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EXPLORING WAYS THAT WOMEN VETERANS DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF
TRANSITION TO THE CIVILIAN WORLD OF WORK

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

EXPLORING WAYS THAT WOMEN VETERANS DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF

TRANSITION

TO THE CIVILIAN WORLD OF WORK

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING WAYS THAT WOMEN VETERANS DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION INTO THE CIVILIAN WORLD OF WORK

by Meghan Reppert

This research was a qualitative study, grounded in feminist research methodology that explored the experiences of women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work. This study explored facets that participants found to be helpful, as well as inhibitive of growth in their transition into the civilian world of work.

Eight women veterans participated in two separate in-depth interviews focused on how they described their ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. They also offered recommendations for how to best support female veterans in their journey that begins when they exit the military. While each woman's story of transition was unique, there were commonalities to the challenges they faced and what they found helpful. Feminist theory guided the data analysis process, which entailed constant comparative coding until no new patterns emerged from the data.

Data analysis resulted in three primary themes, each consisting of three sub-themes. The findings suggest that participants perceive significant differences between military and civilian culture, which can contribute to feeling disconnected to others in the civilian work culture. Results also suggested that increased knowledge of military culture and a greater understanding of veteran's experiences may be helpful for counselors, friends, family, and community in providing effective support for women veterans in their transition into the civilian world of work. Implications for advocacy, practice, and counselor, and future research were provided.

Keywords: women veterans, transition, career

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the women and men who have served in the United States military. Completing this research project has helped me better understand the strength, sacrifice, and determination that is required in military service. I am grateful for your service to our country. Thank you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In 2011, there were over 200,000 women who were on active military duty, meaning that women comprised approximately 14.5% of active-duty forces that year. In the past decade, the number of women in the military has increased and is forecasted to continue to do so (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Interestingly, the types of roles and positions women hold in the military diversified as well over the past decade (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Women currently account for 16.7% of the officers on active duty in the Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force and U.S. Coast Guard, the branches that comprise the United States (U.S.) military, and 14% of enlisted service members on active duty (Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans Initiative, 2015). As of 2015, women made up 9.2% of the overall veteran population and 13% of the veteran labor force. Also, the number of women veterans is expected to increase. According to U.S. recruitment projections, women veterans are expected to make up 18% of the veteran population in 2040, making them the fastest-growing segments of the overall veteran population (Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans Initiative, 2015). Programs have been developed to meet the needs of veterans transitioning out of the military; however, programs more support specific to the reintegration of female veterans into the civilian world are needed (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Greer, 2017).

Based on their research into veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) suggested that there are challenges common to male and female veterans as well as challenges that are unique to women veterans. Some of the unique differences between male and female veterans include family roles, support when reintegrating into civilian life, and unemployment rates (Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans

Initiative, 2015), which I will discuss later in this chapter. Because of these differences, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) noted the need for additional research on which to ground the development of services designed to assist women veterans with their transition to the civilian world of work.

Provided the anticipated increase of women veterans, and the changes mentioned above in public policies regarding support programs, counselors are more likely to have the opportunity to work with women veterans as they transition to the civilian world of work. The lack of research on how women veterans experience this career transition, however, limits resources for counselors to develop and implement evidence-based interventions. I first became aware of this dynamic during a doctoral internship when I had the opportunity to facilitate a group for women veterans. I designed the group to help support these women in their experiences adjusting to life as undergraduate university students, as well as help them cope with their concerns regarding their upcoming transition out of college and into the world of work. Some examples of the concerns expressed by the women included how best to translate military service experience into civilian employment opportunities, how to best adjust to a university system with less clear hierarchies and social rules, and how to choose a practical and meaningful career path post-graduation. I found myself frustrated by the lack of research on which to draw and resources specific to women veterans' experience for their career transition.

Statement of the Problem

In my internship experience, I found my work with the women veterans to be meaningful. I enjoyed my ability to help group members through the group facilitation while simultaneously learning about their collective experiences in the military and later transitioning out of the military, as well as aspects of their experiences unique to each one of them. At the same time, I

struggled to find relevant research findings to inform group and individual counseling interventions to use with the veterans in the group. The lack of evidence-based interventions on which I could draw for inspiration or guidance caused me to feel limited in my abilities to design and implement effective counseling services specific to the needs of these particular women. This challenge was especially relevant in the face of the importance of using informed and intentional interventions in the counseling profession (American Counseling Association, 2014). Professional counselors, regardless of their specialty, are expected to adhere to the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014), which states that “counselors have a responsibility to the public to engage in counseling practices that are based on rigorous research methodologies” (p.8). Furthermore, ethical counselors are bound to engage in ongoing education in their specialty area, to practice within their relevant scope of practice, and to continually monitor the effectiveness of services (American Counseling Association, 2014).

During the time I was preparing to facilitate a group for women veterans, much of the literature that I found focused on female service members’ experience of military sexual assault, which served to inform the way I initially envisioned the group. However, the group participants did not raise the issue of military sexual assault in our discussions. Instead, they discussed challenges encountered in re-adjusting to the norms and cultural rules in the university. I revisited the academic literature to gain insight into how women veterans experience their transition out of the military and found much less research from which to draw. This reinforced the need for research to inform the provision of effective assessment and counseling services to women veterans transitioning from the military to civilian life.

During the time of my doctoral internship, there was a good deal of attention in the media given to the high rates of military sexual trauma and sexual harassment for women service

members. Because of this publicity, I expected the women veteran students to have a negative lens with which they understood their experience in the military, and which would impact their experience in transitioning from the military. However, as I mentioned, sexual harassment and sexual trauma were not topics brought up by group members, and it quickly became evident that my assumptions were faulty. In fact, without fail, each woman in the group, regardless of the branch of the military in which she served, reported having grown immensely as a military service member. Another commonality in these women's narratives was a feeling of "otherness" in the military. Their status as female, the minority in terms of gender, appeared to be significant in their military experiences. In their analysis of available statistics and interviews with women veterans, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) also described a similar theme, explaining that women veterans described being male as the "norm" in the military. How this dynamic impacts women veterans' career development and transition from the military to the civilian workforce, however, is a topic worthy of additional exploration.

Women Veterans and the Workforce

The majority of research published on women veterans' transitions to the civilian world of work has focused on employment and demographic information gathered after they have exited the military (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). The available statistics provide parts of a picture that suggests there are challenges unique to women veterans' career transition into the civilian world of work. Following is an overview of key data that highlights some of those challenges. I include more comprehensive research on identified challenges women veterans face after exiting the military in chapter two.

Based on the most recent U.S. census data (2015), the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs reported on the employment status of veterans once they exited the military. As of 2011, 41% of all veterans, regardless of gender, had used “some or all of their unemployment benefits” since 2004 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015, p. 10). In 2015 “approximately half” of all service members experienced unemployment within 15 months of exiting the military (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015, p. i). Although unemployment is higher for all veterans than their non-veteran counterparts (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), some sub-groups of veterans tend to struggle with unemployment more than others (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). For example, veterans under the age of 35, veterans over the age of 55, and veterans who were in the second Gulf War and who were enrolled in school at the time of data collection were more likely than other veterans to be unemployed (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Despite women veterans tending to be more educated as compared to women in the general population, (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016), they are more likely to be a part of the sub-populations that have higher unemployment rates and therefore are more likely to struggle with their career after exiting the military (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

A snapshot of how female veterans fare in comparison to non-veteran females in the workforce suggests that once demographics are controlled for, women veterans experience unemployment at a 26% higher rate than their non-veteran counterparts (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). In addition to a relatively high unemployment rate, current data on women veterans indicate that they are also more likely than their male counterparts to struggle with other issues such as sexual harassment and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Mulhall, 2009).

Women in the military, when compared to men in the military, have reported experiencing higher rates of sexual harassment and trauma (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Mulhall, 2009; Wilson, 2018). According to current statistics, one out of 100 men and five out of 100 women are sexually assaulted each year while on active duty (Kimerling, 2017). In a report by the Disabled American Veterans (2014), the authors stated that the high incidence of military sexual trauma is “an illustration of problems and solutions that require radical changes in the culture of the Armed Forces” (p. 7).

Military sexual trauma often leads to long-term debilitating psychological conditions, including PTSD and major depression (Ghahramanlou-Holloway, Cox, Fritz, & George, 2011; Kimerling, 2017). The U.S. Department of Defense examined all administrative data of female soldiers who made reports of sexual assault and matched that to servicewomen who had not reported incidents of sexual assault (Kimerling, 2017). The results of the comparison indicated that female service members who had experienced military sexual assault were more likely to experience mental health issues and to experience adverse career outcomes such as military attrition and demotion (Kimerling, 2017). While the career outcomes studied were specific to a career within the military, such disorders, in turn, have a direct impact on career development in more general terms (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013; Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2012; Wesley, 2009).

While mental health issues are not typically the focus of career counseling, they may significantly impact a person’s career development, including career transitions, and need to be included in a holistic approach to career counseling (Lenz, Peterson, Reardon, & Saunders, 2010; Mowbray et al., 2006). For example, when a person struggles with PTSD, certain job environments or tasks may trigger feelings of anxiety or cause a person to relive certain aspects

of traumatic events (Resnick & Rosenheck, 2008; Smith, Schnurr, & Rosenheck, 2005).

Additionally, struggling with mental health issues can impact multiple areas of life, such as housing, social support, and cognitive abilities, which in turn can impact employability (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013).

Higher rates of specific mental health disorders may also contribute to the disproportionate number of women veterans who struggle with homelessness, especially provided that approximately half of all people who are homeless struggle with mental health issues and close to 25% of people who are homeless have serious mental health disorders (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013). While there is no one cause of homelessness, unemployment and underemployment increase the risk of becoming homeless (Wesley, 2009). Furthermore, once someone has become homeless, it can be more of a challenge for them to become employed again (Sun, 2012). Practical challenges such as the lack of a permanent address, documents to verify identity, and appropriate clothing can impede the process of finding employment (Sun, 2012; Tsai, Rosenheck, & McGuire, 2012).

As previously stated, there is research available on female veterans once they have exited the military and re-engaged in the civilian workforce (e.g., National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Researchers, however, have focused less on *how* women veterans experience their transition into the civilian workforce and how insight into this transition could help provide greater support for them during this transition. Furthermore, what little research is available concerning the transition of veterans into the civilian world of work tends to focus on male veterans (Greer, 2017). Given the anticipated increase of women veterans in the coming years, some of the trends presented in the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics' profile of women veterans (2016), and the

increased likelihood for counselors to work with women veterans during their transition into the civilian world of work, it is important that the practices of counselors be informed by women veterans.

Public Policies

Recent federal policy changes reflect a need for increased programs to support women veterans' reintegration into civilian life after exiting the military, as well as increased opportunities for counselors to work with veterans (American Counseling Association, 2006; National Board for Certified Counselors, 2017). The Veterans Administration recognized licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists as mental health providers in December of 2006 (American Counseling Association, 2006; National Board for Certified Counselors, 2017). This recognition has allowed for greater opportunities for counselors to participate as providers in U.S. Veterans Administration programs supporting veterans' transitions into the civilian world of work.

The U.S. government has also issued executive orders and implemented programs in recent years to help veterans increase their economic competitiveness as compared with the non-veteran population (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Examples of such legislative and policy changes include programs at both state and federal levels (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015) such as the Veterans Employment Initiative (2009), Women Veterans Initiative (2014), and Hire Heroes Act (2011), to name a few. Programs include qualification standards issued by the Veterans Administration, which "establishes the occupation of licensed professional mental health counselors within the agency" (Glosoff, Schwarz, & DiZenzo-Priestley, 2017, p. 43). While these changes in government policy reflect an interest in assisting veterans with their transition into the civilian world of work, after engaging in a comprehensive

search for information on supportive programs for women veterans transitioning into the civilian world of work, there appear to be few.

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2017), female veterans need support in their career transitions into the civilian world of work. Similarly, relevant research supports the assertion that veterans, in general, need support in their transition to the civilian world of work (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015; Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010). Data from the Disabled American Veterans (2014) reinforce that there is a need for services specifically for women veterans because they tend to face common challenges once in the workforce. The lack of knowledge on which to base counseling interventions and career development programs specific to women veterans during their transition to the civilian workforce has guided me to the research question below.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was: In what ways do a group of eight women veterans in the U. S. describe their experience of transition from military service to the civilian world of work? In exploring the answer to this question, I was able to learn about the difficulties that women veterans have encountered as well as what they have found helpful in their transition from the military to the civilian workforce.

Significance of the Study

Professional standards such as the American Counseling Association's (2014) *Code of Ethics* call for counselors to make informed decisions regarding interventions to address such challenges. By gaining insight into how women veterans described their experience of transitioning out of the military and into civilian careers, this research contributes to the available

body of literature available to counselors to develop and implement interventions in an informed manner and effectively serve and support women veterans looking to forge civilian careers.

The U.S. Department of Labor (2015) specifically identified the need for qualitative research to more fully understand the complex process of transition that women veterans experience as they move from the military to the civilian world of work. Therefore, my goal was to conduct a qualitative research study using a feminist research methodological framework, which is consistent with the research needs identified by the U.S. Department of Labor (2015). Through my research, I gained insight into the experiences of women veterans and, in doing so, I hope to contribute to a body of literature to inform evidence-based counseling interventions in a manner consistent with the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics* (2014).

Theoretical Framework

I used feminist theory to scaffold my research. Career development is a multifaceted construct that includes the roles and values that contribute to an individuals' life paths and choices, as opposed to simply referring to their vocational choices and paths from position of employment to position of employment (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Super, 1963; Super, 1980). The transition from military service to civilian work is often complex. By using feminist theory as a framework, I was able to focus on women's multiple aspects of self and the way those selves, or identities, interact (Beckman, 2014; Torre, 2014) in regards to their reintegration into the civilian world of work. Consistent with feminist ideology, I also believe that gender is a social construct shaped by culture and environment (Evans, Kincade, Marbley, & Seem, 2005). Since available government research does not distinguish between gender and biological sex, for this research, I used the term *gender* to describe veterans who identify as female. I do, however, recognize this as a limitation of my study as it simplifies the relationship

of gender, which is reflective of cultural values, and biological sex (Butler, 2014). Still, the resulting descriptive themes, based on how eight veterans who identify as women experienced the transition into the civilian world of work, provide counselors with greater insight into how gender, as a socially created construct, may impact that transition.

Feminism is not limited to engaging with issues concerning gender but encompasses race, class, sexual orientation, and culture of origin, making feminism a complex and multi-layered lens on human behavior (Butler, 2014; Davis, 2008; Evans et al., 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminist theorists have posited that individuals experience inequality due to institutionalized power differentials (Evans et al., 2005; hooks, 1984). More specifically, as a result of the subordination of women, characteristics that are considered to be traditionally feminine (e.g., a stronger emphasis on caring for the needs of others, being more relationally oriented, and dependence on others) may be less valued than men and those characteristics considered to be more masculine (e.g., aggressiveness, autonomy, and stoicism) (Butler, 2014). Gender socialization can create strict guidelines for behavior that is considered “feminine” and behavior that is considered to be “masculine.” Furthermore, interacting with the world around us in ways that consistently uphold social expectations can cause these expectations to become ingrained as central to a person's identity while simultaneously maintaining the power hierarchies embedded in society (Butler, 2014).

As stated earlier, the role of women in the world of work and the military has shifted significantly in past years (Allsep, 2013; Pawelczyk, & Mickiewicz, 2014; Silva, 2008; Woodward, 2000). In 2015 women comprised 16.07 % of officers on active duty and 14.7% of enlisted service members on active duty (Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans Initiative, 2015) and 9% of the veteran population (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015),

making them a minority while active service members and then as veterans. Throughout history, the role of protector and warrior has predominantly been associated with men and masculinity (Allsep, 2013; Pawelczyk, & Mickiewicz, 2014; Silva, 2008; Woodward, 2000). Central to feminist theory is the interplay between a person's sense of self and societal values, and the power dynamics between dominant and non-dominant groups (Butler, 2014; Friedan, 2010; Worell & Remer, 2003). Given the minority status of women veterans and how gender can be a primary lens by which some individuals experience the world (Carreiras, 2006; Coogan & Chen, 2007; Evans et al., 2005; Hooks, 1984; Sax, 2005; Silva, 2008), a feminist theoretical framework lends itself well to my dissertation research.

Definition of Terms

Gender

Gender is a term used to describe culturally ascribed expectations concerning a person's behavior, appearance, and life roles (Evans et al., 2005; Friedan, 2010; Worell & Remer, 2003). There are undoubtedly significant variations in gender performance and expectations across settings, cultures, and individuals. I attempted to avoid overgeneralizations by avoiding quantifiers, such as "many" or "some." In my dissertation study, I focused on gender socialization in the United States.

Career

The term comprises all occupational activity over an extended period as it relates to a person's multiple life roles (Super, 1963; Super, 1980).

Career Development

Career development is a complex construct that includes the roles and values that contribute to the summation of an individual's life path and choices relating to paid or non-paid

vocation, as opposed to simply referring to a person's vocation of choice and their path(s) from one place of employment to another place of employment (Anderson et al., 2012; Super, 1963; Super, 1980).

Culture

Culture can be considered a shared set of values, beliefs, and behaviors, which can manifest in the arts, music, food, as well as other expressions representing a collective human intellectual understanding (Strom et al., 2012). The term also refers to a set of social rules and expectations specific to a unique group, time, and geographical location (Bryson, 2008).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality can be considered as the overlap or interactions of multiple socially constructed identities that impact how persons or a group understand who they are within a society, and also how others in that culture view them (Beckman, 2014). The power imbalances and hierarchal social norms associated with each constructed identity (e.g., race, gender, social class) interact complexly and fluidly (Beckman, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Transition

Transition in the broadest sense is a term used to describe the passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) or to describe a process of change, as well the period of time when a change is taking place (Anderson et al., 2012; Super, 1963; Super, 1980). A career transition can be defined as a period which an individual is changing roles or changing their orientation to a life role due to shifts in their career development (Super, 1963; Super, 1980).

Non-Veteran

A non-veteran is a term used for any individual who has never served in the military (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

Reintegration

In their review of literature regarding the concept of reintegration, Elnitsky, Fisher, and Blevins (2017) noted that the U.S. Department of Affairs has defined community reintegration as an “the resumption of age, gender, and culturally appropriate roles in the family, community and workplace” (p.2). As a result of their review they concluded that reintegration comprises multiple domains including individual, interpersonal, community organizations, and societal factors (Elnitsky, Fisher & Blevins, 2017).

Veteran

As defined by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015), a veteran is "any person discharged from active military service under other than dishonorable conditions" (p. 97). This definition holds true for any branch in the U.S. military. The amount of time in military service doesn't impact veteran status in name; however, it can affect access to veteran services (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

Organization of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I introduced my study, including the topic of interest, statement of the problem, research questions, constructs of interest, and relevant definition of terms. I identified the significance of the study, which was to address a gap in the current professional literature. More specifically, by completing this research, I was able to provide counselors with information to guide interventions, as well as provide insight into a little-explored topic that could serve as a foundation for future research on women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work. I

also provided an overview of data on women veterans in the world of work, as well as feminist theory.

In chapter two, I present the relevant literature on women veterans and career development from the lens of feminist theory. I will then present the current research and conceptual articles that support the relevance of my proposed study. In chapter three, I describe the methodology I used for my research. I present feminist research theory, which provides a framework for my methodology, as well as describe the sampling procedures, data analysis, positionality as a researcher, and limitations of my study. In chapter four, I present the findings of the study. In chapter five, I discuss the study implications as related to the field of counseling, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In chapter one, I outlined the intention of my research, which was to explore the experiences of women service members transitioning into the civilian workforce. In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature relevant to my research question, focusing on women veterans, the culture of gender in the United States, military culture, and the reintegration process for veterans exiting the military and entering civilian life fulltime. I begin by presenting current statistics about women veterans, followed by an overview of the United States military, the logistics of joining and exiting from the military, military culture, and gender socialization. I then share an overview of feminist theories, which are central to my lens as a researcher and serve as a framework for my proposed research, and end with information about common experiences in the career development of women in the military and the civilian world of work.

Women Veterans

Currently, women are the fastest-growing group within the veteran community (Ghahramanlou-Holloway, Cox, Fritz, & George, 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). While the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) projected that the veteran male population will decrease in upcoming years, they anticipate that the number of veteran females will increase. Researchers who have studied veterans' reintegration into civilian life have suggested that veterans may experience some common challenges during the process (McCormack & Ell, 2017). However, less has been written about the experiences of female soldiers and veterans, as compared to men. Other authors (e.g., Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015) have noted that research is needed specific to women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work to tailor programming, policy, and evidence-based interventions to meet their needs.

I chose to use feminist theory as a framework for my research, given my interest in how gender, socioeconomic status, education levels, and multiple aspects of social identity may have impacted or shaped women veterans' experience of transitioning into the civilian world of work (Brownson, 2014). In 2015 and 2016, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) and the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2016) conducted research on veterans' transition from the military. They identified differences between men veterans and women veterans in age, employment, family, homelessness, and other factors that will be further discussed below. In the following, I provide a synthesis of relevant research and statistics, followed by an overview of feminist theory.

Age and Race

In 2016 the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics published a profile on women veterans based on the analysis of data collected from the American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, and the Department of Veteran Affairs' Veteran Population projection Model. In the opening paragraphs of this report, the authors wrote, "According to American Community Service data, women Veterans are significantly different than men Veterans" (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016, p. 2). The authors went on to suggest that there is a pressing need for more research on women veterans due to the much larger number of women serving in recent years. The results of their analysis indicated specific differences between male and women veterans, many of which are supported by other researchers such as the Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans Initiative (2015) and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015).

Certain demographics, including age and race, appear to vary for women and men veterans. Women veterans, on average, tend to be younger than male veterans; the median age

of women veterans is 50, while the median age of male veterans is 65 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). A higher percentage of female veterans are minorities in terms of their race, meaning that as a group, women veterans are more racially and ethnically diverse than men veterans (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016).

Regarding racial diversity, 19% of women veterans are African American, while 12% of men veterans are African American. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) and the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2016), African Americans are overrepresented in the military in comparison to the civilian population. Hispanic women comprise approximately 9% of women veterans. In all racial categories aside from White, females were more greatly represented than male veterans.

Education

Women veterans tend to be more educated as compared to women in the general population. For instance, in 2015, approximately 44% percent of women veterans had received at a minimum some college education, compared with about 32% of the non-veteran female population (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). This difference may be due to requirements that individuals must have a high school diploma or equivalent to enter the military. About a third more women veterans had some college as their highest level of education compared with non-veteran women. Overall, a higher percentage of women veterans (34.5%) than non-veteran women (28.1%) had completed a bachelor's or advanced degree (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Women veterans are also more likely to have some post-secondary education than their male counterparts (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

Period of Service

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2017), 56% of all women veterans served from August 1990 to present, during the Gulf War Era. The second-largest group of women veterans (25%) of all living women veterans served during peace times only (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Statistically, veterans who served in Gulf War II (1990-1991) are more likely to struggle with unemployment, and veterans who have served post-September 11, 2001, are statistically more likely to apply for disability compensation than veterans who served before September 11, 2001 (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). Based on this research, as discussed in chapter three, I considered the time of service relevant to participant selection.

Other Relevant Statistics

Female veterans, on average, appear to have higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts. However, the discrepancy in employment between female and male veterans varies depending on their period of military service (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). In 2019, 3.7 % of women veterans were unemployed, while employment rates of men veterans were 3.0%. When comparing women and men veterans who served in the military since 2001, 4.7% of women veterans were unemployed compared to 3.4% of men veterans (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). There was little difference between the unemployment rates of women and men veterans who served between August 1990 and August 2001, respectively 2.0% and 2.7%. When comparing unemployment rates for women and men veterans who served before 1990, 3.9% of women veterans and 2.8% of men veterans were unemployed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

Female veterans also have lower median incomes than their male counterparts and are more likely to live in poverty than male veterans. More specifically, 10.3% of women veterans

compared to 6.5% of male veterans currently live in poverty (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). Interestingly, civilian women are also more likely to have no personal income and live in poverty than their male counterparts (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). This dynamic may be reflective of overarching cultural norms and societal obstacles for women in the U.S.

According to the Disabled American Veterans (2014), since September 11, 2001, women veterans have had higher rates of mental health and medical challenges than their male counterparts, which may contribute to more significant employment challenges. Higher rates of military sexual assault, compared to male veterans, have been cited as one factor that may contribute to higher rates of mental health challenges for women veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011). According to Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al. (2011), approximately 80% of military women report exposure to one or more sexual stressors, which include sexual identity concerns, harassment, and or assault. According to a meta-analysis on military sexual trauma, including both harassment and assault, 15.7% of military personnel and veterans report MST. When broken down by gender, 38.4% of women and 3.9% of men reported that they experienced MST (Wilson, 2018).

Women veterans and women who are serving in the military also are more likely to have experienced multiple types of childhood trauma compared to military service members and veterans who are men, as well as when compared to demographically matched civilian women (Evans, Glover, Washington, & Hamilton, 2018; Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011). Given this context, and that women in military service are increasingly involved in and exposed to combat, women veterans are more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than their male counterparts (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). Women who have served in the

military are also three times more likely to attempt suicide than civilian women (Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011), suggesting more significant struggles with hopelessness.

While these statistics provide some insight into the demographics of women veterans as a group, there is still much to learn about how both male and female veterans experience reintegrating into civilian life (McCormack & Ell, 2017). Before discussing issues specific to women in the military and their experiences in re-entering the civilian world, it is helpful to have an understanding of how the U.S. military services are structured (e.g., the different branches), how individuals enter the military, and the basic logistics of exiting from the military.

The United States Military

The United States military is comprised of the following five branches: Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. Three branches of the military (the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps) were created in 1775 as a result of the American Revolution. The War Department, the precursor to the U.S. Department of Defense, was established in 1789 and created the Coast Guard in 1790 (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). The Air Force was later established in 1947, and the same year the Secretary of Defense assumed direct oversight of Army, Navy, and Air Force.

In addition to the different branches of the military, there are two main categories of service members, enlisted service members, and officers. Each category has specialized training, responsibilities, and areas of expertise (Strom et al., 2012). Regarding career advancement in the military, many women have expressed a belief that they have to work harder than men to be promoted, and that they are less likely than men to be provided opportunities that will allow them to prove themselves capable of career advancement (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Entrance into the United States Military

The transition from civilian to military life requires adaptation to a novel way of life that includes intense and continuous supervision, mandatory physical training, group living, institutional feeding, separation from family and friends, and strict discipline (Lieberman et al., 2014). To enter the military, an individual speaks with a recruiter and then becomes officially inducted by going to a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). The MEPS Command owns and administers the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and serves as an impartial third party “acting independently of any service influence in nearly every step of the process” (Marsman, 2009, p. 44).

There are 65 MEPS in the United States, and applicants complete the military enlistment process at these locations (Military Advantage, 2017). At the MEPS appointment, a recruit takes the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, which is a multiple-choice test designed to assess the most suitable military path. Each recruit also participates in a physical examination and must meet minimum standards of physical fitness set by the United States military. After completing the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and physical exam, recruits meet with a military representative who helps them determine the best assignment based on the needs of the military, the qualifications of the recruits, and the preference of the recruit (Military Advantage, 2017).

After a recruit’s career path within the military is decided, they take the “Oath of Enlistment,” and then, depending on the job assignment and branch, will directly report to basic training or agree to begin basic training at some point in the future. The second option is most commonly used with recruits who are still in high school and need to complete their education before beginning basic training (Military Advantage, 2017).

Research findings based on both self-report and blood tests indicate that increased cortisol levels, which suggests higher levels of stress, are present as both men and women begin boot camp (Lieberman, Kellogg, & Bathalon, 2008; Lieberman et al., 2014). While research on how entering the military specifically impacts women is sparse, Lieberman et al. (2008) studied a sample of 51 female recruits participating in basic military training for the United States Marine Corps. Results indicated changes in participants' moods, body compositions, and additional biomedical changes over the 13 weeks of the basic training. More specifically, Lieberman et al. (2008) reported that the women's mood and overall body composition improved from pre-training, which would indicate that transitioning into the military had an overall positive impact on women.

According to Lieberman et al. (2014), the initial boot camp training comprises intensely supervised preparation in which a collective mode of cognitive processing is encouraged with the aim of transforming young men and women into soldiers. Boot camp training encompasses exercises intended to strengthen physical stamina, memorization, problem-solving, and various skills that encourage the complex cognitive task of making logical decisions under duress. The training also emphasizes skills to successfully live in a relatively homogeneous group, such as institutional feeding, strict adherence to a unified set of rules, and separation from family and friends are normalized in boot camp training. While these values and cultural rules appear to be productive for military cohesion and success, veterans can experience difficulty in shifting from military culture to civilian culture due to the differences between the cultures (Kukla, Rattray & Slayers, 2015).

Exit from the United States Military

The support available for veterans has varied over the decades, as the social understanding of war-related stress and mental illness has changed (McCormack & Ell, 2017). Currently, the primary program provided to assist veterans in their transition into the civilian labor force is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and the U. S. Department of Defense have not collected comprehensive data on the efficacy of the TAP, such as participation, satisfaction, and outcomes by gender and race (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). McCormack and Ell (2017) engaged in a review of supports for the reintegration of service members into civilian life. They noted that available programs and supports fail to address veteran needs holistically and do not consider psychosocial, spiritual, and relational issues. Based on their grounded theory study, which included eighteen veterans, Smith-MacDonald et al. (2019) stated that participants expressed a preference for holistic treatment approaches, rather than treatment that focused on symptomology.

Those who have researched veterans' transition from military service have suggested that service members reintegrating into civilian life may struggle to identify with civilian norms and expectations, which can lead to feelings of isolation from others who don't have military experience (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Verey & Smith, 2012). Based on a qualitative interview study of how veterans experience post-combat adjustment, Verey and Smith (2012) identified themes that included the importance of fitting in a group and the need to buffer civilian family and friends from their combat experiences.

Veterans often believe that civilians won't relate to their experiences in the military, and as a result, many veterans choose to avoid actively engaging in conversations with non-veteran

(Russell & Russell, 2018). Boredom with civilian life also appears to be a common struggle communicated by veterans upon leaving military service (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Verey & Smith, 2012). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) conducted an interview-based qualitative study on women veterans reintegrating into a civilian university setting. They identified three major challenges reported by participants: struggling to find an identity other than that of a service member, negotiating the structural and procedural differences between the military and higher education bureaucracies, and finding a sense of purpose (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). As will be discussed in chapter four, the findings of the current research study indicate that after leaving the military, women veterans struggle in finding a new sense of purpose and forging an identity other than that of service members.

Military Culture and Gender Socialization

All human behaviors and characteristics can be found within the context of specific cultural rules that give meaning to the behavior, making it impossible to study behavioral phenomenon or experiences without considering culture. Culture can be defined as a shared set of values, beliefs, and behaviors (Strom et al., 2012). For centuries the military and the idea of a warrior have been associated with men and masculine qualities (Pawelczyk & Mickiewicz, 2014), which may suggest that being female and a member of the military culture is a complex dynamic.

Culture Common Across Military Branches

There appear to be cultural norms and expectations common to all branches of the military in the U.S., as well as cultural variations among the branches of the military (Elder, Domino, Mata-Galan, & Kilmartin, 2017). In exploring the overarching culture of the military, it is important to look at the underlying values of the military first. As noted by Strom et al.

(2012), “among veterans, shared values stem from service to one’s country, shared training experiences, and shared mission, namely preparation for war, and national defense” (p. 68).

Women in Western cultures have, in general, traditionally been encouraged to value relating to others (Brown, 2010). Characteristics such as altruism, putting others first, and expressing care and interest in others traditionally have been considered feminine. However, when women enter the military, they are immersed in a culture that values hierarchal power dynamics, stoicism, physical strength, “fraternal bonding,” unquestioning loyalty, and authority (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Silva, 2008). As Silva (2008) suggested “performing gender in culturally recognizable ways” (p.398), may have a significant impact on a person’s sense of self, and how that person interacts with others in the same culture.

Shift in Government Recognition of Women in the Military and as Veterans

It was not until the 1980 Census that the U.S. government asked women if they had served in the Armed Forces (Brownson, 2014). This question on the Census provided the opportunity for 1.2 million women to answer “yes,” and shortly afterward, Congress granted veteran status to women who had served in the Women’s Auxiliary Corps during World War II (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Since the government recognized women as veterans, research has consistently found that women participate less in available veterans’ services than their male counterparts (National Center for Veterans Statistics Analysis, 2017).

In 1984, the Veterans Administration surveyed women veterans, interviewing 3,003 women veterans. Results indicated that 57% of women veterans were unaware that they were eligible for Veterans Administration services and to participate in Veterans Administration programs (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). The Veterans

Administration also found that women veterans were reporting cancer at approximately twice the rate of women in the general population, with cervical cancer being the most common type of cancer reported (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). As a response, the U.S. government established the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans in the late 1980s to assess the needs of women veterans as well as make recommendations for change. The Advisory Committee on Women Veterans remains active in this capacity to the present day.

Women's Roles in the Military Today

Women's presence in the military certainly has increased over the past decades. As of 2011, there were over 200,000 women who were on active duty, meaning that women comprised approximately 14.5 of active-duty forces that year (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Women became officially recognized in the military in 1948 when Congress passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). The Act allowed women the opportunity to serve in the military in both active duty and the Reserves (Brownson, 2014). Before this, women could not serve in activity duty armed forces during times of peace, unless doing so in the role of nurse. The presence of women in the military has also significantly increased since the 1970s. The inception of the "All Volunteer Force," in 1973 effectively eliminated the draft and served as an impetus for structural change in the military that helped to remove obstacles to women serving in the military (Brownson, 2014; King, Street, Gradus, Vogt, & Resick, 2013).

While the presence of women in the military has been increasing for decades, women have historically not been permitted in active combat roles. According to Silva (2008), patriarchal values have defined the military structure, which provides some context for how women's more active role in the military has been met with some resistance (Silva, 2008).

However, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have blurred the frontlines, thrusting servicewomen fully into combat roles (Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011). Since 2001, more than 300,000 women have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of those 800 have been wounded, and more than 130 have lost their lives in service to our country (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

The Army and Marine Corps have expanded their use of women on the battlefield using ad hoc Female Engagement Teams and Lioness Teams. In the most basic terms, Female Engagement Teams and Lioness Teams are groups of female soldiers who disseminate information to local families as well as gather intelligence in cultures that have prohibited male soldiers from doing so. These teams are often tasked to work with combat arms units (Nicolas, 2015). In a similar vein, for the first time in history, two women graduated from Ranger School, indicating a milestone for women in the military (National Center for Veterans Statistics Analysis, 2017). In 2013, the official ban on women in combat was lifted, serving as another major barrier that women have overcome in proving themselves as valuable members of the United States military (Grossman, 2013).

A historical perspective on the evolution of women in the civilian workforce, as well as the military workforce, provides a frame of reference for both the tremendous strides women have made in the world of work, as well as some of the common challenges women face. The continuously evolving role of women in the military and the strong patriarchal foundation of the military organization may speak to the perseverance and skills women have exhibited to succeed in a patriarchal institution (King et al., 2013). However, women remain underrepresented in higher ranks of the military and have lower promotion rates than their male counterparts (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). As of

2011, throughout all four branches of the military, only one out of every 41 women in the military had reached the highest rank of General or Admiral (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2016), averaging all four military branches, women officers represent only 7% of those who hold the rank of General or Admiral, and 15.5% of officers overall are women. At the rank of Officer W-1 or above, women are most highly represented in the Air Force (18.5%) and least represented in the Marine Corps (5.8%). Regarding enlisted women, the Air Force has the largest proportion of women at the enlisted personnel rank (19.7%), and the Marine Corps has the smallest proportion of women enlisted personnel (6.4%).

Women and men in the military continue to define (and re-define) women's role in the military (Brownson, 2014). It remains unclear if there is a pattern as to how women make meaning of assimilating into an organization that has historically placed significantly more value on traditionally masculine ideals. Awareness of the intersection of potentially contradicting cultural values of "femaleness" and the military culture contributed to my decision to use a feminist framework for the current research project (Davis, 2008).

Feminist Theoretical Lens

Feminism in the U.S. arose from women attempting to find their voices in a patriarchal society. Feminism has evolved beyond gender to encompass multiple aspects of identity including, race, socioeconomic status, education, class, sexual orientation, and culture of origin, making feminism a complex and multi-layered lens to human behavior (Brown, 2010).

Individuals are impacted significantly by the ongoing interaction between gender, race, socioeconomic status, and the mainstream political and cultural systems. Cultural norms and socialization practices impact personal identity, as well as the understanding of what it is to be a

woman or a man (Brown, 2010; Enns, 2004; Evans et al., 2005; hooks, 1984; Martinez, Paterna, Roux, & Falomir, 2010).

Pawelczyk and Mickiewicz (2014) suggested that feminine values are divergent from values espoused by the military, stating that women are considered as the “referential other” (p. 3) to being a soldier. Related to this sentiment, authors of the Disabled American Veterans Report (2014) on women veterans stated that,

Historically, women have not been afforded the same status as men in military service. Even today, women in the military and veterans face barriers to full integration into military service, recognition as veterans, and barriers to VA services and benefits (p.4). The authors went on to state that the military and the Veterans Administration remain systems that are designed to meet the needs of males, despite significant efforts by the Department of Defense and Veterans Administration to change this (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). These statements suggest that gender may impact how women veterans describe their time as service members, as well as their experiences reintegrating into the civilian world of work.

Feminist theorists (e.g., Butler, 2014; Evans et al., 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2014) have acknowledged that culture and personal experiences impact how individuals interact with their environment and emphasize the subjective nature of reality. Gender is understood as a socially created construct, as opposed to a binary descriptor synonymous with biological sex (Butler, 2014; Evans et al., 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Both men and women are negatively impacted when expected to adhere to stringent gender roles and expectations, which may cause some people to repress those characteristics that are not consistent with their biological sex (Brown, 2010; Enns, 2004).

The basic principles that serve as the foundation for feminist theories include the recognition of societal power imbalances, emphasis on accepting diversity within and between groups, the intersection of multiple aspects of self, social relationships, and the interplay between personal expectations and sociocultural norms (Beckman, 2014). In conceptualizing the process of transition from military service to a civilian career, a feminist theoretical framework scaffolds the experience of women veterans within the larger contexts of social and cultural expectations, including power differentials between the dominant culture and non-dominant culture (Brown, 2010; Enns, 2004). While it is impossible to confine feminism to the bounds of a singular theory, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to include all an in-depth review of all feminist theories or forms of feminism, a historical overview of feminism in the U.S. highlights the central tenants of feminist theories.

First Wave of Feminism

The first wave of feminism in the U.S. came to realization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It can be dated back to the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, where over 300 women and men gathered to advocate for women's suffrage and equal rights between the sexes. Out of that gathering grew the women's suffrage movement and the development of organizations such as the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869 and the National Woman's Party in 1916 (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005). Although the first wave of feminism was largely comprised of white, middle class, well-educated women, it was also supported by African American abolitionists, such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances E.W. Harper who advocated for the right of African American women to vote (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005). Alice Paul, a notable figure in the National Woman Suffrage Association, encouraged more radical expressions of advocacy for women's rights, such as marches, parades,

and picketing in which the National Woman Suffrage Association had historically engaged. As a result of the actions of these early feminists and early feminist organizations, women obtained the right to vote in 1920. In addition to women's right to vote, the first wave feminists also confronted stereotypes regarding the "correct" way for women to behave and speak, as well as challenged the belief that domesticity was the domain of women.

Second Wave Feminism: The Personal is Political

The second wave of feminism in the U.S., radical feminism, came about in the 1960s-1970s during what came to be the women's liberation movement. The second wave of feminism was, at least in part, a response to the political climate and other movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as student protests over the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and lesbian and gay rights movements. Those identifying with second-wave feminism viewed gender as more fundamental to oppression than race or class and considered themselves activists for political change. It was during the second wave of feminism that large numbers of people protested the U.S. Miss America Pageant in 1968 and 1969 (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005). Central to second-wave feminism was the belief that women could empower other women. While second-wave feminists considered gender to be the most salient driving force behind the imbalance of power inherent in oppression, the movement laid the groundwork for combining social, racial, sexual, and personal struggles as inextricably linked.

Third Wave of Feminism

Third-wave feminism arose partially in response to the perceived failures of second-wave feminism. More specifically, third-wave feminism rejects the assumption that being a woman is a universal experience regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. Third-wave feminists moved away from categorical thinking, denying that there is

one universal truth for any one person. Krollokke and Sorensen (2005) noted that the term “traverse politics” has been used to describe third-wave feminism and captures the broadly encompassing theories and perspectives that co-exist under the umbrella of third-wave feminism.

Fourth Wave of Feminism

Fourth wave feminists have challenged many of the labels and categories of previous generations of feminists (Brown, 2010). Social constructs are more variable than constant. The central role that technology plays in Western culture is reflected in the more global awareness that characterizes fourth-wave feminism. The central use of technology in the present-day also lends itself to social interactions and political activism that are immediate and far-reaching in nature (Chamberlain, 2016).

While different feminist theories vary in specifics, the emphasis on oppressive social systems and advocacy remains at the core of a feminist lens (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Davis, 2008). As detailed above, feminism has evolved to encompass the complex intersection of multiple aspects of social identity, as opposed to gender, in understanding how a person describes their own experiences and creates their own narratives (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Davis, 2008). I chose to frame women veterans’ transition from the military into the civilian world of work using fourth wave feminism to understand the participant narratives within the context of social identity as it relates to cultural norms and expectations.

Career Development: Common Experiences of Women Veterans and Civilians

In focusing on career and career development, it is not only a person’s employment that is the focus of exploration, but the constellation of roles played over the course of a lifetime (Savickas, 2011). Consistent with a developmental perspective on career, the concept of career development is not static, but a lifelong psychological and behavioral process that is impacted by

various contextual influences that serve to shape a person's career over a lifetime (Savickas, 2011). The following narrative includes common and salient career experiences of women in the U.S., as identified by current data and literature.

Salary and Promotion

In many instances, women in the U.S. still earn less money than their male counterparts. Women are about two times as likely to work part-time (less than 35 hours per week) than men in the labor force. Women working full time earned 81% of what men working full time earned in 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). In the year 2017, women (5.3%) were more likely to have been employed for at least 27 weeks out of the year and still lived below the official poverty line. Women who were Black or Hispanic were almost twice as likely to have been employed for at least 27 weeks out of the year and still lived below the official poverty line than White or Asian women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

While female veterans appear to make more money than civilian women, they still make less than male veterans who have returned to the civilian workforce. While an apparent increased earning potential is a benefit that some women veterans experience, women veterans' yearly salary is still approximately \$10,000 less than their male veteran counterparts on average (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2016). There is little research to explain the differences in salary between veteran women and civilian women. One theory presented in the literature is that veteran women have more education and training than civilian women and that this may translate into higher salary prospects when leaving the military (Mulhall, 2009; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). More research is needed to gain a comprehensive picture of how having been in the military impacts women veterans' salaries.

Career Advancement

In attempting to understand the experience of women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work, the work experiences of women service members provide a useful perspective. Within the military, as previously stated, statistics indicate that there are fewer women than men in leadership positions (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016), which may suggest that the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" is present in the military. In a research study by Mulhall (2009), as well as research conducted by the National Center for Veterans Analytics and Statistics (2016), female service members reported feeling skeptical regarding their opportunities to advance within the military. The results of a U.S. Department of Defense survey conducted in 2008 indicated that female enlisted soldiers were less likely than their male counterparts to believe they would get the assignments needed for promotion or that they would advance proportionately to their skills and experience (National Center for Veterans Analytics and Statistics, 2011). Similarly, both officers and enlisted female participants consistently rated their experiences with supervisors more negatively than their male counterparts (National Center for Veterans Analytics and Statistics, 2011).

Family and Career

The decision to have children can also impact women's career development and influence their work choices, in the military and the civilian workforce. For instance, employers may look negatively upon gaps in working outside the home because they suggest inconsistent work habits or a lack of motivation to perform consistently (Coogan & Chen, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). In the civilian workforce, some women may be concerned that they are unable to take time for maternity leave after giving birth because it makes them less competitive within their organization. Researchers have described the current structure of the labor market as

being grounded in expectations that an individual should be exclusively devoted to working, suggesting that family responsibilities detract from a worker's ability to be effective and devoted their company or employer (Lester & Sallee, 2017; Moskos & Williams, 2000; Strom et al., 2012).

In many families, the role of primary caregiver is still filled by women in both the military as well as civilian workforce (Coogan & Chen, 2007; Mulhall, 2009; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). Filling the role of both parent and employee can be difficult, especially given that employers often do not clearly define expectations surrounding the intersection of parenting and work roles, such as a protocol for employees who need to leave work to take care of a sick child (Brownson, 2014; Mulhall, 2009). The U.S. Department of Labor (2015) cited that a lack of flexibility in the workforce as a primary challenge for women in the workforce. When considering motherhood and balancing motherhood with career needs, being a service member comes with challenges that are both similar and unique to women working in civilian careers.

The expectation of deploying creates a unique challenge for mothers serving in the military. The specific responsibilities and lengths of deployment vary depending on the specific military branch (Agazio, Padden, Goodman, & Opanubi, 2017). What is consistent among deployed mothers is the necessity to both rely on and trust others, whether they be friends, family members, or military programs to care for their children and keep them safe. Exacerbating this challenge is that at times deployment can be extensive in terms of length, which means extended time away from children and continued reliance on others for childcare (Agazio et al., 2017). Women service members are much more likely to be single parents than male troops (Mulhall, 2009; National Center for Veterans Analytics and Statistics, 2011). It follows that a greater

number of women veterans are juggling the demands of being a single parent while transitioning into the civilian world of work.

Regarding specific deployment practices by branch, the current deployment length for the Army is nine months, for the Air Force six months, and for the Navy six to seven months (Agazio et al., 2017). Reserve and National Guard tour lengths are the same as active duty. The military has reduced the length of deployments for medical specialties, which may be particularly relevant for women since they comprise the majority of those serving in the Nurse Corps and a significant portion of the Medical Corps (Agazio et al., 2017).

As stated earlier, the concept of career development encompasses multiple life roles, including parent and worker. As will be discussed further in chapters four and five, the transition into the civilian world of work appeared to serve as a catalyst for a shift in life roles and identity.

Summary

Available research suggests women veterans are faced with challenges during the ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. Research on veterans' transition into the civilian workforce suggests that veterans struggle with the loss of their identity as a military service member and the loss of their sense of purpose. Additionally, the literature indicates that women veterans are more likely than their male counterparts and civilian women to struggle with other difficulties such as unemployment, mental health issues, and physical issues. However, there is little in the current body of literature about how these challenges impact women veterans' experience of transition. I designed this research study with the intent to provide insight into how women veterans experience their transition into the civilian world of work, including how various challenges impact their experience of transition.

A historical perspective on the role of women in the military provides a useful context for understanding the greater presence of women in the military. While efforts have been made on the part of veteran organizations, including the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Veterans Administration, current programs and support services continue to be largely based on the needs of male veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). Research is needed to assess the needs of female veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Counselors and other helping professionals look to relevant research to inform best practices. By providing insight on this topic, counselors may be able to shape interventions for women veterans in a more intentional manner.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In the past decade, the roles available for women in the military have diversified. The number of women serving in the military has increased, and the number of women veterans is anticipated to increase in the upcoming years. Researchers in the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) have suggested that veterans of both genders experience challenges with transitioning back into civilian life in general and cited a need for increased availability of services specific to women veterans to support their transition into the civilian world of work. They also stated that there is a need for further research to understand better how to best support women veterans (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Professional counselors are expected to use evidence-based interventions to provide effective counseling services, which, given the lack of current research on female veterans, also supports the rationale for this research project (American Counseling Association, 2014). The overall aim of my research is to gain further insight into how women veterans experience their transition into the civilian world of work so that counselors may be able to better identify interventions and counseling approaches more specific to women veterans. This chapter includes information on participants, research design, data collection, data analysis, and steps taken to maintain integrity and transparency throughout the research process. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research practices I conducted to answer the question, “How do women veterans describe their experience of transition from military service to the civilian world of work?”

Overview of Feminist Approaches to Qualitative Research

Since the end of conscription in 1973 and the implementation of the All-Volunteer-Force, the military began to recruit women into service due to the lack of qualified men willing to volunteer. Since this time, the number of women serving in diverse roles in the military has

increased (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics [NCVAS], 2016). In turn, the number of women seeking support after leaving the military is greater than ever and continues to be the rise (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). While there has been a significant amount of survey research conducted on veteran demographics that includes gender as a descriptive variable, there has been little research specifically on how gender as a social construct applies to women in the military or women veterans (Eichler, 2017).

A feminist approach to my research means that the term *gender* is not used as a binomial description synonymous with biological sex, but as a socially constructed concept (Davis, 2008). A “socially constructed concept” refers to ideas, values, and beliefs that are prevalent within a culture and adopted, in varying degrees, by individuals living in that culture. By using what Eichler (2017) referred to as an “analytical conceptualization of gender” (p. 674), I was able to explore how gender may have impacted women veterans’ transition into the civilian world of work while using their description of cultural norms and narratives as a lens for understanding their experiences. Hesse-Biber (2014) also suggested that more traditional forms of research may promote existing dominant narratives, including narratives supporting patriarchy by minimizing the subjective nature of the research process and emphasizing the researcher’s role as the expert. As a researcher, I worked to maintain awareness of the way my status as an educated white woman might impact the research process (Davis, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2014). A feminist approach to research served as a framework to help me minimize the extent to which my worldview and biases served as a lens for understanding participants’ experiences.

Rationale for Conducting a Qualitative Interview Study

Certain questions and phenomena lend themselves better to qualitative research, while others lend themselves better to quantitative research (Merriam, 2016). Qualitative research is

ideal for the in-depth study of a topic (Hesse-Biber, 2014) and, in terms of specific qualitative methods, “in-depth interviews capture an individual's lived experiences” (p. 228). Because I was interested in women’s experiences of transitioning from the military into civilian life and work, interviews proved to be a well-suited tool for collecting richly detailed data about events that were impossible for me to observe.

Given the centrality of gender, power, and the subjective nature of personal experience, feminist research methodology and in-depth interviews proved to be an ideal approach for my study due to the centrality of how multiple social identities interconnect and impact how a person experiences the world. Central to the concept of intersecting social identities is the understanding that each aspect of a person’s identity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) tends to be associated with a certain social status. Furthermore, the social status is dependent upon cultural context. Since I aimed to minimize the extent to which I imposed my values and world view to understand how women veterans experience their transition out of the military and into the civilian world of work, I chose feminist research methodology, more specifically in-depth interviews for exploring this topic (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

By choosing to use feminist theory to understand the transition of women veterans into the civilian world of work, it was essential that I explore the social and cultural norms of both the military culture and the civilian culture, as described by participants (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Savickas, 2013). The inseparable elements of perception, experiences, and societal constructions and factors were central to all aspects of my research design. By conducting this research, I hoped to help others have a greater understanding of women veterans’ transition into the civilian world of work. Below, I outline my research design, including participant recruitment and demographics, data collection and analysis, and my positionality as a researcher.

Research Design

Given my belief that it is impossible to separate the intersection of participants' multiple culturally constructed identities, including gender roles, from their experience of transition into the civilian world of work, feminist research methodology served as an appropriate framework for my study. I engaged in two separate in-depth interviews with eight women veterans who served in the military from 2001 to 2016 and left the military at least one year before participating in my study.

Recruitment

Once I received approval from the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, I began my recruitment process by asking contacts in the National Career Development Association's Veterans Committee and contacts in nearby universities and career development centers for potential referrals. I also reached out to local veteran organizations such as the American Red Cross, American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I provided contacts at organizations with a flyer containing information on the study, as well as a statement for them to share with potential participants that included information about the study and how to contact me. Once I began to recruit participants, my status as a civilian became more salient to my identity. Not being a member of the group that I planned to interview initially made it more difficult to connect with women veterans who might be willing to sit and speak with me for two interviews. However, once I began to meet people who worked in organizations that served veterans and talk to people in my local community, I was struck by how unaware I was of the veteran community in my own town. I was also happy, excited, and surprised at the many men and women I met who seemed to both appreciate my interest in supporting women veterans and were willing to help connect me with potential participants.

I attended two different veteran conferences during my recruitment process to learn more about services and networks available for veterans and to recruit participants. My experiences recruiting participants and attending the veteran conferences were invaluable in providing me with the opportunity to learn experientially about the disparate nature of military and civilian culture as relevant to veterans' transition into the civilian world of work, which I will expand upon later in this chapter.

Once potential participants made initial contact with me expressing interest in the study, I responded with an email that included a summary of the study as outlined in the informed consent document (see Appendix A) to facilitate these potential participants' ability to make an informed decision regarding participation in the study. In the body of the email, I communicated that I aimed to have diverse experiences represented in my study and that to support this aim, the next step was to speak by phone for me to get some basic demographic information (i.e., age, time in the service, time out of the service, race/ethnicity, education level, branch of the military, and rank when they exited the military). I also included a copy of the demographic questionnaire that I intended to complete with them during the phone screening to support their ability to make an informed decision as to their participation in the phone screening. During the phone screening, I again explained the purpose of my study and then reviewed the information on the demographic questionnaire.

During the phone screening, I provided information on my role, educational background, and my perspective as a researcher. I also communicated the role of potential participants as experts on their own experiences and discussed the collaborative nature of the research-participant relationship in my study. I invited potential participants to discuss any concerns or questions they may have had about participating in the study. Once individuals agreed to

participate in the study, I asked them to choose a pseudonym to protect identifying information. Finally, I asked anyone who participated in the initial phone screening to refer other participants to the study, repeating the process described above (Patton, 2005).

I tried to balance realistic limitations regarding time and resources with my goal to maximize diversity. Eight women who met my eligibility criteria participated in the study. I initially planned on interviewing eight to ten individuals. However, after completing two interviews with the eight women identified below and analyzing 22 hours of recordings and 200 pages of transcriptions, I chose to end participant recruitment because I found meaningful and complex patterns woven throughout the 16 interviews and identified that no new or conflicting information emerged (Merriam, 2016; Patton, 2005). In the following section, I provide information on the participants.

Participants

As mentioned in chapter one, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) analyzed data on veterans who had transitioned out of the military and into the civilian world of work. The researchers at the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015) stated that veterans, in general, experienced significantly higher rates of unemployment than the civilian population within their first year of leaving the military, but that after one year, the employment gap between veterans and their civilian counterparts narrows. Since military members seem to struggle most in their first year of exiting the military and may report their experiences differently during that first year of transition, I recruited participants who had exited the military at least one year before the time of the first interview.

Researchers (e.g., Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Kukla, Rattray, & Slayers, 2015) have suggested that women veterans who have served in the military since 2001 may experience

greater challenges in their reintegration into civilian life due to combat exposure and that, in general, transitioning out of the military into civilian life can be more challenging for veterans who have experienced combat (Kukla et al., 2015). Because of the increased number of women service members and the increased diversity regarding their roles in the military in the past 17 years, including the increased likelihood for them to be exposed to combat, I chose to recruit participants who served in the military between 2001 and 2016.

I strived to have a diverse sample regarding participants' race, socioeconomic class, and education levels in efforts to gain insight into how these aspects of their identity may relate to their experiences of transitioning into the civilian world of work (see Table 3.1 for participants' basic demographics). I also hoped to have a diverse sample regarding combat exposure. The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2015), based on their research of veterans' transitions into the civilian world, suggested that those veterans who have experienced combat or who were exposed to combat (e.g., may have served in a combat zone) have more likelihood of developing trauma-related mental health issues that can negatively impact them once they have exited the military (Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011).

Of the eight women I recruited to participate in this study, seven of them had been deployed and exposed to combat. My sample was comprised of eight women veterans whose ages ranged from 32-53 years (see Table 3.1). Six of the participants lived in Virginia when they completed their interviews, which is relevant because Virginia is one of the top ten states in terms of having a high veteran population (US Department of Veteran Affairs [USDVA], 2015). Of the two remaining participants, one lived in Arizona, and one lived in Maryland. All of the participants for this study served in the army.

Table 3.1*Demographics*

Alias	Age	Race	Enlisted/or Commissioned Officer	Promoti on to Officer	Time in Military
LKSmith	28	White/Caucasian	Enlisted	No	6 years
KWellss	32	White/Caucasian	Enlisted	No	4 years
Lana	41	Black/African American	Went in as officer	N/A	5 years
Roostergirl	47	White/Caucasian	Enlisted	No	17 years total
MizDeDe	41	Black/Caribbean American	ROTC then active duty as officer	N/A	First term - Active Duty: 4 years Second term - Reserves: 6 years
Gertrude	53	White/Caucasian	Enlisted	Yes	5 years
Belle	43	White/Caucasian	Went in as officer	N/A	September 2008-
Hairess	33	Black/African American	Enlisted	No	November 2012

Multiple participants shared that a veteran's rank of service, either as an enlisted service member or as an officer, impacted their experience of transitioning into the civilian world of work. As noted in chapter two, the primary determining factor in entering the military as a commissioned officer or an enlisted service member is a person's level of education. In addition to varying in terms of race, they varied in terms of military rank (see Table 3.2).

People who enter the military and already have a bachelor's degree automatically go to officers' school and enter the military as commissioned officers. Conversely, people who enter the military with a high school diploma, an associate's degree, or having some college enter the military as an enlisted service member. Therefore, education level was included in addition to military rank while serving in participant descriptions and demographic data below. Participants varied in terms of levels of formal education (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.2*Demographics Related to Military Service*

Alias	Role	Years out of military	Reason for leaving	No. of terms of service
LKSmith	Medic	4 years	Became pregnant, didn't want to deploy due to struggles husband had, tried to push her out due to "not keeping up with family plan" and fought for honorable discharge	1
KWellss	Military Police	12 years	Med boarded out/Injury	1
Lana	Intelligence Officer First term - Ammunition Specialist Second term - Black Hawks	13 years	Injured early on prevented career advancing after serving initial term	1
Roostergirl	Gunner/FET Medical Service Corps, Patient Administration,	4 years	Med boarded out/Injury - didn't feel betrayed by having to leave her second time out	2
MizDeDe	Chief Officer. First Term- Enlisted Communications Second Term - Reserves: Communications, Officer Candidate School TAC and	5 years	Med boarded out/politics also involved - downsizing	1
Gertrude	Senior Instructor Military Intelligence	6 years	First exit - Wanted to teach Second exit - wanted to retire	2 terms of service/active duty and then reserves
Belle	Officer	13 years	Injured in surgery - could no longer deploy.	1
Hairess	Medic	6 years	Injured/med boarded out	1

Table 3.3*Demographics Related to Education and Career*

Alias	Branch	Location	Highest Education Level	Current Employment
LKSmith	Army	Virginia	Bachelor's Degree/Entered in Master's program at time of interview	Full time - DVS
KWellss	Army	Virginia	Bachelor's Degree	Full time - DVS
Lana	Army	Arizona	Bachelor's Degree	Full time - TSA
Roostergirl	Army	Virginia	Associates Degree	Part time - Makes and Sells Crafts/Entrepreneur
MizDeDe	Army	Virginia	Bachelor's Degree	Full time - DVS
Gertrude	Army/Army National Guard	Maryland	Master's Degree	Full time - teacher & Part time - field hockey coach
Belle	Army	Virginia	Master's Degree	32hrs - part time for Government
Hairess	Army	Virginia	Associates Degree - Cosmetology License	Full time as a hairdresser

The following are overviews of each participant. The names are pseudonyms or aliases selected by each participant.

Belle. Belle was 43 years old at the time of our interviews and had been out of the military for 13 years. She lived in Virginia with her children and husband and identified as White/Caucasian on the demographic questionnaire. Belle went into the military with her bachelor's degree and, as such, began her service as a commissioned officer. At the time of our

interview, her highest level of formal education was a master's degree, which she completed while serving, and she was employed for a government agency working 35 hours per week.

Belle joined the army when she was 25 years old. She explained that immediately before joining the military, she was living in a small town with few employment opportunities and was discontent in her marriage. Military service represented autonomy, adventure, and opportunity. Belle attended officer candidate school and, upon completion, was assigned to Intelligence. She served as an active duty Military Intelligence Officer for five years. During her fifth year of service, Belle developed plantar fasciitis and had her foot operated on by a surgeon in a military medical facility. During the operation, her foot was injured. Due to the nature of the injury, she was unable to run again and was therefore undeployable. At that time, if a service member became undeployable, they were no longer able to serve (without exception). Thus, Belle received an honorable discharge and found herself facing an unexpected career change and transition into the civilian world of work.

Gertrude. Gertrude 53 years old at the time of our interviews and identified as White. She lived in Maryland, stated that her highest level of formal education was a bachelor's degree, and worked full-time as a Special Education teacher. When we spoke, she had been out of the military for six years. Gertrude was the only participant who served as both an active duty service member and a member of the reserves in the National Guard. She enlisted in the military as active duty in 1985, when she was 19 years old, and served as a satellite communications operator, repairer, and installer. She explained that the military was a way to pay for college and offered her adventure and a way to get out of her house and away from her mother.

Gertrude served as active duty for four years, and in her fourth year had the opportunity to teach how to work on the satellite terminal she specialized in. Gertrude said that she fell in

love with teaching. She left the military to pursue her degree in education. Once she received her degree in teaching, Gertrude explained that she didn't immediately find a position and that she also missed military service, and so decided to enlist in the National Guard.

Gertrude served in the National Guard for 17.5 years in the field of communications, but differently than her first term of military service. She worked to support radio, telephone, and radio communication for her assigned unit. During her time in the National Guard, Gertrude had the opportunity to attend officer school for tactical communications and became a non-commissioned officer, as well as a senior instructor. Gertrude chose to retire from the military in 2012 to spend more time with her adoptive son, and to honor her promise to her father, who passed away the year before her retirement, that she would leave the military. Gertrude was the only participant who left the military because of her desire to retire.

Hairess. Hairess was a 33-year-old woman who identified as Black/African American. She had been out of the military for six years and lived in Virginia with her mother and young daughter at the time of our interviews. Hairess was working fulltime as an entrepreneur and hairdresser. Her highest level of formal education at the time we spoke was an associate's degree, as well as a cosmetology license, which she earned after serving in the military. Hairess enlisted in the military when she was 21 years old. She explained that she had a serious boyfriend at the time, and he had been working with a recruiter to enlist but kept failing the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), which is a requirement for enlisting. She said that she would go with him to talk to the recruiter, and the more she learned, the more she realized enlisting in the army might be an opportunity for her to move forward on a different life path. She further explained that she had been waiting tables and drinking "way, way, way too much" and knew that she wanted something different. She explained how enlisting in the

army provided her with an opportunity to have adventures, further her education, and help her “figure out who she wanted to be.”

Hairess shared that she mentioned the idea of enlisting to her mother and that her mother wasn't supportive. Still, she decided to join the army and said that she “didn't even” tell anyone in her family when she went to enlist. Hairless's sense of adventure also led to her working towards a parachutist badge, which is a type of military badge that would allow her to participate in airborne operations when deployed (U.S. Army TACOM Life Cycle Management Command, n.d.). Hairless shared that she loved the excitement of deployment and that when she came back from deployment, she would often feel bored. Hairless said that she enjoyed being in the military and would have stayed in longer, except she injured her foot when jumping out of an airplane and became undeployable. Her injury led to a medical board evaluation, which led to her exit from the military.

KWellss. KWellss was 32 years old and identified as white/Caucasian and lived in Virginia. She enlisted in the army when she was 21 and had been out of the military for 12 years at the time we spoke. KWellss' highest level of formal education was a bachelor's degree. When we spoke, she was expecting her first child and was working full-time, helping veterans struggling with mental health issues with services. When asked what led to her decision to join the military, KWellss explained that while her stepfather had served in the military for approximately 20 years at that time, she hadn't considered enlisting and planned to go to school for massage therapy. Then when she was faced with paying tuition, she said she had an epiphany, "Holy crap, how am I gonna pay this \$14 thousand-dollar student loan debt?"

KWellss shared that she went to her stepfather and told him she was going to enlist. KWellss shared that he had hoped she would go into a secretarial or clerk position, but that she

wanted to go into a combat position in the military. She served in the role of military police after enlisting and was medically discharged before being able to deploy. KWellss had a multitude of factors that contributed to her inability to deploy and her subsequent medical retirement. She explained that she had a brain tumor, was struggling alone with the aftermath of surviving sexual assault that she had experienced while serving in the military, and was also struggling to cope with symptoms of traumatic brain injury (TBI) that she had as the result of a motor vehicle accident that occurred while she was in training.

Lana. Lana was a 41-year-old woman who lived in Arizona at the time of interviews. She identified as Black/African American, and her highest level of formal education was a bachelor's degree. She had been out of the military for 13 years when we spoke and was working full-time for the United States Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Lana joined the army after she graduated from college, which she described as a "backward way of doing things." After entering, she was sent straight to officer candidate school and was assigned to Intelligence.

Lana explained how she grew up having strong, intelligent role models who demonstrated a determination to succeed in the face of discriminatory cultural practices and social barriers. Lana's understanding of how hard her mother and grandfather fought to become doctors and battle discriminatory practices on a systemic level had helped her to understand how privileged she was growing up. She said that joining the military allowed her to give back to her country and contribute to positive change. When talking about her privileges, Lana referred to the privileges of growing up having her basic needs met, as well as attending private schools. She also talked about the opportunities hard-won by relatives in her family and other people of color living in the United States. For example, she stated, "You know, like the fact that as a

minority in this country, I can still vote. I can still drive a car. I can still become a doctor if I wanted to. And not all countries have all of that....” Joining the military provided Lana with a way to feel as though she had done her part too, as she noted, “earn” those privileges.

Lana was injured relatively early in her military service. The injury prevented her ability to advance further in her military career, which led to her decision to leave the military after completing her initial term of service of five years. After leaving the military, Lana worked for the State Department in the role of Intelligence Officer and was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq. Her role was to support her team by gathering all available intelligence and providing the intelligence analysis to her teams to determine the level of terrorist threat involved in completing various missions by convoy. If the information indicated that terrorist groups provided too high of a threat level on a specific mission, the mission would be canceled. Lana shared that she found meaning in the role she played in keeping her team safe and felt valued in her contribution to the team. However, she chose to leave the State Department due to policy changes that inhibited her ability to support her team to her full ability. At the time of speaking, she continued to struggle to find the same level of meaning in her current occupation.

LKSmith. At the time of our interviews, LKSmith was a 28-year-old woman who identified as White/Caucasian and lived in Virginia with her two children and husband. She was working full-time for the Veterans Department of Labor to support veterans in their career transition into the civilian world of work. She had been out of the military for four years at the time we spoke. LKSmith enlisted in the army at the age of 18. After she graduated from high school, she went to college and realized that it wasn't the right option for her. She said that enlisting in the military was a good fit since she grew up in a family in which people she was close to had served in the military. She shared that her family was supportive, although she said

with a smile that some family members were disappointed that she had joined the army and not the Air Force. She also shared that her father had told her that if she went into the military first, she would never finish college. LKSmith smiled widely as she told me that she had just finished her bachelor's degree and was enrolled in a master's degree program for marriage and family therapy.

LKSmith served as a medic in the army and felt that her service strengthened her value of respecting others. LKSmith left the military due to several contributing factors. She shared that at the time immediately before leaving the military, she had recently given birth to her youngest child, which was particularly meaningful for her because she hadn't thought she would be able to conceive for much of her adult life. LKSmith explained that six months after giving birth, women were qualified for deployment and that she was transferred to a new unit and asked to deploy when her daughter was still a young infant. While she had originally planned for her infant daughter to stay with her mother, her husband was in the hospital recovering from injuries he received in combat while deployed, and her stepdaughter had come to live with them, which was a happy change in her life but had not been planned. Complicating matters, since she and her husband had not been her stepdaughter's primary guardians up to this point, they didn't have alternative caregiver plans for when they both were unable to serve as her primary caregivers. Moreover, she said that she was also struggling with severe post-partum and was taking medication to help manage post-partum depression symptoms.

LKSmith requested a compassionate assignment due to these unplanned life changes and challenges, but her request was denied. She explained to me that the army requires service members to have an up-to-date family care plan in place to ensure that children who have parents that serve in the military are provided for in the instance that their parents are both deployed,

leave their family for training, or other assignments. In response to her request to not deploy and receive a compassionate assignment, the army attempted to dishonorably discharge LKSmith for not keeping up with her family care plan. LKSmith fought the dishonorable discharge and succeeded in leaving the army with an honorable discharge.

MizDede. MizDede was 41 at the time of our interviews and identified her race as Caribbean American. She had been out of the military for five years when we spoke and lived in Virginia. Her highest degree of education was a bachelor's degree, and she was employed full time by the Department of Veteran Labor supporting veterans in their transition into the civilian workforce. When I asked what led to her decision to join the military, she shared that she joined to continue and finish her education, as well as for "the opportunity to be a part of something greater than herself." MizDede began her military experience when she was 18 in the Reserved Officer's Training Corps while in college. Six years later, after graduating from college, she entered active duty as a commissioned officer and served in the Medical Service Corps in Patient Administration as Chief Officer and oversaw different aspects of medical evaluation boards.

MizDede explained that medical evaluation boards determined if an injured service member were fit for duty or not, and what kind of healthcare benefits they would receive "for the rest of their life." She explained that in 2012 she was part of a group targeted for involuntary separation due to the political climate. She elaborated by sharing the following:

I had some physical issues. I had gotten injured in my second deployment to Iraq, and I had been struggling through that, and there came a crosshair. They wanted to deploy me for a third time, and my doctor would not clear me to deploy, and that started the process for them to look at me for involuntary separation.

She found herself undergoing a medical board evaluation, received medical severance, and was transferred to the Veterans Administration (VA).

Roostergirl. Roostergirl was 47 at the time of our interviews, lived in Virginia, and identified as White/Caucasian. Her highest level of education was an associate degree. She had been retired from military service for four years and was working part-time as an entrepreneur, selling natural products for people and dogs. I was able to meet with Roostergirl and her service dog Argo for both interviews and was struck by the bond they shared. She was the only participant who served in the military on active duty for two separate terms. When asked what led to her decision to join the military, she said that she had a desire to join the military at a young age and had family members who had served in the military, which she believes contributed to her interest in military service. Roostergirl's grandfather was a captain in the Navy and hoped she would choose to join the Navy in a "secretarial" role. She chose to join the Army and, at that time, was the first woman in her family to join the military.

Roostergirl enlisted right after high school as an ammunition specialist. She shared that she found a sense of purpose in serving in the military and hadn't wanted to leave. However, she was asked to leave the military as a result of being sexually assaulted by a superior. She shared, "He got two years in Fort Leavenworth, and I was handed a plane ticket that weekend. 'Cause they didn't know what to do. So, let's just slide under the carpet." Roostergirl explained that the experiences in her first exit from the military and her most recent exit from the military differed significantly.

In her second term of service, Roostergirl entered as a Supply Sergeant for an Aviation Black Hawk helicopter then got promoted to Door Gunner in a Black Hawk helicopter because she excelled in the position. She continued to perform well, which resulted in being chosen to be

part of a Female Engagement Team (FET), which she considered an honor. She received special training to prepare her to become part of a female engagement team, which included mental, physical, and cultural training. She was trained in language as well and learned Arabic, Pashto, and Dari. Due to the training, it took almost two years before Roostergirl was deployed to Afghanistan to be part of a FET team, as not only a member of the team but the FET leader. Roostergirl was injured while serving and underwent the medical board process. The Army doctors determined that she was unfit to serve. Roostergirl said that she felt supported when leaving the military four years ago, which was vastly different from her first experience exiting the military

Approach to Interviews

As previously mentioned, my preference was to conduct in-person interviews with participants. In my experience as a counselor, much communication occurs through non-verbal means (e.g., eye contact, posture, vocal tones). Technology can inadvertently detract from non-verbal cues, and social nuances (e.g., poor internet connection, technical issues with volume, and technical issues in general). However, in multiple instances, meeting in person was not feasible, or the participant preferred to speak by phone rather than meet in person or through video conference. I conducted six interviews in person and ten by phone.

For all interviews, I developed a small set of prompt questions (see Appendix B) that allowed for the freedom of shaping the interview based on the responses and viewpoints of the participants as they unfolded (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). However, these questions were also open-ended in nature so that participants had the power to direct the interviews based on their responses and the natural flow of conversation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Primary or topical questions were followed up by prompts to more fully engage the

participants and encourage a natural flow in the interview (see below for more on this).

However, the order of questions was changeable, and I attempted to introduce primary questions when natural spaces in the conversation allowed for me to do so (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

I decided upon the questions included in my interview guide (Appendix B) to gain an understanding of the experiences of how women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work and the meaning they ascribed to those experiences. Early on in my interview process, I had the opportunity to speak Dr. Nancy A. Glowacki, the Women Veteran Program Manager in the Veterans' Employment and Training Services, which is housed in the U.S Department of Labor. Dr. Glowacki also served in the United States military and has headed much of the research on women veterans conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor. Dr. Glowacki consulted with me on my research and provided me with additional feedback on my interview guide. In response to Dr. Glowacki's feedback, I included a question on the second interview regarding possible stereotypes that women veteran face (See Appendix B).

I developed two sets of questions, each corresponding to the two interviews I conducted with participants. The first interview focused on completing the informed consent process, learning about participants' career paths, both in and out of the military, and developing rapport. The second interview focused on reviewing initial categories and patterns from the first interview and then the participant's reactions to the credibility of initial categories and patterns. I elaborate on both below.

I structured the first interview around three open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Before asking my central questions, I opened this interview by asking the question, "What made you interested in participating in this study?" My aim here was to establish the participants as

experts on their experiences in the military and transitioning out of the military. Doing so is congruent with feminist research methodology because it serves to minimize the hierarchy implicit in maintaining the researcher as the expert (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The primary questions in this first interview were:

1. While I have read the statistics researchers and government agencies have provided, I want to know what it's like for women who have served in the military to return to life after they leave. Before talking about why you left, maybe we could start by you explaining a little bit about what led to your decision to enter military service and what your time in the military was like?
2. How would you describe what you do during your day to day life now?
3. Tell me about your experience of re-immersing yourself in civilian life after leaving the military? What was it like for you to return to civilian life and the civilian world of work?

I began my first interview with participants by following up on the phone screenings and sharing information about myself to provide a space for them to ask questions about me and who I am as a person and researcher. I acknowledged our different roles, emphasizing participants' expertise in the military, and their own experiences to begin to create a relationship defined by collaboration. I made efforts to clearly communicate my desire for their feedback and direction on identifying patterns and themes based on our interviews together (Hesse-Biber, 2014). I also reviewed the key points of the informed consent document that we discussed during the phone screening. I encouraged questions regarding the research project and what it meant to participate in the research so that participants had the information needed to make an informed decision on participation.

I reminded participants that I would be audio recording our conversations, reiterating that the intention of the recordings as to assist me in representing their narratives faithfully. Finally, before moving onto the first question in my interview guide, I invited participants to share any possible discomfort or concerns they might have and expressed my sincere desire to understand their experiences from their perspective. I asked that in the instance I misspoke or misunderstood something throughout the interviews, that they let me know and that I would welcome learning from them. After reviewing the information discussed during our initial phone screening, the informed consent, and role induction regarding the roles of participant and researcher, I moved onto the questions noted above.

During the interviews, I avoided using language that focused on deficits by framing questions in a manner that emphasized the relationship between participants and societal challenges and acknowledged societal barriers. For example, if I was speaking with a participant who experienced a time of unemployment after leaving the military, I may have framed a question regarding this period as,

So, after leaving the military, you struggled to find employment for seven months. From what I have read about the immediate experiences of veterans, that's not an uncommon experience, which makes me wonder about challenges for veterans in gaining employment after leaving the military. What was that experience like for you?

As I became more immersed in my interviews, I more fully understood how important language was in supporting participants. I will speak to this later in this chapter. I avoided asking direct primary questions about gender to try and minimize leading the direction of participants' responses or overtly imposing my feminist stance on them. My aim was to understand participants' experiences from their perspective and to be aware of how my own

experiences and world views might impact how I heard and interpreted participants' stories. To accomplish this, I engaged in active reflection throughout the interviews, paraphrasing, reflecting content and feelings, and reframing what participants shared. Reflection and reframing served as tools for me to use to check for an apt understanding on my part of participants' stories to facilitate conversation regarding my understanding of their narratives and to work towards identifying possible themes built on emergent patterns in these women veterans' experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

During the second interview, I reviewed the emergent patterns I identified from the first interview with participants. I invited participants to share their reactions and to engage in member checking and the ongoing co-construction of themes. In instances in which participants reacted to the language I used or expanded upon an emergent pattern so that it more accurately reflected their experiences, I changed initial patterns noted in my coding to reflect these suggestions and reactions. Following are the five primary questions that guided the second interview.

1. I am wondering how well what I just shared with you represents what you recall from our first interview. How do the emergent patterns I identified capture your experiences transitioning from the military?
2. After having time to reflect on our previous interview, was there anything we missed that is an important part of how you have experienced the transition from the military into the civilian workforce or anything else you want to share with me?
3. When you think of the journey that led you to where you are today in your career, what factors have impacted you the most?

4. When transitioning into the civilian world of work, did you experience stereotypes or negative assumptions (based on your identity as a woman veteran) that you think others and counselors working with women veterans should know about?
5. What do you think would be most helpful for counselors to know to provide effective support for women veterans as they reintegrate into the civilian world?

During the second interviews, I shifted, and at times altered, the questions to reflect the categories and patterns identified from first interviews through the data analysis in keeping with recommendations in Hesse-Biber (2014), Merriam (2016), and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Throughout the interview process, I worked with participants to verify the aptness of my data analyses by engaging in reflections of content throughout each interview and checking for the credibility of the patterns that I identified from each individual's first interview to facilitate meaningful conversations regarding the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The second interview also provided an opportunity for participants to expand on descriptions of experiences they shared with me during the initial interview and express any thoughts or reactions they may have about the interview process in general. By checking the representation of data with participants, I hoped to establish that my understanding and recording of participant's stories usefully captured key elements of their experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Merriam 2009). In total, I completed 16 participant interviews and had 22 hours of audio recordings and 200 pages of transcripts.

Conducting the Interviews

In using interviews as my means for data collection, I relied solely on the spoken language that participants used to describe and represent their memory of their personal experience of transition (Merriam, 2016). The goal of my research was to explore how

participants experienced their ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, with attention given to the relevance of social and cultural norms, as described by participants, as well as the intersection of participants multiple social identities which made in-depth interviews an appropriate means for data collection (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

I used a digital recording device with a voice recording app installed and carried a backup recording device to each in-person interview to use in the instance my primary recording device failed to function. I used a bag with a lock and key to store and transport digital recording devices. The bag remained locked when not in use. I subscribed to the business account available through Dropbox to store interviews more securely than free accounts. Within 24 hours of each interview, I uploaded the recording to my password-protected Dropbox account and transferred the recording to an external hard drive as a backup. I created a folder within Dropbox and saved interviews using the pseudonyms participants chose, along with the interview number and date. I used Rev Transcription services to transcribe each interview verbatim, which entailed uploading the audio recording directly to the Rev Transcription services site. Once completed, I received an email with a secure link to access the transcripts. I backed up completed transcripts onto an external hard drive every week and stored that hard drive in a locked cabinet.

Once I received the completed transcripts, I checked the transcripts against the audio recording for accuracy, and made notes of notable differences in participants' intonation, vocal volume, and pauses in speech. After engaging in this process, I then re-read transcripts and began to categorize and code the interview data.

Data Analysis

I began organizing data shortly after my first interview, using coding as a means for condensing data, summarizing data, identifying categories and patterns, and ultimately to synthesize these units of data into themes that emerged from within and then across participant interviews (Saldaña, 2009). My first cycle coding included (a) descriptive coding, which I used to chunk data based on the topic of language segments; (b) process coding, which I used to chunk data based on segments of language describing an action, often a goal-oriented action; and (c) structural coding, which I used to chunk segments of language based on concepts directly related to my research question (Saldaña, 2009). For instance, when lines in a transcript were directly relevant to military culture or a participant specifically discussed being a woman in the military, I used the term, “military culture,” or “differential other” as structural codes. By using feminist theory to guide (but not drive) the coding process, I attended to language relevant to how participants described gender, class, race, ethnicity, education level, or other socially constructed group membership that impacted their reintegration into the civilian world of work. As noted earlier, initial codes assisted me in organizing data into a systemic order that facilitated my ability to identify emergent patterns (Merriam, 2016; Saldaña, 2009). Please see Table 3.4 for examples of initial codes.

As data collection progressed, I gained further insight into how women veterans may experience their transition into the civilian world of work, which helped to inform my second cycle coding. I engaged in a second cycle of coding, specifically pattern coding. Pattern coding involved synthesizing my first cycle codes into categories by grouping similarly coded data together. I then further grouped those meta-patterns into more comprehensive and complex patterns or themes that were relevant to my research question and applicable throughout

Table 3.4*Initial Codes*

Initial Code	Definitions	Examples from the Data
Relationships (Descriptive Code)	Both positive and negative connections that participants identified in their stories of transition	Right. Yeah, I didn't have ... There was only maybe a couple of people I felt like I could really talk to, and they hadn't had that experience, because we were some of the first to go (G1 - Lines 414-416).
Military Culture (Structural Code)	Shared set of beliefs, norms and cultural expectations specific to the military	Oh, yeah. You need to fold 50 shirts by the end of the day, if you don't fold 50 shirts by the end of the day you're going to get written up (H1- Lines 742-743).
Civilian Culture (Structural Code)	Shared set of beliefs, norms and cultural expectations specific to civilian culture	Yeah. I would say the biggest challenge that I had, and even the biggest challenge that I still face to this day is that I'm a very direct person. And ... in the civilian world it's much more fluffy (L1-I1- Lines 260-262).
Initial Code	Definitions	Examples from the Data
Loss of Connection (Descriptive Code)	Losing a sense of belonging and feeling disconnected from others, and/or a part of self	I didn't really have friends, there anymore. It was me and the other broken people, it was like everybody that got left behind (H1- Lines 481-482).
Resilient (Descriptive Code)	Able to bounce back after hardships, unexpected changes/a drive to work through life challenges that arise	Because I could've just went down this tube of depression and went a whole different route of just horribleness, but then now I look back and I own my own home, and I have a really good amount of savings, and we're having a baby, and I'm married, and I have a great job, and I'm happy, and I'm getting the mental health support that I need. It's working (Lines 414-418, KWellss- I1).
No Choice to Leave (Descriptive Code)	Feeling a loss of power due to leaving the military due to circumstances out of personal locus of control	I didn't really have the choice of transition that was like, "Oh, my four years are up. And do I want to get out, or do I want to stay in"? I didn't have that (Lines 281-285, KWellss-I1).

participant interviews (Saldaña, 2009). The categories and patterns I identified early on in the data collection process were also used to further mold the aspects of participant descriptions that

I focused on as data collection progressed (Merriam, 2016; Reinharz, 1992). As Merriam (2016) explained, “Simultaneous data collection and analysis occur both in and out of the field. That is, you can be doing some rudimentary analysis while you are in the process of collecting data, as well as between data collection activities” (p. 171).

I expanded my sample size until the data I collected from interviews yielded no new or conflicting categories or patterns (Douglas, 2003; Goulding, 2002; Locke, 2001). I then grouped initial codes into categories. Subsequently, in the third round of analysis, categories were grouped together and organized into three themes, each with three subthemes. See Table 3.5 for a summary overview of themes and sub-themes.

Table 3.5.

Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Definitions	Sub-themes
Moving Forward	Participants’ strength and determination to grow, make new life goals and work towards achieving them	1. Loss 2. Challenges 3. Perseverance
Connection	Connections with others, or the lack of connection with others, and feeling part of society or a group	1. Relationships 2. Isolation 3. Sense Belonging
Sense of Purpose	Having meaning in life that helps to provide a context for career and life path, and a sense of being part of or connected to something bigger than self	1. Social Identity 2. Direction 3. Part of Something Bigger

Throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote analytic memos. I also elicited feedback from a critical friend, described in more detail later in this chapter, to promote self-reflexivity specific to how my role as the researcher impacted the categories, patterns, and themes I identified and to encourage my rigorous analysis of the data (Saldaña, 2009). My analytic memos also served as an audit trail to help me be transparent regarding my active role as a researcher in this study (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Positionality

Researchers influence data from the moment that data collection begins. All data are already present. It is the researcher's focus for the study and choice of relevant information that creates meaning (Creswell, 2013). Subjectivity, or unique beliefs and assumptions about the world and how things work, is a researcher's ever-present companion, as it was mine throughout my completion of this study. As a researcher, I aimed for transparency throughout the research process to provide greater credibility for my results. Additionally, I engaged in practices to encourage reflexivity and awareness of my values, beliefs, and worldview, which is essential to successful feminist interviews (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Pasque, 2013). With this in mind, I will share some of my world views and experiences that I believe to be relevant to this research.

I come from a family with very traditional gender roles in many ways. In my home, when I was growing up, women were expected to be kind, gentle, empathetic, and to put others first. These values and behaviors were modeled and esteemed as feminine and the ideal. Conversely, characteristics such as independence, competitiveness, and assertiveness were masculine. However, as I grew older and became more independent from my family of origin, I learned that to succeed in school, and later the workforce, characteristics such as assertiveness,

competition, and autonomy were often traits that helped me reach my goals and were valued by others. Still, I struggled with how to embrace the characteristics I had associated with being masculine while maintaining my sense of femininity. This internal struggle impacted my performance during graduate school, which led to my master's level internship supervisor's suggestion that I attend assertiveness training. I learned assertiveness skills during this training (e.g., how to communicate my wants and needs without deferring to the wants and needs of others, how to convey confidence in professional situations using eye contact and posture, etc.).

I also learned from the other women in the group that I was not alone in this struggle. Many group members shared that they, too, continued to struggle with assertiveness skills in the home or other specific areas in their life, but had learned how to communicate assertively in work settings to succeed. My participation in the women's assertiveness group during my graduate counseling program facilitated my personal and professional growth as a counselor in that I was able to learn skills that helped me communicate with others at my internship in an assertive manner. I learned how to communicate my thoughts and reactions to others, as opposed to only responding to their reactions and what others needed from me, which was emphasized as a core feminine value in my family of origin.

My own experiences as a woman and my own career development were central in developing my research question. The goal of these practices was to increase and maintain my awareness of how my beliefs and worldview shaped and impacted my research, including my interactions with participants. Awareness regarding my positionality as a researcher allowed me to be intentional and transparent in how I shaped and progressed with my research (Merriam, 2016).

While in the process of completing my research proposal for this study, I was aware that my interest in gender and career development, as well as my own socially constructed concept of gender, impacted my role as a researcher. However, it wasn't until that I realized the extent to which this was true. Through analytical journaling, discussions with my critical friend and committee, and returning to current literature, I was able to use this insight to facilitate my growth as a researcher and work towards maintaining the trustworthiness and integrity of my research, as described below.

Trustworthiness and Integrity

To have confidence that the results of my research have value and are sound, I employed multiple strategies to ensure “good quality” interview techniques and, as previously stated, to gain and maintain awareness of my worldview, beliefs, and biases. Because feminist research methodology challenges the assertion that there is a single objective reality, I want to be clear that my goal of using the following strategies was to be aware of how my worldview impacted the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Merriam, 2016).

Collecting Quality Data

The data must aptly represent the phenomenon of study to produce meaningful results of a qualitative research project, (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative data collection can be a time-consuming process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2016). I gave considerable thought to how to effectively and efficiently conduct interviews. Similarly, I gave considerable thought on how to engage in interviews. I aimed to use questions and techniques that were consistent with the aims of my research, while also facilitating my ability to develop a rapport with participants and provide participants with the time and space necessary to actively participate in the interview process in a meaningful way (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Without giving attention to the multiple

facets of data collection that allow for quality data, the trustworthiness of the data, and therefore the results of the study would be questionable.

Critical Friend

As previously mentioned, my biases, views, and beliefs impacted my research at all stages of the process, from deciding upon the problem statements to the interpretation of results (Merriam, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I consulted consistently with my critical friend, who was also a doctoral candidate in a counselor education program. At the time of my research, she had completed doctoral-level courses in qualitative research and was engaged in conducting a qualitative research study for her dissertation. She had access to my verbatim transcripts and my analytical memos so that we were able to engage in conversations that helped me evaluate my coding and interpretations, increase my self-awareness, and facilitated accountability.

By consistently engaging in peer debriefing with my critical friend, I supported the dependability and transparency of my study, as well as gained insight into how my worldview and lens as a researcher impacted my interviews, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation (Flick, 2014; Merriam, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Debriefing with a critical friend was one way that I clarified and documented my views and perspectives, encouraged active reflection, and provided me with accountability throughout the research process (Flick, 2014; Merriam, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Replicability

Replicability refers to the efforts of qualitative researchers to engage in studies that can be repeated (Merriam, 2016). As previously noted, I engaged in continuous analytic memoing or reflective journaling to document my thought process by detailing each step throughout data collection and analysis. My critical friend and committee members had access to memos and

research process documentation at all stages of my research. As was appropriate, memos and documentation have been included directly in this chapter and/or as appendices to my dissertation. By creating an audit trail, I attempted to be transparent in the process of my research and, therefore, enable others to re-create my study in efforts to add to knowledge about the transition of women veterans into the civilian workforce.

Member Checking

Member checking provided an opportunity to understand and verify the accuracy of data collection and further understand the perspectives of participants (Merriam, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the second interview, I shared emergent patterns that I identified from the data collected from the first interviews with participants. I also provided them with my interpretation of those emerging patterns to allow participants the opportunity to clarify their meaning and to encourage participants' active participation in shaping the direction of my research project (Gilligan et al., 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Pasque, 2013).

Member checking served to help me gain insight into how my role as a counselor informed the language that I was initially used to describe participants' experiences and label my initial categories and patterns. Early on in my process of completing second interviews, a participant reacted to the term "resilient," which I had used to label an initial pattern. She shared that it wasn't a word she would have chosen to label the pattern I had described. Similarly, my use of the word resilient drew a reaction from another participant later that week.

I realized that I was using language more consistent with presenting a case during clinical supervision than as a researcher. Indeed, I realized that I was failing to capture participants' descriptions of *their* experiences, as *they* described them and was imposing my worldview as a counselor on the meanings I was making of their accounts. I used this awareness and shifted the

language I used to that more reflective of participants' descriptions throughout the data collection and analysis process and continued to engage in member checking, as well as the other practices previously described. However, when I began to write chapter four, I believed my writing to be more reminiscent of case notes than effectively presenting my results, which frustrated me. I felt stumped on how to move forward.

After engaging in discussions with my critical friend and committee members on how to move forward in a meaningful way, I returned to the literature. Reading James Gee's work on discourse analysis helped me more clearly identify or "name" aspects that I was struggling with in terms of presenting my results. In essence, discourses are a way to be in the world and ways of interacting with and communicating with the world around us. Gee's (2017) work helped me gain fresh insight into the salience of language in constructing our own personal worlds and helped me more fully grasp how critical the role of language is in bounding social interactions, as well as social expectations and cultural norms. Although I did not use discourse analysis as my methodology or in interpreting my findings, I took the insights I gained to heart when presenting my results in chapter four.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which research results can be transferred to other contexts. Transferability is an important facet of qualitative research since a clear and inclusive description of the entire process of the research, including an audit trail, is needed for the results to be transferable (Flick, 2014; Merriam, 2016). I engaged in data analysis between participants' first and second interviews, as well as across participant interviews, to work towards obtaining transferable results. I also conducted two interviews to elicit rich descriptive data about how

women veterans experience their transition into the civilian world of work (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam, 2016).

Summary

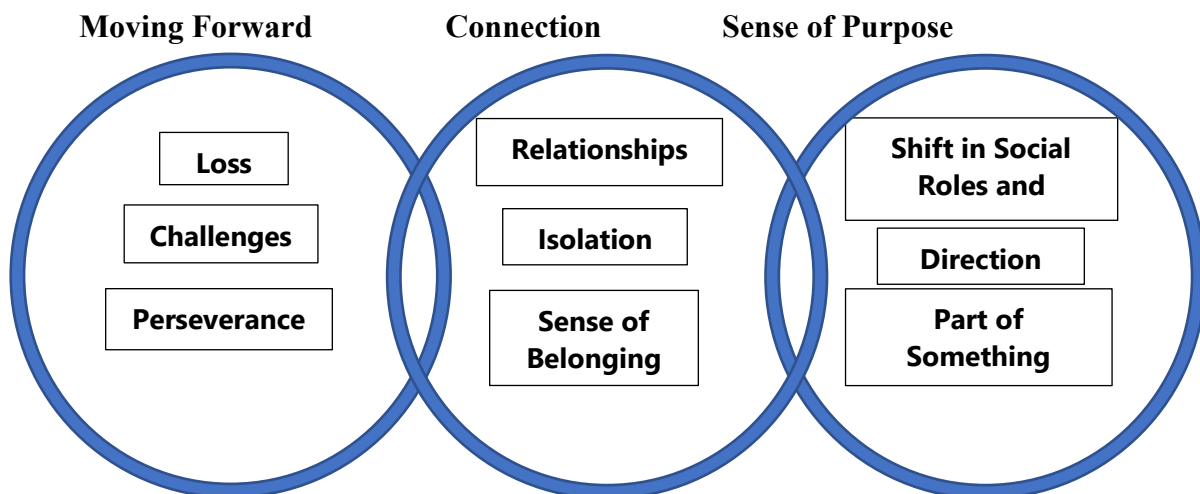
I used feminist research methodology to inform my research design to learn how eight women veterans described their experiences of transition into the civilian world of work. I designed and completed this study to contribute to counseling literature in a way that may help to inform counseling interventions for those working with women veterans exiting the military. In this chapter, I outlined the research methodology I employed to answer the question of how eight women veterans described their experiences of transition into the civilian world of work. I included my criteria for participant selection, descriptions of my process for data collection and analysis, and the approaches I employed to maintain the trustworthiness of my research. In chapter four, I present the resulting themes of my research.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes I identified by the data analysis methods described in chapter three. As discussed, I used feminist research theory as a framework for all stages of the research process, which allowed me to attend to participants' multiple socially constructed social identities, the intersection of these identities in relation to culture, as well as their own experiences. I determined that each of the themes described below met the objective of increasing insight into the experience of women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work, with the overall goal of helping counselors gain insight into how to best support women veterans transitioning into the civilian world of work.

As noted in Figure 4.11 below, the three primary themes I identified were Moving Forward, Connection, and Sense of Purpose. Additionally, I describe the following sub-themes: (1) Loss, Challenges, and Perseverance; (2) Relationships, Isolation, and Sense of Belonging; (3) Shift in Social Roles and Identity; (4) Direction and Part of Something Bigger and discuss these as related to the themes. In identifying the primary themes and sub-themes included in this chapter, I aimed to answer my research question, "How do women veterans describe their transition into the civilian world of work."

Figure 4.1. Primary Themes and Subthemes



Theme 1: Moving Forward

The term “moving forward” in and of itself is not negative or positive by nature but represents a complex construct that encompasses loss, challenges, and perseverance as subthemes. Participants described a sense of loss of military culture discourse, and confusion as to how to act and connect in the civilian world of work. "Moving forward" is the term that I have used to represent the inter-related descriptions of loss, challenges, and perseverance that mark these women's transitions into the civilian world of work, as they have described this experience to me.

Initially, my understanding of participants' descriptions aligned with the term "resiliency," which is a term that gets much attention in the world of counseling. However, more than one participant shared that while they may agree with the essence of how I described my conceptualization of "resiliency" as it applied to their description of transition, they had an adverse reaction to the word itself. Based on their feedback during our second meetings (as part of member checking), I understood that when I shared my initial categories, and they heard the word "resilient," there was a general feeling that the term emphasized the experience of hardship, violence, possible assault, having been maltreated, but bouncing back. I chose to share this because my experience in member checking served to re-emphasize the importance of language while engaging in data analysis. I aimed to use language that was congruent with participants' language to the extent possible—in keeping with my research principles and the broader theoretical framing of this study. Thus, I chose the phrase "moving forward" in hopes to emphasize an action orientation, resoluteness, and strength that I had the privilege of hearing about when I spoke with these eight women.

Participants each had unique stories that included happiness, sadness, success, and loss. Without fail, the participants communicated a sense of loss while leaving the military and transitioning into the civilian world of work. What follows is a description of the three sub-themes comprising Moving Forward: Loss, Challenges, and Perseverance.

Loss

Participants described a sense of loss of military culture and confusion as to how to act and connect in the civilian world of work. They shared the sense of value they felt while serving and went on to explain that they still felt, many years later, a sense of worth in their past military service. Much of the participants' identity seemed to be connected to their military service. They felt that part of themselves was ripped away when they exited the military, especially when their decision to leave wasn't their choice. Haress conveyed the loss of value she felt after learning she was unable to deploy and had to transition out of the military, "I didn't really have friends, there anymore. It was the other broken people and me, and it was like everybody that got left behind."

While participant roles may have varied, each woman shared that serving in the military entailed successfully meeting high expectations, rigorous demands, self-sacrifice, and accomplishment. When leaving the military, they left that culture and understanding. In the civilian community, they found a culture with little knowledge of the tremendous self-discipline they had earned and mastered when serving, the unique successes and experiences they had when serving, and the amount of self-sacrifice and hard work that went into serving their country. Furthermore, the process of exiting the military in and of itself sounded to me as though it could feel degrading, depending on circumstances.

By learning about this dynamic, I was able to gain insight into the interwoven relationship between identity and cultural or procedural practices in the military. In the instances that participants left due to injury, not a personal choice, they expressed a sense of feeling unvalued by the military. As LKSmith communicated, "I just felt like the military failed me because it was like, look, you know, I gave you everything...." Belle expressed a similar sentiment, "That bothered me a lot. I gave everything to the army, and then they screwed up by cutting a nerve in my foot. And then they were like, 'get out.'"

The circumstances surrounding the participant's exit from the military colored their experience of transition into the civilian world of work. For instance, MizDede described a sense of loss regarding her personal and professional value during the medical board evaluation process and early on in her transition. She described an internal battle to accept that she wasn't able to deploy due to physical injuries. MizDede explained,

The role of the military is to defend the United States at home and abroad, so the ability to deploy is one of the top priorities for military service members. If you are unable to deploy, then they start looking at whether a service member is fit to do their job.

As a researcher, I failed to understand the enormity of this statement until I grasped the tremendous pride and sense of accomplishment that participants felt when serving as part of the U.S. military. KWellss also explained how devastating it was to learn that she would be unable to deploy due to her injuries. As presented in chapter three, KWellss chose the role of military police to serve in a combat position that made the inability to deploy crushing. Not only was she faced with her loss at being unable to deploy but expressed anger in response to the reactions and negative assumptions of other service members, more specifically resentment of the stigma of being a woman serving in the combat arms field. She still struggled with her loss on different

levels, as well as other challenges, yet maintained a spirit of strength and a willingness to continuously learn and grow. In instances where participants who felt as though they had some say or power in deciding when they left the military, their experience of loss was devoid of the complexities presented above.

For instance, when learning Gertrude's story of transition into the civilian world of work when she was ready to retire, she ended her military career feeling valued. Still, she shared that she experienced a loss in terms of others' understanding of her accomplishments and the accompanying status when she left the military. At the time of our interviews, she shared that she still struggled with this dynamic. She explained, "People respect me cause I was military, but they don't respect the fact that I've had all these experiences that, you know, make me ... I don't know ...A valuable asset to the school?"

Participants' descriptions of their transition out of the military conveyed how central being a part of the military was to their sense of identity. When serving, they had a greater mission, to protect and serve their country with clearly defined parameters as to the role they were expected to play in that mission. They knew who they were, felt value in their service, and demonstrated strength to meet the challenges they faced while serving in the military. When exiting the military, the participants lost that part of themselves, that sense of direction and social identity. They had to work to figure out how to adapt and forge ahead.

Hairess explained that she was at a loss on how to conduct herself early on in her transition into the civilian world of work. She shared, "And it's not like they teach you to do that just in ... it's not like you get dropped off in Afghanistan and you're like, 'okay now you gotta be ...' It's like they ingrain it in you. So, all four years, it's always ingrained. Know your surroundings, what are you doing, be persistent, be regimented." Hairess also shared that she

was unsure about what role she would play in the civilian world of work, or what purpose she would have, which is a sentiment shared by other participants. Hairess stated, "But I wish I would've been able to go straight into like the government, even if it was a secretary type job, or some medical inputting. Whatever. Just so I would've had a purpose in my life. And I think then I would not have spiraled down and had to come back up from that."

While Hairess was aware of feelings of grief and hurt early on in her transition, the experience of loss was not always so immediate for all participants. Participants' experience of loss impacted each at different times throughout their transition, which may imply that the transition into the civilian world of work is an ongoing, non-linear process. For instance, while MizDede was immediately aware of her sense of loss, when we spoke, she still had to exert effort to not to cry while talking about her experience leaving the military and shared that it remained a difficult thing for her to talk about. She stated, "I think that would be a key thing for folks to realize. It doesn't happen just within the months before, six months before I got out and six months after. If people understand the journey...I don't necessarily totally feel settled yet, and it's five years later."

Belle and LKSmith were pregnant at the time of exiting the military. Both women shared that their changing role in their families required significant time and energy, making it difficult to think about or process their feelings regarding their exit from the military. Participants portrayed a sense of urgency in keeping busy and an inclination towards action in their lives, particularly early in the ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, which left little time for the grief process. They filled their lives with family, job searches, new jobs, and education. KWellss described how her life has been full of changes since leaving the military. Early on in

her transition into the civilian world of work, it felt as though her life was a whirlwind of change. She explained,

I got married and then ended up getting divorced. I bought a house, and then my family all moved in with me. I took custody of my special-needs nephew, I met my husband, and he moved in with me, we got married almost a year ago. So, everything has just been...and then my parents moved out before we got married.

The tendency to keep busy and engaged in activity may contribute to the temporal variation that marked participants' description of loss, or the awareness of their experience of loss. Belle shared that she hadn't realized the loss that she felt at leaving the military until speaking in our interviews about her exit from the military and the process of transition. During our second interview, Belle shared that she hadn't thought about the loss she experienced when she left the military. She explained that by talking about her transition into the civilian world of work in our interviews, Belle had realized for the first time that it was indeed a loss for her and wondered if others who left the military experienced a similar loss. She said that after our first interview, she had talked to her husband of many years about the loss she felt when leaving. Although Belle stated that her husband served in the Reserves at the time of our interviews, she learned that her husband had also experienced a sense of loss when leaving active duty military service. She stated

We (she and her husband) talked for like two hours. I never even realized I felt this way... it was good to talk about it and kind of get it out because at the time. Things were moving so fast that I just don't think I ever took the time to stop and think.

Seven of eight participants shared that they had been out of the military for one or more years before understanding that they were experiencing difficulties with their mood or health,

such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or traumatic brain injury. Leaving the military and joining civilian culture entailed a shift in which participants were expected to focus more on themselves and their well-being, as well as recognize that they may need support. The conveyed challenge to do so may partly be reflective of the collective, or team orientation emphasized in military service and the training that participants described as being central to their assimilation into the military, and military culture. It makes sense that for the participants' part of the adjustment to the civilian world of work and civilian culture included adjusting to cultural norms and expectations that put more value on self and a more individualistic mind-frame.

A sense of chaos marked participants' descriptions of how they experienced the civilian world of work and civilian culture, social expectations bounded by simultaneously existing and multiple layers of motives and communication. Participants talked about the less direct, softer communication style they associated with cultural norms in the civilian world of work as frustrating and communicated a preference for the direct communication style they associated with service in the military. Lana explained, "Yeah. I would say the biggest challenge that I had, and even the biggest challenge that I still face to this day is that I'm a very direct person. And in the civilian world, it's much more fluffy." The divergences between military and civilian work cultures, as described by participants, seemed to cause discomfort, as well as a sense of loss or confusion about how to best move forward with their careers, especially early on in transition.

Although participants' collective narratives included loss, the overall picture portrayed from the interviews is of women who valued strength and determination in reaching their goal. Participants experienced challenges when leaving the military and adjusting to the civilian world of work; they refused to let that loss or other challenges define them.

Challenges

The challenges participants included when talking about their experiences of transition into the civilian world of work provided greater clarity as to the complex nature of their transition. Each woman's story of transition was unique, and the difficulties described included struggles with emotions, physical pain and injury, systemic challenges, and relational challenges. Due to the significance of relationships in participants' narratives, I chose to include relationship challenges later in this chapter. Challenges named by participants fell into three categories: physical challenges, emotional challenges, and acculturation challenges.

Physical challenges. While the timing of seven participants' exit from the military was directly impacted by injury, without exception, all participants were injured during their military service. Their physical injuries, however, affected their stories of transition to varying degrees and in different ways. Gertrude shared that after her deployment to Iraq, she had foot surgery when she returned, and still grapples with back and knee pain that "limit her." She said that her back issues were likely due to the Kevlar and plates soldiers wear for protection against gunshots when deployed.

Well, and what led to my ... Most likely, what led to my back issues was all that gear, because I always joke with my students and tell them I weighed over 200 pounds in Iraq, and they're like, "What?" Well, I weighed 135, but there was- (over 75 pounds of equipment she wore).

LKSmith also shared that she will have ongoing back issues for the rest of her life due to the body armor she wore when deployed. She shared that while the armor was protective, it also was a tremendous amount of weight for her upper body. She explained, "physically, it just

wears on your body so much...because of, well, women have boobs, and they didn't accommodate for that. There were no like, little cups."

KWellss was hurt while serving in the army, which resulted in traumatic brain injury (TBI). When asked how her TBI impacts her life in the civilian world of work, she responded, "I think it impacts every single day, all day long. Constantly in pain, constant migraines, constant confusion." Roostergirl shared that when she became injured, including suffering from TBI, her husband, at the time, was considered her caretaker. She said that he received money each month to take care of her, remind her of appointments, and remind her to take her medication. She also shared that due to her injuries, she was considered unemployable. Roostergirl shared, "I also fall under the unemployability, which is funny because the military trains you to fight, but they don't train you to go home." KWellss explained to me that when someone is injured in the military, the VA will compensate them monetarily and connect them with services. However, she also shared that the system of veteran services can be complicated to navigate, which I expand on further below.

Hairess shared about how she felt others who hadn't served didn't understand how much her pain impacted her regularly and how much energy and effort she put into coping with the ongoing pain from her injuries. "I'm just really trying my best to make sure that I'm not contributing to my downfall more so than what I've already done, like with my foot and stuff. But it's frustrating to hear people complain about pain or ..."

LKSmith also shared that she felt others had minimized her physical pain and the severity of her injuries. She conveyed that other service members communicated and acted in ways that minimized the extent of her physical pain. LKSmith stated, "...it's the whole having injuries, you know, that people, kind of, look at it as, 'Well, you're just a soft woman,' and it's like, no, these

are like, really legitimate and, you know, people argue women shouldn't be in the military. I'm like, 'Well, they are, and they're an integral part of it'...." Within the context of this insight, it may be useful for counselors working with women veterans to have an awareness of the complex manner with which physical injuries may impact their experience of transition.

Emotional challenges. Participants shared they struggled with their mood during their transition into the civilian world of work, including experiencing PTSD, depression, anxiety, and grief. Although each woman shared a unique and rich description of their transition, challenges with mood or emotions were a common theme among the interviews. As referenced earlier, participants described a desire to keep going without much thought or self-awareness of their emotional health. When Gertrude discussed her experiences with PTSD during her ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, she said, "I think because I wasn't aware of what was going on, I didn't really think much about it." She went on to describe how her PTSD impacted both her personal and professional life. Before being diagnosed with PTSD, she described a sense that others were uncomfortable with her, but that it was difficult for her to see the emotional changes in herself. Again, as a counselor working with women veterans early on in their transition, it may be worth inviting your client to discuss self-awareness as a useful tool in healing, as well as clarifying her perceptions and thoughts on self-awareness in her life.

Gertrude said that as time has passed, she has become more open about her PTSD as she has continued to work through her symptoms and that she talks about how PTSD impacts her life with friends and co-workers, including that daily medication is part of her coping. Gertrude described the direct and humorous way that she talks about her PTSD with friends and co-workers. She shared that she might say, "Hey, if I'm acting weird to you, it's because I have PTSD. I'm not really that weird, crazy. I am crazy, but... it just means I may not be the typical

teacher." I will discuss later how teaching and advocacy are both facets of Gertrude's transition into the civilian world of work that she identifies as being healing and facilitating her personal growth.

KWellss described her feelings of depression early in her transition into the civilian world of work, to the extent that she was unable to focus on work, education, or career. She further described that her struggles with TBI and other physical challenges contributed to her depressive symptoms.

So, when I got out, I fell into an extreme, extreme depression. So, for about six months, I had to move in with my parents, which was embarrassing when in your mind, you play this, 'I'm gonna spend 20 years like my dad, I'm gonna deploy, do all these things.' And then have that cut short and have all these medical things.

MizDede also shared that she experienced feelings of depression. She explained,

Absolutely. Absolutely. I was already losing sleep, sick, depressed. I had no quality relationship with my family because now I'm just isolating myself. I didn't want to tell them what was going on. I haven't even told this story to very many people, but I know it's part of my journey.

Struggles coping with emotions during adjustment to the civilian world of work were also expressed by Hairess, who talked about nightmares negatively impacting her sleep and concern that other areas of her life would adversely be affected by her difficulty sleeping as well. Lana shared that she struggled with symptoms of PTSD after leaving the State Department and had to learn how to cope effectively. Roostergirl also discussed challenges with PTSD. She said that due to her struggles with PTSD, in conjunction with her physical issues related to her TBI and hearing, she became so hopeless in her outlook that she thought of ending her life. Other

participants also spoke about suicide in their interviews. MizDede disclosed that early on in her transition, she had felt so overwhelmed and hopeless that she had considered ending her life, and KWellss conveyed sorrow at how many of those she had served with had taken their own life since leaving the military. During our first interview, KWellss said with a saddened tone, "...since I've been out of the military ... what, I got out, it's been seven years now. I've had six or seven people that I've served with commit suicide."

Hairess and Gertrude, similarly to Lana, also spoke to the hope that could be found in understanding or gaining insight into their emotional struggles. Gertrude lived with symptoms of PTSD for a year before she gained insight into her feelings of hypervigilance and anxiety. She shared that she was not diagnosed with PTSD until a year after exiting the military. When discussing how the delay in being diagnosed impacted her, it seemed difficult for her to describe it adequately. She said, "I mean, dealing with all that, and then dealing with PTSD, and not understanding what's going on totally (it was tough), you know." Hairess also shared that she felt a sense of relief when her doctor told her that she was experiencing "anxiety-induced memory loss." She explained, "And when he told me that I just cried, I was like, I thought I was crazy because I wouldn't remember things. I couldn't remember what I told my mom yesterday, or I would repeat things." Her words confirmed the power of health and mental health providers normalizing symptoms and helping clients make connections. Lack of accurate diagnosis can also serve as a barrier for effective treatment, and for veterans, it can serve as an additional barrier to receiving services from the VA.

Veteran benefits and the services available to veterans are currently numerous. It can, however, be a daunting system to navigate. LKSmith shared that the stigma of having mental health issues and seeking help for those mental health issues can serve as an additional barrier to

veterans seeking services. She shared that her own experiences early on in her transition seemed to ring true with other veterans with whom she had worked. She explained, "they take the uniform off, and they feel completely naked and vulnerable ... And so, I mean, there was still a period where I felt like that, but it was...I was able to overcome it." LKSmith went on to explain that trust was especially challenging for her since she felt mistreated by the military during her transition out. She stated, "...the trust was a huge thing...Like, I didn't trust the VA because it was, it was in the administration run by the military..." The strength and perseverance struck me that LKSmith and other participants demonstrated in seeking out help and refusing to let challenges with mental health define them.

Acculturation. Participants described variations in the military and civilian culture and how chaotic it could feel to find themselves immersed in the work culture of civilian institutions and organizations grounded in a different set of social rules and expectations. Based on participant interviews, military culture was defined by clear power hierarchies and clearly defined expectations in terms of their roles and work tasks. Furthermore, participants described the importance of following orders, completing assignments, and working as a team instead of an individual. They described their experience of civilian culture after leaving the military as confusing, and at times overwhelming. As MizDede explained, when comparing her civilian career with her military service, "Wow. Comparatively, to what I used to do in the military, I think the only thing that is the same is that I still work in the healthcare space." Participants were faced with the challenge of learning a new way to engage with the world around them.

Some aspects of being action-oriented seem to have been beneficial to participants. However, they also described being still and calm or being in the present as a challenge. As Hairess described, "My brain doesn't function like that, so my brain is always constantly moving,

and I'm just like, I don't know how to ..." She explained that she always feels the need to be doing something and finds it difficult to be calm and content. Haireiss further explained how her drive to be moving and in a state of action could, at times, prohibit her ability to prioritize efficiently, .." let me deep clean my bathroom with a toothbrush, but it would be a mission like I'm cleaning the toilet. And then I'd be like, oh, I'm tired now. And nothing else would get done."

Another way that participants described that the "mission" or goal-oriented mentality might have a potentially negative impact is by re-enforcing the importance of focusing on an external stimulus or goal completion, as opposed to self-awareness. As Lana described when discussing her lack of awareness of her PTSD symptoms when working for the State Department, "Yeah. I don't think I thought about that at all. I just did my job because I enjoyed my job. I loved the work that I did. I felt fulfilled. I felt everything." Belle similarly disclosed that early on in her transition into the civilian world of work, she didn't take time to process or acknowledge her feelings or internal reactions. She said, "I didn't verbalize it, and I didn't take the time to stop and think about it or figure what it was that I was experiencing."

While feeling the need to remain in action, participants were thrust into a culture with different rules and social norms. Participants described the shift from a more hierarchal power structure in the military to a more fluid power structure in the civilian world of work as a challenge. Based on participants' descriptions, the military functions with a hierarchal chain of command in which service members follow orders without question. As LKSmith stated when discussing her experience of navigating conflicting cultural expectations of the military culture and civilian culture, "If the army wanted you to have a husband, they would have issued you one." Participants also described struggling to adjust to cultural norms that place greater

responsibility on individuals, as opposed to an organization or place of work, and to prioritize their own goals and objectives daily as opposed to the greater organization mission. Similarly, when first transitioning out of the military, adapting to the expectation to actively engage in information gathering to decide an occupation or career path for themselves, it was also a challenge described by participants.

As explained by the women, I had the opportunity to speak with, the expectation when serving in the military is more aligned with efficient teamwork and working towards completing a collective mission or goal. Therefore, failure or success is experienced as a unit or team, which also may contribute to different sources of motivation or external reward expected in a work setting. Interestingly, participants consistently communicated a preference for the direct communication style and having solidarity in work goals that they associated with military service, as well as ongoing frustration at the more ambiguous expectations and communication approaches in the civilian world of work. As Belle described in talking about the civilian workforce, "Everybody kind of has their own thing, even though where I work, we have one mission, it's just not the same." The multifaceted nature of adjusting to civilian culture was evident by participant statements regarding divergent styles of communication, as well as their non-linear narratives of transition.

Participants seemed to be drawn to career paths in the government or occupations related to the military. As will be discussed later, Haress, who was the only participant with an occupation completely disparate from her military experience, also expressed a desire for a clear career path into a "government position" immediately after leaving the military. As included in the participant demographics (see Table 3.1), two out of the eight participants served for two separate terms of military service, and one participant, Lana, was employed by the U.S.

Department of State shortly after leaving the military. While working with the U.S. Department of State, Lana was deployed to Afghanistan and described the experience as comparable to being deployed as a military service member. For these participants, the sequence of transition does not follow a linear progression.

As previously stated, Gertrude served in the military on active duty for four years and then exited the military in 1989. She then re-enlisted in the reserves in 1996 and continued to serve in the reserves while teaching full time. However, she was deployed in 2005 to serve in Iraq, at which point she had to leave her full-time employment in the civilian world of work. When she came back from her deployment in 2006, she experienced a significant transition in which she had to re-immense herself into a new civilian position and civilian culture. When hearing Gertrude's story, it became clear that instead of one concrete transition when exiting the military and entering the civilian world of work, there were numerous transitions from the military into the civilian world that occurred before her retirement from the reserves. Roostergirl and Lana also described non-linear patterns of transition into the civilian world of work.

Roostergirl served two different terms of service in the military as an active duty service member. She exited the military in 1995 and then again when she retired in 2014. Roostergirl described them as very different experiences. When comparing her experiences of leaving the military, she explained that the circumstances surrounding her exit from the military were different, as were the military protocols, and the resources available to veterans to assist with the transition into the civilian world of work and civilian culture. While Lana only served one term in the military, when she described her transition into the civilian world of work, it began when she stopped working for the U. S. Department of State, not when she left the military. Lana was repeatedly deployed to Afghanistan while working for the U.S. Department of State. She

contributes her multiple deployments to being part of the reason that her transition out of the U.S. State Department was more salient for her than her exit from the military. Based on interviews with these three participants, a linear conceptualization of transition shouldn't be assumed when framing veterans' experience of adapting to the civilian world of work and the civilian culture.

Perseverance

The third sub-theme of “Moving Forward” was perseverance. Regardless of the unique and common challenges that participants described, their shared experiences also spoke of endurance and moxie. While these women's experiences were each different, their commitment to working through their challenges, even when difficulties were described as overwhelming, was a commonality among participant interviews evident throughout the themes and subthemes. Relationships, particularly relationships with other veterans, and finding a new sense of purpose, were described as both central and helpful in many participants' experiences of transition. I will discuss those later in this chapter. In this section, I describe the subtheme of perseverance as it aligns with the theme of moving forward and the mission-oriented culture that seems to predominate military culture. For civilians and counselors to begin to understand the process of transition into the civilian world of work, it's essential to realize that this other/mission focus can make taking time to think about themselves foreign, uncomfortable, and possibly even selfish.

LKSmith shared that while the army required service members to be in top physical condition, there was also a cultural norm viewing self-care as weak. She stated, “And self-care, in the fact of a physical standpoint. Like they want you to be in top physical condition, but if you hurt yourself, they kind of frown against you actually getting medical care.” MizDede introduced me to the term “hero syndrome,” which encompassed the need to focus on

accomplishment in the external world, as opposed to self-awareness and accomplishment within one's self or one's inner world. This dynamic contributed to MizDede's tendencies to minimize her challenges during the process of her medical separation from the army. Hairess shared a similar dynamic when learning that her injury meant she was undeployable. She stated,

I was like, when can I go back to work? I'm literally sitting there with five bones broken in my foot, can't really walk at all. And I'm like, well I have patients at the clinic, I have to go. And they're like; you can't go back to work right now. So, I think I was minimalizing or whatever, my pain, and what happened. So that I could hurry up and get back to what I was doing.

It seems that the drive to achieve may even be particularly salient for women veterans, given that participants described measures of success still largely based on physical ability and strength, which creates a dynamic in which women have to work harder than men to prove themselves. Lana explained that there is likely variation in how mentality impacts a woman veteran, depending on the role she served in the military. As she explained,

The entire thought of you have to work harder to prove yourself... I think definitely depends on what it is that you're doing. So, in a really strange, bizarre way, if you have a perfect PT score, you're seen as a good soldier, for example. Like, oh, this person has a 298, wow, she's good to go. And even males too. There's always, again, that kind of unconscious bias of oh, this person's squared away because they can run an eight-minute mile, or whatever it is for their group ... so as a woman, if you can score high on your PT score, then you're seen as good or whatever. I think female nurses, which are the female-dominated environment, they probably don't have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts.

KWellss echoed a similar thought in reflecting upon the need she felt to prove herself while serving in the military. She shared that this was particularly reticent of her own experiences serving because “she was the only female, the only lower enlisted and the only soldier who had never deployed.” Gertrude noted that in her experience, this dynamic was made more complex by the reality that other women who served also contributed to the negative stigma that women face in the military. She shared that three other women were deployed with her unit and that she deployed after them. She said that she found it “embarrassing” because the other service members there, who were all men, treated her as if she already was a less valuable member of the unit due to her gender. Gertrude explained, “Yeah, because the guys, when I first got there, wouldn't let me do anything, and I was like, "Look, I am not going to stand here for two years and watch you guys work.” Instead of allowing this dynamic to deter her, she pushed forward, “So I kind of had to prove myself, but once I did, they were like, 'Okay.' If we are going to have a woman on our team, we're glad it's you'. I'm like, ‘Okay.’”

Belle also had insight into women service members having to fight against stigmas and stereotypes. She shared that rank was a factor that could shape a woman's experiences in doing so. Belle said that she was an officer, but that she believed it would be even more challenging to face some of the stigmas as an enlisted service member, "...but as an enlisted female, everyone's in charge of you, everyone's your senior.” She also shared that women could successfully battle stereotypes that are associated with being a woman and serving, but that it took tenacity. She said,

They always say in the army; there's three types of women. You're either a lesbian, or you're a total bitch, or you're a whore. I mean, that's probably the three categories they

put you in. My attitude was well; I'll be the bitch. I can do that. You have to... or they would take advantage of you...you have to do it.

Lana, Hairress, and MizDede also discussed the intersectionality of being an African American or Black woman in both the military and the civilian world of work. MizDede shared,

I'll tell you what, my whole entire career, I felt like I had to be twice as tactical, twice as technical, run twice as fast, work twice as hard, just to get equal recognition and equal respect. My voice, I had to speak twice as loud to be heard, and unfortunately, some of the cultural nuances that come with that, being an African American woman, some folks would try and come at me with the angry black woman business, and I have to shut them down. No. I am not an angry black woman. I am a professional army officer that, if you actually realize in this conversation, you were absolutely not making an opportunity for me or any of my colleagues that were female to say something, so I was not going to be the sheep that was being led by wolves.

Participants described determination to press on throughout their ongoing experience of transition. For instance, when LKSmith was faced with the possibility of receiving an honorable discharge, she demonstrated a tremendous drive to do what was best for her and her family. She fought for herself, against what it would mean to herself and her family. She explained,

So that's one of the things where I was like, I'm not budging on this. If you guys give me a dishonorable, be prepared to fight because I'll take it to court. I'll do whatever I have to do to come back, and I won't let you do that to my entire life.

Family and relationships were central to LKSmith's transition, and connection with others was another theme prevalent throughout participant interviews.

Connection

Participants described connection with others or a lack of connection with others as salient to their experience of transition. They talked about relationships that helped them grow and served as support, as well as relationships that were hurtful, and prohibitive to growth. In addition to relationships, participants' narratives also included the importance of having a sense of belonging or feeling part of a culture or social group, as relevant to their experience of transition. Consistent with participant descriptions, this theme encompasses three sub-themes: relationships, isolation, and a sense of belonging.

Relationships

Relationships were a significant facet of participants' descriptions of their transition from the military into the civilian world of work. Friendships, familial relationships, relationships with other veterans, as well as civilians, were meaningful to participants. Participants noted changes in the relationships they had before serving in the military. Additionally, they described a change in relationships with the service members once they exited the military. Furthermore, women described contrasting social expectations in the relationships and support they experienced while serving and the relationship and social supports in civilian culture and world of work, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. When sharing about the relationships that impacted their transition, participants talked about relationships that were significant in both positive and negative ways.

Participants' portrayal of relationships throughout their story of transition were complex and interwoven throughout other salient aspects of their experiences. Relationships that were both helpful and hurtful were included in participant narratives of their transition. For instance, Roostergirl described both heartbreaking relationships and relationships that gave her hope. She

discussed how hurtful her relationship with her husband at the time was after she retired from the military. She explained that her ex-husband was also a veteran. She said that he made her feel as though she was to blame for her injuries. He became more controlling and degrading than he had been while she was serving. Roostergirl said, “He made me feel like he's blaming me for failing a mission. That's exactly how I felt. Like he is disappointed in me.” At a time in her life, when Roostergirl already felt like she had little control, her husband belittled her and was verbally abusive, which contributed to feelings of hopelessness. It was during this time that Roostergirl also found the strength to heal, which she contributed largely to her relationship with her service dog, Argo.

Roostergirl described her relationship with Argo as one of the primary sources of strength that helped her work through feelings of defeat, hopelessness, and thoughts of ending her life. She stated,

Yeah, I sat down on the couch one morning with a loaded weapon. He was bringing me his tennis ball. And he would not stop. I finally realized he was trying to tell me...He was trying to tell me, ‘I still need you. I need you. We got this.’

Roostergirl shared that she sees her relationship with Argo as a continual source of comfort, love, and support that continued to get her through her hard days and her ongoing bouts of vertigo due to TBI. During our interview, Roostergirl spoke about how meaningful service dogs could be to veterans, which echoed Lana’s statements, who also had a service dog. Lana described how meaningful her relationship with her dog was in helping her through tough times during the transition. She stated that the VA recommended she get a dog to help her cope with her symptoms of PTSD. Lana further explained,

Yeah. So, once I started, I went to the VA, and once I started just getting treatment and the vast advice they gave me, they're like, 'We can give you all the drugs in the world. But with your protective drive, you need a puppy'. Literally, they're like 'You need a puppy.' So, I went to a shelter and met a whole bunch of dogs. And this one puppy jumped into my arms, and I'm like you're the one. And he has been my best buddy ever since.

Both Roostergirl and Lana credited their dogs for taking care of them, and the warm tone of their voices when speaking about their dogs conveyed the love and appreciation they felt for their canine companions.

Relationships with other veterans were described as being salient to the healing and growth of other participants during their transition. MizDede talked about a relationship with another veteran that she served with that helped her through a time when she felt hopeless and lost. She shared that her difficulty finding employment was even more difficult since she didn't choose to leave the military and the declining health of her father. She said that she felt alone, overwhelmed, and unsure of how to move forward to a better place. MizDede explained that she reached out to a friend who had also served as a nurse in the army, and MizDede recognized this interaction as a pivotal point in her ongoing transition into the civilian world of work.

A friend of MizDede connected her with someone who was also a veteran that might be able to help her find employment. She said that the fact that the new connection, a male, was also a veteran made her feel more comfortable than she would have otherwise, and more confident that he would understand her achievements and skills. She met him shortly after the loss of her father and explained that the meeting led to her first civilian position and served to be a turning point in her transition. She said, I met him and my goodness, he just such a light in a

dark time. It was like he lifted the weight off of my shoulders. He's like, 'I totally understand. I lost my father. Please don't worry about it. We'll find a way to connect when you're in a good place and all that good stuff.'

Hairess also described a relationship as being a stimulus for her civilian career moving in a meaningful direction. Hairless discussed heavy drinking and receiving several DUI's early on in her transition out of the military. She explained that meeting the man who became the father of her child helped her during the period. She also said that in retrospect, the relationship ended up being hurtful in many ways, but that at the time they met, he made her feel loved, helped her move past some of the hurt and sadness. She also talked about how important it was to feel others understood her experiences in the military. She said that his brother and mother had both served, so "So I think he kind of understood but didn't understand. So, it was nice for him to just be around. And be in my space."

The next statement also demonstrated the complex nature of relationships she made, "So I didn't completely drown. But he was also part of a bigger problem, he was in and out and cheating on me and stuff like that. Instead of me focusing on my individual problem, I focused on my relationship problem." Hairless further expanded on how the relationship impacted her transition. She explained that when she learned her partner had cheated on her, she fell into depression again. However, she focused on the betrayal of her partner as the reason for her depression this time. Hairless said, with happiness in her voice, "And then I had poops," referring to the birth of her daughter. She said that becoming a mother served as motivation to grow and work through her depression. Shortly after the birth of her child, she met a civilian woman who owned a

local hair salon, which was another relationship that she described as salient to her transition into the civilian world of work. The new acquaintance led to a position in a hair salon that had an atmosphere that allowed her to feel accepted and part of a work-family. Hairdresser's statements regarding relationships spoke to the importance of feeling connected to people both in the workforce and in her personal life.

Several participants also talked about their relationships with family members during interviews. Lana shared that moving to live closer to her family has been instrumental in helping her feel connected during her ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. She said, "...also being close to my family. Even though I thought that it was going to cure everything now that I have figured out what needed to be done to help me, I absolutely love being near my family." Belle also described her family as being a salient aspect of her transition into the civilian world of work. She shared that when she was serving, those that she served with were her family and that she missed those close relationships in the civilian world of work. In her civilian work, Belle described a greater separation of work and family, stating that, "...my family is more important to me than my job." Belle also shared that she felt her husband was able to understand her better since he had also served in the military. When family members hadn't served, it appeared to be more challenging for participants to be genuine and unguarded in familial relationships in some instances.

KWellss described her necessity to have close connections with her civilian family and friends, as well as to maintain a barrier with civilian family and friends due to her belief that they couldn't fully understand or accept her anymore. She shared that the need to keep parts of herself from civilian family and friends was particularly salient early on in her transition into the civilian culture and civilian world of work. KWellss stated,

Well, I think that they didn't understand that I went from this happy-go-lucky person to just confining myself to my room, crying all the time, and not wanting to be engaged. But they also didn't understand. I never let them know about anything that ever happened to me in the military.

Other participants also stated that they found value in having relationships and interactions with other veterans. They shared that connecting with others who had served in the military served to help them feel understood and accepted. Often times, relationships with others who served were described as meaningful, positive relationships that were helpful during the ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. LKSmith explained to me, "So, you identify with people that have served better than you identify with people who didn't serve." KWellss also shared, "when everything started to get better is when I got into school and was interacting with people and other veterans..." This insight speaks to the importance of connecting with other veterans after leaving the military, particularly early on.

Lana provided a unique insight into the complexity of relationships with other veterans as a female veteran. She shared,

So, you feel the need to only talk to people who had been over there with you. That was something that I think as a female was also very hard because everyone that I had been with had been male. And the wives just didn't understand our relationship. Where it could be entirely nonsexual, but they still were the only people who understood me.

She went onto explain that she has had to distance herself from some of the men that she served with because it was difficult for their partners to fully understand or accept that the nature of the intimacy in their relationship was not romantic in nature. She said,

And I know that spouses have had a very hard time with me. So, I have actually had to cut off some of my friends and just say, 'Look, I understand that you and I are not in a romantic relationship, but your wife is very, very hurt by us. So, I have to end this friendship. Even though it's not romantic, it's something that's much more hurtful for your wife because it's such a deep emotional connection.

Lana also expressed gratitude for the respect and understanding he has provided her in navigating these boundaries.

While participants discussed helpful, hurtful, and complex relationships, the importance of having a support group was consistent among participants' narratives. Participants' suggestions for how to better support veterans included helping to connect them with other people who have served and advocacy to help employers of veterans and the overall community help understand to a greater extent how they can understand and help.

Isolation

As included previously, participants experienced a lack of connection or distance in some of their family and friends during their transition, especially early on. Not only did participants voice a feeling of loss for the close relationships they had while serving, but they expressed that at times, those that they had relationships with before serving didn't really reach out to them or make efforts to reconnect after they exited the military.

Gertrude explained that while she was in the reserves, she was deployed. When she returned from deployment and was transitioning back into work as a teacher, the relationships she had maintained with civilian friends while deployed seemed to become strained due to lack of understanding or awareness of her experiences and training in the military. This insight highlights the non-linear nature of participants' transition into the civilian world of work, as

well as the complexity of maintaining social support with those who haven't served during the ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. As Gertrude explained, "... I guess. I didn't have much choice. It was just me, so ...I mean, I even had friends that kind of abandoned me when I came back because they couldn't deal with me, so I had a tough time. Other participants echoed sentiments similar to Gertrude's regarding those they had been close with before serving, which contributed to feelings of being separate or different from others. KWellss talked about how devastating she believed isolation could be to veterans in their transition into the civilian culture and the civilian world of work. In our second interview, she talked some more about the numerous veterans she had served with that ended their life. She expanded by explaining,

Only one of them did it because of military reasons, combat after combat after combat.

The others had never even served in combat, and they were just family related. Knowing that they could've called any of us, we could've done something else. I don't know. I wasn't there. I'm not in their head, but (I wonder if it would have been different if) they felt they had somebody else and not felt so alone.

The isolation described in participant interviews was complex in that it didn't necessarily refer to being physically alone or devoid of interaction. Lana explained, "But also feeling like I was totally alone in a room full of people because nobody understood what I had just gone through or been through." This statement speaks not only to the sense of aloneness that participants experienced but also to the importance of friends and family being able to recognize the hurt and pain veterans may experience in the transition into the civilian world.

As previously noted, the separateness that participants described in their relationships with civilians were contributed to by the belief that civilians wouldn't understand them. This belief appeared to be at least part of the basis to withhold parts of their experiences or identity from others. In some instances, participants shared that they chose not to disclose some of their experiences to protect their loved ones. For example, Roostergirl shared that she didn't share much about her hardships and experiences of trauma with her parents, who hadn't served in the military, because she didn't believe they would be able to identify with her experiences, nor accept them. She explained,

I don't share it with my parents. My Dad was never in the military. My Mom was never in the military. Even though when my Mom grew up, her Dad was in the military. I still to this day, I don't think they understand.

Similarly, KWellss shared that she refrained from talking about some of her traumatic experiences, and specifically military sexual trauma (MST), with her parents to protect them. She stated,

I'll take it to my grave before telling my parents. I just don't think; personally, it's something they need to know. I don't want to put that pressure that stress on them. I don't want my dad, who helped me get in the military to ever feel guilty, 'cause I'm coming to terms with that it wasn't my fault, I don't ever want him to feel like it was his fault.

KWellss went on to talk about the challenges of talking about her survival of MST in general and the vulnerability she experienced when disclosing about the traumatic experience. She explained that the fact that it was unreported contributed to her difficulty in sharing her experience with others. She told me that she didn't speak of it again for a long time, even with

her therapist. More specifically, she stated, “For me, I never even told my therapist of the last seven years since I've been out ...until I got this job.” She went on to say,

I would say of the seven years that I've been seeking therapy; I feel like year four, I got this new doctor in the VA, and the doctor was going through, ‘Oh, do you drink alcohol? Oh, do you do this? Oh, have you ever been a victim of military sexual trauma?’ And I just froze, and I said, ‘Yes.’ And then he wrote it down, and it was never followed up on, so I felt unverified ...not verified, but...So it was my moment to scream it out loud and say, ‘Yes, that happened to me.’ And then it was never followed up on, and he never went back to it, he never said, ‘Well, oh my gosh. Let's talk about this, or let's bring you over here to this person.’ It was just never revisited, so I felt invalidated, and then I think that's why it took me so much longer to tell my therapist. It was just like, ‘Well, if he didn't care, why would he care’?

When KWellss spoke these words, it served as a reminder and a very clear example of how powerful and important validation is when working with clients or connecting with others. The importance of feeling heard was also echoed by other participants.

Family members' and friends' responses to participants early on in their transition were, at times, described as contributing to the loss they were already struggling with after leaving the military. As previously noted, Roostergirl's husband at the time made her feel as though she was a failure through controlling and belittling behaviors. Belle described how her mother's response to her exit from the military contributed to her feelings of loss and uncertainty. She stated,

Yeah, my Mom was really disappointed because she always jokingly called me Colonel Belle. And she was like, ‘I always thought you'd be a colonel someday.’
And I remember feeling like really like I'd let her down because I was getting out

and I wasn't going to make it to colonel....and she was like, 'I just always thought you'd get there.' And I just felt so like, 'wow, I let my family down, what am I now that I'm not an army officer?'

Belle also shared that her mother would be “mortified” if she knew how much it had hurt her, which supports participants’ assertions that civilians struggle to understand and support veterans. Participants verbalized a similar sentiment regarding civilians’ perceptions and understanding of veterans’ experiences and training. This obstacle to feeling understood, and therefore fully accepted, likely contributed to participant assertions that at times they have felt like an “other” once immersed back into the civilian culture and the civilian world of work. LKSmith, Hairess, KWellss, MizDede all spoke of how they felt separate from other service members during the process of exiting the military, which contributed to their sense of isolation and shame they felt early on in the transition process, as previously discussed. The close, intimate nature relationships participants described in the military may contribute to a tendency to feel more alone when entering the civilian culture.

Participants voiced an understanding that their relationships in the civilian world of work wouldn't be as intimate as their relationships with those they served with when in the military, which contributed to feeling more alone and isolated at times. Isolation and feeling alone was a common experience reported by participants, even though the way each participant experienced feeling alone or separate from others was unique. Participants also spoke of the importance of advocacy and education in the civilian world regarding how to best support, understand, and connect with veterans living and working in their community.

Sense of Belonging

The importance of acceptance of others and feeling understood, more specifically, the importance of feeling like a part of a social group was a topic included in all participants' descriptions of transition. Participants' explained that the experience of feeling disconnected from civilians, and out of place in civilian culture felt like being an outsider, separate from others. Upon exploring this, I found myself drawn to Gee's work on Discourse Analysis. His description of "discourses" helped frame this subtheme. Gee (2017) stated,

Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on and so forth. Discourses are a way of being 'people like us (p. 3).

Based on participants' descriptions, exiting the military and entering the civilian world feels like a sudden submersion in a new set of cultural rules. They knew how to act, speak, and behave as part of the military. When leaving the military, however, they found themselves immersed into a new mainstream discourse, without training or education on how to adhere to civilian expectations or how to be "people like us," as Gee described (2017, p.3). When searching for employment, or a place in the civilian world of work, these divergent cultural norms and rules marked all aspects of the process from job search skills and hiring practices to expectations in the work environment once finding employment, as well as all aspects of their transition into the civilian culture in general.

The dissimilarity in military and civilian language, specifically vocational terms, seemed to be a potential obstacle in transitioning into a civilian career. Participants asserted

that the ability to translate military experiences and skills into language relevant for civilian careers was essential for transitioning successfully into the civilian workforce. Lana shared that her colonel, at the time of her discharge, helped her write her resume. She said,

He just gave me pointers and reviewed it. And kind of gave me ideas of what one should look like. And what skills I should emphasize. Things like when you are a lieutenant or whatever, you don't necessarily think of yourself as a title of supervisor, but you are. And so, he was explaining how to write those things in civilian speak. So, as a lieutenant, I did supervisory type work such as performance evaluations, things like that.

Hairess and MizDede, both of whom served in a medical role in the army, shared that they had not had sufficient guidance or education on how to market themselves for a civilian occupation when leaving the military. As a result, they had difficulty finding occupations related to their military experience and with identifying transferable work skills when searching for employment. As stated in chapter three, MizDede served in the medical service corps, inpatient administration as the chief officer. She stated,

I'm an officer now, mind you. I'm an officer, so I'm supposed to have a college education. I'm not supposed to have any problems. This should be intuitive to me. I'm thinking to myself, what the heck is my soldiers going through, that specialist, that private, if I'm going through this as a captain, almost major kind of thing, what are those soldiers going through?

When MizDede exited the military and was searching for a position in the civilian world of work, she described how hopeless she felt. She had experienced success in a leadership position in the army; however, she struggled to write a resume that reflected her accomplishments. MizDede's difficulty with transferable language served as an obstacle to

finding employment and contributed to diminished confidence in her ability to provide for herself and her mother. “At one point, I was so dead set. I was like I'm not going back to work at McDonald's. I told her, as embarrassing as it might feel, I just need to keep the lights on.” MizDede’s statements emphasized the importance of having transferable skills and knowledge on how to market transferable skills in the transition from the military into the civilian world of work.

As noted previously, Hairess served as a medic and shared that she had partially chosen to become a medic because she had hoped the training and skills would serve to help her become a nurse in the civilian world of work at some point. She expressed frustration at the lack of education regarding the challenges of transitioning into a civilian occupation. She stated,

For me, I can't go be a nurse. I can't go to work in a hospital. I have to go to school all over again for that. And I've already done everything, so there's no point. And they didn't tell me that when I signed up, they just like, yeah, this is gonna be a great job for you.

Hairess then explained that since education on transitioning into a civilian career wasn't provided in the military when she served, she would have appreciated clarity regarding the extent to which various skills and vocational roles in the military were relevant to civilian occupations. She said, “Say it, and that way, I could've used those four years if I really liked the military training. I could've gotten my associate's degree in nursing; I could've gotten my bachelor's in nursing.”

Conversely, Belle shared that she believed the skills that she learned in the military were very relevant to her current career. She shared that if she were to advise someone about to enter military service, she would stress the importance of choosing a

career path in the military that provides training in skills that are transferable to a civilian career. In addition to challenges while searching for a job, obstacles adjusting to civilian work settings were also discussed by participants.

Gertrude talked about feeling different from others in her work setting. When discussing how PTSD impacted her current work experiences, she shared that she's unable to "turn off" her hypervigilance, or heightened awareness of everything around her to engage in continuous threat assessment. She gave her preference for teaching with the door open as a specific example, "people think you're weird when you're like that." Gertrude also expressed frustration with the less direct communication style preferred in the civilian world of work, as did Belle, Haress, and Lana.

When asked what she found to be most challenging in her ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, Lana discussed her frustration with feedback from supervisors that it would be beneficial for her to interact with others in an "approachable, softer" way. Lana further explained that she naturally gravitated towards a direct and succinct communication style, even before being in the military, and that while in the Army, this style of communication served her well. She said, "I'm viewed as adversarial and confrontational. I'm a bitch. Yep." Lana described her ongoing frustration at repeatedly receiving critical supervisor feedback regarding her communication style, while simultaneously receiving positive feedback and earning advancement opportunities due to her productivity, competence, and success in the organization.

Belle described a similar sense of discontent with the comparatively less direct/less hierarchal communication styles predominant in the civilian world of work. She said,

Yeah. And I work with a lot, in the Department of Defense, I work with a lot of military and former military, so I'm still around that. To a degree but it's just funny to meet someone. Like, I have a supervisor in my chain of command who was never in the military, and you just, you see the difference.

She went on to explain that she still doesn't feel as though she understands some aspects of the civilian world of work, and perhaps disagrees with certain cultural norms. Belle shared, "I find the civilian world like absurd. I mean, you can file a grievance for anything. Anyone can get offended over anything and that just..." The women's preference for the direct communication style associated with the military culture, as opposed to the less direct, less clear communication style associated with dominant civilian culture, was a pattern across participant interviews. This point seems to be a facet of all participants' narratives that is significant, provided the centrality of communication in engaging with others in the community and work environment.

Based on participants' descriptions, unclear cues and expectations in conjunction with civilians' lack of understanding of military culture and roles, as well as civilians' lower tolerances for direct communication, may have contributed to participants' feelings of grief and disconnection. Gertrude and Hairess also expressed frustration at others, not respecting them for the military experience and all they accomplished when serving in the military. During the second interview, I asked Gertrude what she believed was the most challenging aspect of her transition into the civilian world of work. She replied, "It's the lack of respect for my experiences and how valuable they are to what I do now." Lack of civilian understanding and awareness of military culture, and therefore the success and diverse experiences participants

brought to their civilian occupations, at times contributed to participants feeling devalued and not understood.

KWellss explained that she experienced feeling different or separate from others while serving. She explained to me that at the time she enlisted, women couldn't be sentries, which meant military police was the only avenue that allowed her to be in a combat role. After completing her training, however, KWellss was never able to deploy due to a brain tumor. Not only was she devastated by this, but she still expressed anger at the discrimination she faced as a woman serving in a combat position. She explained,

I have this brain tumor, and I was...in the combat arms field, it's a little bit different when there are very few females. And then, when you're getting ready to deploy, then you can't, they automatically assume you're trying to flake out, don't want to, so they don't really know the whole story.

KWellss said that she also had experienced stigma based on her gender as a veteran as well. More specifically that she had experiences with both civilians and other veterans in which it was stated or suggested that women's service in the military was somehow less meaningful or important than men's service in the military. However, she said that the hardest stereotype she has had to face was that combat experience or deployment was necessary to be a real veteran. She explained that when faced with this stereotype, it felt as though her service and sacrifice to her country didn't matter. KWellss sadness and anger at the perpetuation of this stereotype spoke to the importance and value that she felt in her own military service. A sense of purpose and meaning in their military service was a common pattern across participant interviews.

Sense of Purpose

The title of the third primary theme, “Sense of Purpose,” concerns the manner that participants prioritize their time, energy, and resources, as well as find fulfillment in their work and life activities. It follows that participants’ “sense of purpose” also serves as a scaffold to what they view as a satisfying career and future. The title is also consistent with the participants’ language. The term “purpose” was used specifically by Roostergirl, Lana, Hairess, MizDede, and LKSmith when discussing their military service and ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. As LKSmith succinctly stated, “Yeah, it is hard to adjust back into civilian life and to find your purpose again. It can be challenging.” Roostergirl emphasized the importance of having a sense of purpose as well, and the difficulty of not feeling as though you have a sense of purpose after leaving the military, especially early on. She shared, “I think finding your sense of purpose is important for your growth. I think that's where a downfall, that's where maybe some veterans might fail and fall into suicide because they haven't found that. When you're in the military, you're go, go, go.”

While KWellss and Gertrude did not specifically mention the term “purpose,” their stories of transition encompassed a similar concept, in that leaving the military initially left them without purposefulness and feeling a sense of loss regarding their identity and direction in life. They felt separate from a culture and organization they valued. Not only had they valued being part of the military, but they felt valued when serving. Similarly, I choose the language in the titles I identified for the subthemes presented below to capture participant descriptions of transition. I identified the following subthemes of the Sense of Purpose: Shift in Social Roles and Identity, Direction, and Part of Something Bigger.

Shift in Social Roles and Identity

When discussing identity, the current concept includes participants' perceptions of how others perceive them, as well as how they perceive themselves, and how they balance and define their multiple life roles and who they are in relation to the world around them. As informed by my use of a feminist lens to understand this process of transition, my analysis of participant interviews is grounded in the belief that participants' socially constructed identities shaped their ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, as well as their experience of this transition (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

In the face of the loss of identity that participants experienced when leaving the military, participants were also presented with the challenge of redefining themselves and finding a new way to interact with the world around them in a personally meaningful way. Participants chose to engage in this process in a variety of ways, including putting a greater emphasis on their role of spouse, daughter, parent, friend, or family member. Participants also engaged in this process by re-defining their losses and hardships into strength and hope and working to adapt in civilian culture while maintaining true to themselves, and to the accomplishments and successes that they had in their military career.

All participants reported a shift in which their relationships with family served as a more salient aspect of their life and identity. MizDede shared that as a result of her unplanned exit from the military, she was able to put more time and energy into her role as a daughter and spend more time with her father before he passed away. She stated, "By the time I got put out of the military, I was like I'll be able to spend some more time with my dad, and I did." When MizDede first exited the military and struggled to find a position in the civilian workforce. During this time, the role of the provider for her mother caused her to feel more pressure to find

a job quickly and also served as motivation that kept her keep striving for a position that would provide an income that could support her and her mother. She also shared that her sense of responsibility to her mother contributed to her determination to move forward when she felt like giving up.

KWellss also spoke about ongoing adjustments and changes regarding her familial roles throughout her transition, and her goals and daily routines reflected the change in her shift in identity from service member to wife, guardian, provider, student, and professional and soon to be a mother. She shared,

The first couple of months after getting out of the military, I got married and then ended up getting divorced. I bought a house, and then my family all moved in with me. I took custody of my special-needs nephew, I met my husband, and he moved in with me, we got married almost a year ago. So, everything has just been ... and then my parents moved out before we got married. You see what I'm saying? Everything has just been so much change and so much pressure, anxiety. And now we're welcoming a baby girl, so everything's just changing.

As previously noted, Gertrude and LKSmith shared that responsibility to their families contributed to the reason they left the military when they did. Both women also discussed that their roles as parents became a more predominant part of their lives after leaving the military, which was reflected in their goals, values, and daily lives. Belle similarly spoke about the greater emphasis on her role as a mother. She shared that more of her time, energy, and life revolved around that aspect of her identity. As a service member, Belle described herself as driven and career oriented. When asked what impacted her transition into the civilian world of work the most, Belle shared that

becoming a mother had the greatest impact. By becoming a mother, her values shifted, and she put more of herself into parts of her life outside of work. Belle shared, “Let's see. I think having children and then having as many as I do has definitely impacted where I'm at. I think I would be farther along.” She went on to explain that her time and energy goes into her family, instead of putting in the “60 or 70” hours some do to move ahead faster in their career. Belle’s shift in priorities, values, and expectations was also echoed by Lana, who described a change in what family meant to her.

Lana shared that her family had also become a bigger part of her life. Her time and energy are more focused on spending time with those she loves and sharing experiences with them. Lana conveyed how tremendously meaningful it was when her family shifted their lives to reflect an understanding of the complex, strong woman she was after serving in the military and then leaving the State Department. She shared that her mother, who was a psychiatrist with a private practice, changed her career path to support veterans. Lana explained,

...she left her private practice to go contract out with the military because they needed more mental health professionals. Basically, when soldiers came back from deployments, she would be there to help them through that transition. Especially their families.

The importance of family and close relationships was emphasized, not just in terms of social support, but as a shift in life focus. While I discussed family relationships when describing the subtheme “relationships” under the theme of connections, the relevance of family is beyond the scope of the relationships themselves. Family and the role that participants played in their family and close relationships became a more central aspect of their identity. Similarly, participant descriptions reflect a shift in what they consider to be purposeful activities, as

reflected in what they named as important in their lives. This shift was demonstrated in how they chose to spend their time and energy.

Family was such an important aspect of transition that one suggestion participants repeatedly had in terms of supporting women veterans, and all veterans, through their transition into the civilian world of work was to include family in classes and training programs. The aim of including family and loved ones in classes and training programs would be to for them to gain insight into what veterans may be experiencing and how to be meaningful support throughout their ongoing transition into the civilian culture, and the civilian world of work. Participants' process of forging a new identity in the civilian world after leaving the military contributed to the direction, they chose in terms of finding meaningful occupation in the civilian world of work.

Direction

Participants' described their sense of direction about their career path as a relevant factor that impacted their experience of transition. In instances that participants' narratives included logical next career steps, they reported less intense feelings of loss and uncertainty in their transition into the civilian world of work. For participants who didn't have a "next step" in place for them after leaving the military, this lack of direction could be daunting at times. Given the clear structure and directives associated with the military culture, having unclear professional goals and objectives created a dissonance in terms of their expectations and their perceptions of others' expectations of them.

Participants' direction in their career path often involved a process of assessing personal skills and assets and drawing upon available knowledge of civilian vocational opportunities. While participant's ability to describe their role and tasks while serving in

the military was consistent, there was significant variation in terms of how transferable those vocational skills and tasks were, as previously noted. Similarly, there was variation regarding the extent that the language used to describe roles, skills, and vocational tasks differed between the military and the civilian world of work. As previously presented, when discussing the importance of having a sense of belonging, Hairess and MizDede both significantly struggled with identifying how their experiences in the military translated into valuable skills in the civilian world of work.

When I asked Hairess if the role of medic translated well into civilian employment, her flat tone communicated disappointment as she replied, "it's not. It's not transferable." In a similar vein, MizDede explained, "I thought I had enough skills and enough experience to transfer titles, just to go from patient admin to a comparable position after leaving the military, which was not the case, unfortunately." Without having a common language to frame the job search process, the job search process becomes more daunting. However, beyond that, the process of finding a new career direction became a disheartening confusing process.

Conversely, participants who felt their civilian career built on skills and training obtained in the military espoused the importance of keeping that aim in mind when joining the military. For these women, the education they were afforded by serving in the military and the array of experiences they had when serving largely contributed to their current career path in a positive way. They felt their military experience had opened doors of opportunity that otherwise wouldn't have been there. As Gertrude expressed so well,

So, it's just amazing, the things that you get to do in the military that you would probably never do as a civilian that will impact you later on in life. I mean, I became a

teacher because of the army. I was able to buy a house and put myself through college. You know, like I coulda never done any of that.

The divergence in participant narratives on this facet highlights the relevance of long-term career goals. When I asked participants what would be helpful advice for someone who was about to leave the military, they included advice for those about to join the military in their responses. In these instances, participants communicated the importance of having long-term career plans, the knowledge necessary to realize long term career plans, including transferability of language and skills, and an understanding of differences between the two work cultures early on in their military careers. Participants who viewed their civilian career as building off of their military career were able to use their military experiences and opportunities in a meaningful way during their transition into the civilian world of work.

Gertrude decided to leave the military to pursue her passion, teaching. Among participants, Gertrude is the only one who left the military as a result of an intentional career change. She shared that the experiences she had in the military are unique and that while serving, she learned about her passion for teaching, which resulted in her career as a special education teacher. Gertrude also shared that her work at an orphanage while serving in the military served to spark her desire to adopt a child, which also was a dream she made come true. She shared,

One of my favorite pictures of me in the army is me with this little Korean kid at the orphanage. And then I end up adopting later, you know? I went into foster care for like 10 years, I guess. But I ended up adopting an infant. I got my son at two days old. From the hospital.

Gertrude's description of transition demonstrates the manner in how awareness of post-military service career aspirations can shape the ongoing career transition into the civilian world of work in a meaningful way. In finding a meaningful direction or path, Roostergirl, KWellss, MizDede, and LKSmith described an active process of reframing hardships and difficulties into a civilian career path that allowed them to help others. In this process, the participants were able to integrate their experiences in a new way to find meaningful vocations and help them in their journey of healing.

KWellss explained that her current position served as the stimulus for beginning to talk about her survival of MST. She said, "Always trying to take care of people because I never wanted them to feel what I felt, or ever feel alone, or not accepted, or you know." KWellss reflected further on the complexity and the emotional toll that supporting veterans with mental health issues can be while continuing to do her work with her therapist. She shared the following:

I would say because of my experiences, a lot of times, I get mentally fatigued more because I am still dealing with my issues. Then when I take on a client who has severe mental health SMI, PTSD, MST, traumatic brain injury, sometimes it makes me self-reflect like, is this something I can do for a long period of time? Do I need to find something else? I honestly truly love what I do, but I don't know if mentally, I can do this job forever, doing, and having what I experienced.

Her statements demonstrated insight into how it can be both incredibly meaningful and challenging to help others heal while still working on healing herself.

MizDede also communicated that her process of reframing some of her challenging experiences included trying to help others avoid experiencing some of the same hardships that she did. She explained,

I'm like nope. If there's any way that I can prevent anybody from going through what I went through and make the better decision, I want to be in a position where people will listen to me and say, 'she knows what she's talking about.' I'm gonna listen to her."

Similarly, LKSmith was in an occupation in which she helped other veterans. Her passion for helping veterans lead to her decision to attend school to further her ability to work with veterans in a helping profession. As will be discussed in greater depth below, Gertrude and Roostergirl also engaged in advocacy born out of their challenges in efforts to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

Participants' desire for a meaningful career path was central to their stories of transition. When serving in the military, participants had a clear purpose in their vocation and were contributing to a greater mission. A desire to continue to make a positive difference in the world around them was also a salient aspect of participant narratives.

Part of Something Bigger

Participants talked about the importance of being a part of something bigger than themselves or making a positive difference in the world. More specifically, participants shared that while serving in the military, they had felt like they were part of something bigger. As LKSmith stated, when asked why she joined the military, "I just wanted to be part of something bigger than myself." Furthermore, part of the women's path after leaving the military was finding a new way to feel like a part of something bigger than themselves.

Participants' narratives of transition were consistent in that it was important to each of them to contribute to society positively. However, at the time of interviews, they differed in the extent to which they believed they had that need fulfilled. MizDede found a sense of belonging and purpose in her military service, stating something similar to LKSmith when sharing her reasons for joining the military. She said that joining the army allowed her "the ability to do something a lot greater than myself." Her sense of pride in being part of something greater than herself seemed to become more ingrained throughout her military experiences, which contributed to the complex emotional challenges she had when leaving the military. For MizDede, her spirituality was central to her journey to healing and to continue to feel connected to something bigger than herself. She explained,

It almost feels like you're being thrown away, just because now you've got a crack in the cog kind of thing. It's like you said, there is a really bittersweet irony at the end of my career because anyone else could've been very bitter and not have been doing any of what I'm doing now, but I decided that would not serve me at all, and that because of my faith, that this has to be part of the purpose for my life, to get me off of one path, to another, to where I'm supposed to be in life. I decided to ...It was tough in the beginning, though. It was very tough in the beginning because I was very depressed.

MizDede further communicated that while it was still difficult to talk about the circumstances surrounding her exit from the military and her struggles early on in her transition, she recognized that it was healing for her to do so. She said, "I haven't even told this story to very many people, but I know it's part of my journey."

Roostergirl's narrative of her transition out of the military, and then back into the military served as a powerful description of the extent to which her military service made her feel like

part of a mission or purpose greater than herself. Her narrative also served to demonstrate how disorienting and devastating it can feel when that greater purpose is stripped away. She explained that during her initial transition into the civilian world of work, she struggled to find meaningful and consistent employment. She said that she went to school to become a massage therapist, and that she worked for a while in this capacity, but that she failed to find meaning in the work. She shared that she also waited tables during this time and started to live “wherever.”

When reflecting on this period of her journey, Roostergirl expressed gratitude that she “made it through” that time. She said that it wasn’t until she met some people who served in the National Guard who brought her to a recruiter and helped her to get back into the military that she found meaning again in her life path. At this point in our interview, I paused, taken aback by the enormity of what Roostergirl had shared and the perseverance, strength, and determination that marked her journey of transition. I also wondered what had prevented her from re-enlisting in the military earlier if that was her desire. She shared that while she had been honorably discharged, on her paperwork, it had said, “local bar to reenlist,” which meant she was barred from reenlisting. Roostergirl explained, “it was sketchy,” and that recruiter she spoke with told her that it should have never gone on her discharge papers and re-enlisted her in the army. She shared, “That was big for me.”

Roostergirl survived MST and discriminatory practices that forced her out of her first term of military service. However, it was the comradery of military service members and their compassion, friendship, and caring that led her to join the military for her second term of military service. At the time of our interviews, Roostergirl shared that

she was still searching for a way to feel fulfillment by contributing to the greater good in a meaningful way.

One way that Roostergirl reported finding fulfillment in the work she was doing with other veterans. Roostergirl shared that with the encouragement of her mentor, she had found the strength to share her story with other veterans at speaking engagements in hopes that her story could help them find strength and comfort in the knowledge that they aren't alone. When speaking about her mentor's encouragement and guidance, I was struck by the tone of pride in her voice about the work they do together. She shared,

Yeah. I love him. I admire him. He got me to tell my story. He said, 'Once you tell it, you don't own it anymore. It's out there for them to do whatever they need to with it, or even help someone'. And he's right, at first, I was like, 'I can't do this story. No one wants to listen to a female veteran. They don't listen to us anyway'. We switch depending on what event we're at. He might tell his story at once event, and the next event we're at, we tell our story.

Roostergirl also took pride in the natural products, such as lotions and soaps, as well as the dog collars and leashes that she made to sell at various venues and festivals. Her journey demonstrated creativity and diversity in how she balanced meeting her professional and personal needs. In instances when participants described a lack of fulfillment in their current occupation, they also described the gratification they found in their personal life as a way to feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

Lana shared that her occupation at the time of our interview failed to challenge her intellectually and left her feeling devoid of personal fulfillment. She named this as one of her greatest challenges since leaving the U.S. Department of State. Lana described feeling a sense of

satisfaction and pride in her military service, as well as the work she did in intelligence. When we spoke, Lana wasn't very hopeful that she would be able to find employment that would be both personally meaningful, as well as provide financial compensation similar to her salary at the time of interviews. She described her internal conflict between the desire to find a position that allowed her to feel enlivened and intellectually challenged and the comfortable lifestyle her salary afforded. When talking about her military service and intelligence work in the U. S. Department of State, she stated,

That was a great fit, and I ... to this day, I miss it, and I wish I could have a job that was as fulfilling as that had been. I'm also very aware that had I stayed there for much, much longer, then I may have felt very miserable with my personal life. So, it's a fairy tale once you leave. You look back and say, 'Oh, it was a fairy tale, and it was amazing.' But I'm also aware that had I stayed there, I probably would have been miserable that I couldn't have dogs and a husband and many of the things I enjoy now in my life.

Lana's current career path in the civilian world of work, while not as fulfilling, has allowed her to have greater stability and foster other facets of her life, which she finds joy and satisfaction in, such as vacation and spending time with family.

While Lana communicated that she still longed to find more purposeful employment, she also recognized that her work provided her the opportunity to enjoy being a part of her family and have a more balanced life. She stated,

Being able to stay in one place and be able to develop relationships without them being severed every three years or whatever. That was a hard part about being in the military. Now I'm in a world where I can have a family. I can have dogs, and I can be with my family. And that's probably it 'cause the job aspect of it sucks.

Belle's descriptions of her journey in finding a different way to feel part of something greater echoed the importance of her family. Her greater focus on her family was also more than a shift in identity, or direction, but was her way of being part of something meaningful. As mentioned earlier, Belle worked 35 hours per week, and she believed this provided her with more time to put her family at the forefront of her life. While participants found unique paths for becoming part of something bigger than themselves in the civilian world of work, all participants expressed a desire to do so.

Many participants shared that their reasons for joining the military were at least partially due to their desire to work towards a mission in which they believed. Participants consistently reported that while serving, they felt pride in being part of something worthwhile and greater than themselves, regardless of the reasons surrounding their decision to join the military. While Hairess didn't report that being a part of something greater than herself contributed to her decision to join the military, she did report feeling a genuine sense of pride in being part of something that felt important, of being part of a greater mission. Hairess shared that part of her initial struggles finding her place in the civilian culture as the shock of feeling disconnected or on her own, and not part of anything. She explained that it felt so natural to be a part of the military and that when you leave, it's sad because you aren't anymore, "Not a part of anything when you get out." As discussed earlier, Hairess felt jarred by her exit from the military. She felt unconfident on how to embark on her new life as a veteran and felt lost. She reported that it wasn't until finding a salon that "felt like home," that she was able to find some closure or able to move forward on her career path with more confidence.

Military service provided participants with a sense of feeling connected to something bigger than themselves and contributing to an overall sense of contributing to society positively.

In their unique ways, participants each were working to find that same sense of being part of a greater purpose in their civilian career paths. When I asked participants what could help veterans in this process, they suggested that increased training on what to expect when leaving the military before leaving would be helpful. Feeling connected to something outside of themselves was a salient aspect of their growth and assimilation into the civilian world of work and civilian culture overall.

Summary

The goal of this study was to gain insight into how women veterans experienced their transition into the civilian world of work. I used feminist theory, as well as Saldaña's coding methods, to analyze participant interviews with the aims of presenting themes consistent with participants' experiences and worldview. I identified three themes from the data, each consisting of three subthemes, as presented in Figure 4.1. As presented in this chapter, the themes Moving Forward, Connection, and Sense of Purpose provide increased insight into participants' descriptions of transition into the civilian world of work. In the next chapter, I explore the primary themes in terms of their relevance to the field of counseling, current literature, and directions for future literature.

Chapter Five: Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, "How do women veterans describe their transition into the civilian world of work"? I aimed to explore facets of transition that participants identified as both helpful and challenging. After interviewing eight women veterans, I identified three themes, each with three subthemes. While overlap exists between the various patterns, themes, and subthemes, I identified three discrete primary themes presented in chapter four: Moving Forward, Connection, and Sense of Purpose. In this chapter, I will summarize and interpret my findings with relation to the current literature, discuss the limitations of the study, and present implications for counseling and future research.

Discussion

Women now serve in more diverse roles and higher numbers in all branches of the military (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics [NCVAS], 2016). As previously noted, the number of women veterans is expected to increase, while conversely, the overall veteran population is expected to decrease in size (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Ghahramanlou–Holloway et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Given these changes, there is a need to understand the unique needs of women veterans during their transition. This research project aims to provide greater insight into how women veterans may experience their transition into the civilian world of work.

I used feminist theories to scaffold all stages of this research, including the interconnected nature of social norms and power differentials, personal worldviews, and social expectations in my lens for understanding participant descriptions (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminist research methodology also provided a useful framework for remaining aware of and intentional regarding how my views and experiences impacted this research project. Using feminist theories as a lens

allowed me to attend to participants' multiple socially constructed social identities and the intersection of these identities within the cultural norms. For instance, each participant shared about times in their transition when institutional practices or cultural norms made them feel devalued because they were women and because they could no longer be deployed. In using a feminist lens, this dynamic appeared in initial codes and themes. As noted, I identified three themes (presented in chapter four), and I discuss these below as they relate to the current literature and my research question, "How do women veterans describe their transition into the civilian world of work"?

Moving Forward

When participants left the military, they moved from the military culture to civilian culture, which they described as submersion into a different set of social rules, cultural norms, and expectations. This sudden submersion in a new set of cultural rules provided the context for participants' transition in employment. Leaving the military is unique from many changes in employment in that the career transition occurs within the context of a broader shift in cultural norms and expectations that impacts multiple, interconnected facets of life. The women who participated in interviews described challenges during their ongoing transition into the civilian world of work, as well as stories of strength about how they overcame loss and challenges through perseverance.

Loss

Participants' described value and pride in their military service, which contributed to the sense of loss felt when leaving the military. Loss looked different for participants and was experienced at varying times throughout transition and to varying degrees. The tendency towards action and staying busy, at times, prevented participants from fully experiencing the

loss, which may serve as an obstacle for women veterans in acknowledging and working through their grief. Evans et al. (2018) reported similar findings in a recent qualitative research study conducted with 22 women veterans. Participants in both the Evans et al. (2018) and my study expressed a feeling of loss after exiting the military, specifically regarding their identity.

Challenges

A valuable perspective to bear in mind when considering this cultural shift is the significant impact that military service seemed to have on participants' self-understanding, understanding of the world around them, and expectations. This dynamic provides context for understanding the enormity of what it means for service members to leave the military and immerse themselves into the civilian world of work and civilian cultural norms. How participants described this process of acculturation is consistent with some aspects of Gee's (2015) Discourse Analysis. Gee (2017) stated that a shared set of expectations, values, and beliefs provide the foundation for communication and social interactions. These shared expectations are part of discourses or ways of being that determine group membership (Gee, 2017).

When participants described their transition from the military and into the civilian world of work, they portrayed a sense of separation from the values, beliefs, and expectations that had defined them as a service member, which was a core part of their identity. Participants did not feel like the same person they were before joining the military but felt unconfident on how to relate to others, immersed in a culture with a different set of underlying values and beliefs. When leaving the military, participants were no longer part of the military, but unsure on how to be part of the civilian world of work and part of the civilian culture. This process can become more complicated when compounded with physical pain, injuries, and struggles with mental

health. Again, findings in the previously mentioned qualitative study by Evans et al. (2018) are consistent with the findings of this study. The researchers wrote that participants described their experience of transitioning out of the military as "hard and isolating," (p. 1886), especially when combined with "substance abuse, fractured personal relationships, unemployment, and unstructured daily life" (Evans et al., 2018, p. 1886).

As presented in chapter two, women veterans are more likely to have reported surviving Military Sexual Trauma (MST), to attempt suicide, and to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or depression (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al., 2011). Women veterans are also more likely than civilian women to have a functional limitation or disability (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Of the eight participants interviewed, two shared that they were survivors of MST, and all participants identified challenges with mood due to traumatic experiences during their military service, whether they had deployed or not. Two participants struggled with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and all of the women reported being injured while serving, with seven out of eight participants reporting that they experienced ongoing physical pain due to their injuries. All participants' narratives included strength and determination in working through the challenges of their transition.

Perseverance

While challenges were a part of participants' stories, their stories of transition were not defined by their problems but by strength, endurance, and a drive to succeed. Without fail, participants described their experiences in the military as a valuable part of their life journey and a positive aspect of their identity. Their fortitude in overcoming adversity and accomplishing their goals suggest that the strength, drive, and accomplishments they associated with their military service were central to their perceptions of self, as well as an essential part of what they

want civilians to understand. In the second interview, I asked participants about what they found helpful in facilitating their personal growth and their transition to the civilian world of work. In their responses, they included counseling, developing social supports in the community, prescribed medication, and two participants discussed their relationships with service dogs as being instrumental in their growth, coping, and ability to assimilate into the civilian world of work.

Participants' statements about the significance of their relationship with their service dog support the growing body of literature surrounding the efficacy of service dogs in helping veterans with symptoms of PTSD (LaFollette, Rodriguez, Ogata, & O'Haire, 2019; Stumbo & Yarborough, 2019; Yarborough, Stumbo, Yarborough, Owen-Smith, & Green, 2018). I found the participants' comments about counseling being helpful interesting. There is a lack of recent research regarding women veterans' and men veterans' perceptions of counseling. In discussing research that focused on student veterans, Seidman et al. (2018) stated that veterans tend to avoid counseling services. More research on veterans' perception of counseling and the role of counseling in veterans' ongoing transition into the civilian world of work would be beneficial.

Participants also discussed the importance of having a connection with other veterans when discussing their desire to feel connected to others and the community. The importance of connection, which included relationships and feeling a sense of belonging, was also central to participants' descriptions of their journey of growth throughout their transition.

Connection

The need to feel connected with others, feeling a sense of belonging, and having a place in the world were common themes among participant interviews. This desire for connection seemed to be particularly salient, given the high levels of comradery and relational intimacy

described as part of military culture. In recent years, multiple researchers (e.g., Drebing et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018; Habib, Stevelink, Greenberg, & Williamson, 2018; Jenner, 2019; Russell & Russell, 2018) have cited the importance of connection and social connection in facilitating veteran integration into civilian communities. In a review of the current literature surrounding the use of peer-support groups to facilitate veterans' integration into the civilian culture, Drebing et al. (2018) noted that veterans are more likely than their civilian counterparts to desire an active role in their greater community. They stated, "veterans are generally more likely to trust and talk with their neighbors, to participate and serve as leaders in civic organizations, and to be politically engaged" (p. 136). The importance of relationships with others was also a part of the overall concept of connection for participants.

Relationships

Relationships with their families, other veterans, and for two participants, service dogs were central facets of participant's stories of transition. Family and close friends could be pivotal in supporting veterans with their ongoing transition into the civilian world of work. However, the various significant relationships the participants described were complex. Some relationships described were facilitative to veterans' growth and process of healing, while others appeared to inhibit growth and well-being.

The nature of long-term relationships changed over time. For instance, Roostergirl missed part of her daughter's growing up, which she described as a source of sadness, especially when she first left the military. She explained how their relationship had evolved and shared that their relationship had been pivotal to her process of healing. Her narrative regarding her relationship with her daughter also demonstrates the strain that deployments can have on parenting relationships, which is a challenge noted in chapter four (Mulhall, 2009; National

Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011). Deployments, particularly multiple deployments, can contribute to strain and conflict in other intimate relationships as well (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015). Given that women veterans are more likely to be single parents than their male counterparts (Mulhall, 2009; National Center for Veterans Analytics and Statistics, 2011), this dynamic may be particularly salient for in their experience of transition.

Isolation

As noted above, participants discussed feeling a lack of connection with the world around them, including a lack of closeness with members of their family and close friends who never served in the military. Participants shared that, even when family members or friends knew something was wrong, they did not know how to ask for help. Several participants spoke to the complex intersection of family and friends, not knowing how to support veterans in their transition. Based on my findings, some veterans may lack understanding of what they are experiencing, what would help, or how to ask those that care about them for help.

The apparent barrier between veterans and civilians may be particularly relevant, given that numerous participants reported times when they felt alone and hopeless. Civilian misperceptions and false assumptions regarding the value of their experiences serving and transitioning out of the military can contribute to a sense of isolation for veterans based on participant descriptions. While there has been research that indicates veterans can feel isolated (Evans et al., 2018; Mankowski & Everett, 2016; Russell & Russell, 2018; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2019), there is little about veterans' lack of understanding how to ask others for help, which may be a topic worth exploring to gain further insight into this dynamic.

Participants shared that relationships with other veterans or connections to military organizations were salient in their path of growth and transition. They seemed to feel more

understood by others who had also served. Based on participant interviews, often, their interactions with other veterans were more effortless than their interactions with civilians. Some researchers have noted that the transition from military culture to civilian culture is made more complicated due to the variance in social norms and expectations regarding intrapersonal relationships. More specifically, when compared to civilian culture, military culture is generally defined by higher levels of interdependence, conformity, and close group cohesion (Drebing et al., 2018).

A Sense of Belonging

The differences between military and civilian culture appear to contribute to feelings of isolation. As noted previously, communication and language have little meaning without context. Participants' perceptions that civilians lack an understanding of military culture, experiences, and language served as an obstacle for feeling at ease with civilians and their community. Part of the assimilation process for participants appeared to be defining who they are after their military experiences while understanding and defining the boundaries of their existing relationships and immersing themselves in the civilian culture, which would be consistent with participant reports that it could be challenging to know how to be with family and friends after serving.

Possibly contributing to participants' feelings of disparateness from civilians is the greater emphasis on individualism. Based on participant interviews, the comradery they experienced while serving was grounded in having a common mission. To complete each mission, every person on a unit/team needed to do their part to succeed. When describing the military culture, Edgar Schein's description of organizational culture provides a useful framework. Schein (as cited in Hill, 2015) described organizational culture as,

A pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems (p. 246).

The above description of organizational culture emphasizes how much of an impact organizational culture can have on an individual within that organization, which may be particularly true for military culture, provided the emphasis on obedience and the collective orientation. As Hill (2015) described, "An effective military emphasizes order, obedience, hierarchy, division of function, and the supremacy of the society over the individual" (p. 86). Participants consistently described civilian culture and the civilian world of work as more individualistic, and more ambiguous in terms of goals and expectations. Current literature is consistent with this perspective on veterans' perception of civilian culture, with other researchers (e.g., Drebing et al., 2018; Stone, Legnick-Hall, & Muldoon, 2018)) citing differences between civilian and military culture as a challenge for veterans' transition.

Sense of Purpose

While the shared mission to protect the country and prepare for war was discussed as it related to connection, participants also expressed a sense of loss related to the absence of a shared mission or clear vocational purpose. All participants expressed a desire for purpose in their lives. They each embarked on unique paths to find a new purpose after leaving the military. The importance for veterans to redefine their sense of purpose expressed by my participants aligns with the findings presented by Habib et al. (2018). Habib et al. (2018) explored post-traumatic growth in veterans by conducting a review of nine qualitative studies on veterans

conducted between 2011 and 2016. They identified six themes as a result of their analysis, one of them being "re-evaluating sense of purpose" (p. 621), which included "creating a new sense of ambition, increasing ownership, and developing a new sense of purpose" (p. 621).

Shift in Social Roles and Identity

Smith-MacDonald et al. (2019) used grounded theory to develop a theory based on veterans' experiences of ongoing psychological stressors they experienced while serving in the military (Smith – MacDonald, et al., 2019). The authors' description of the process of becoming a service member, which they term "soldierizing" (p.3) provides useful insight into the extent that service members lose their civilian identity to embrace their identity as a military service member. The authors wrote, "The category of soldierizing describes participants' experiences of purposeful fracturing of their civilian self and identity to be successfully transitioned into a military self and identity" (Smith–MacDonald et al., 2019, p.3). If individuals lose their civilian identity to embrace becoming a member of the military, it makes sense that reentering the civilian world calls for finding a different purpose.

Some participants found purpose in areas in their life other than career. Their time and energy shifted to different life roles, which also signified a shift in identity. Sullivan and Al Ariss (2019) noted that career transitions could lead to shifts in identity in different ways. Participants actively adapted this shift in identity by spending more time and energy in other parts of their lives, such as parenting, family, pets, vacation, which was not possible when serving in the military. In terms of living and working in the same place for more extended periods, stability afforded in their civilian careers allowed them the ability to shape their lives in a new way. Participants also adapted to this shift in identity by reframing experiences in military service, as a unique skill set for helping other veterans.

Direction

When hearing participants discuss this aspect of their transition, the words "chaotic" and "confusing" came to my mind. Women veterans' efforts to make meaningful decisions related to their career transition and adapt to the civilian world of work and civilian culture could be more challenging when considering the shift in cultural values, norms, and expectations. Participants described civilian culture as more fluid, individualistic, and interactions in the civilian workforce marked by less clear communication and more ambiguous objectives and goals. Comparatively, military culture was described as hierarchal in command, highly structured, mission-oriented (as opposed to individual-oriented), and performance expectations were clearly communicated and defined.

It appears that in the absence of the unambiguous structure and clear directives that mark the military culture, participants had to shift to a more internal locus of structure. They had to learn to identify their own needs, goals, and desires, which could serve as an obstacle to women veterans' ability to engage in career decisions in an informed, intentional manner, early on in their transition into the civilian workforce.

Part of Something Bigger

Participants communicated that it was essential to contribute to or have a connection to a greater purpose in their journey of transition into the civilian world of work. I was particularly interested in this finding since the concept of being part of something bigger than themselves was not explicitly cited in current literature, although military culture has been described as collectivistic (Drebing et al., 2018; Seagran, 2015; Smith–MacDonald et al., 2019). Participants expressed a longing for a meaningful vocation in the civilian world of work. For some participants, this entailed a process of reframing past hardships into strengths as a means of

finding meaningful vocational activity. It was important for participants that they spend their energy and time doing something that held meaning for them, and that they were contributing to something greater than themselves.

One of the challenging aspects of leaving the military for some participants was feeling that their service was no longer valued. For example, MizDede shared that she felt as though her military service was unvalued when she exited the military. She went on to explain that she experienced feelings of turmoil and shame when she was medically discharged from the military. She believed that had she felt understood and validated by others, it may have helped her cope with these feelings. Some participants' journey of healing centered on finding vocational opportunities that helped them to empower others and reframe their own experiences of trauma and hardship into a source of strength and compassion when helping other veterans.

Participants consistently found meaning in helping other veterans, whether that be professionally or personally. The draw veterans appear to feel to other veterans, and the military culture could be useful insight for counselors in determining appropriate interventions when working with women veterans.

Implications for Practice

I invited participants to share their perspective on what they believed counselors and others could do to further support women veterans in their transition into the civilian world of work. Their responses frequently included the need for counselors, employers, and the broader civilian community to have a greater understanding regarding military culture and veteran experiences. The findings of this research have implications for the field of counseling specific to advocacy, the practice of counseling, and the practice of counselor educators. Some

implications are relevant to veterans in general, while some are more specific to women veterans. I will differentiate throughout the following sections.

Counselor Advocacy

Regarding their experiences in the civilian world of work, participants expressed frustration at civilians' lack of understanding and education on the diverse skills and relevant military work experiences. They shared that civilians failed to understand the extent of their accomplishments during their military service, and as a result, often did not afford them the respect commiserate with their accomplishments and strength. As discussed, the lack of common knowledge of military culture also directly contributes to some veterans' struggles in finding employment. Transferable skills or a need for education on transferable skills are cited in the literature regarding veterans' employment (Stone & Stone, 2015, 2019; Tran, Canfield, & Chan, 2016). Counselors are in a position to advocate in their communities for increased education regarding how military skills and vocations transfer to civilian careers. Partnering with local veteran organizations and national organizations that support veterans could serve to strengthen counselor advocacy efforts to support veterans.

When asked what stigma counselors could work to address to support veterans and education civilians, it was common for participants to discuss the misperception that veterans are "broken" or "civilians have to walk on eggshells around veterans." Through these conversations, I gained greater understanding regarding how the importance of strength and determination associated with military service, contributed to this degradation of this stereotype. Institutions and organizations, including organizations of employment/hiring practices, support practices/beliefs/social expectations in the civilian mainstream culture.

Some research suggests that stigma and negative stereotypes associated with veterans may negatively impact organizations hiring practices regarding veterans (Stone, Lengnick-Hall & Muldoon, 2018). The RAND National Defense Research Institute published a report that cited employer discrimination due to prejudice or stereotyping (e.g., mental illness) as possibly contributing to the veteran unemployment rate (Loughran, 2014). The Department of Veterans Administration ([DVA], 2015) suggested that this is a long-term phenomenon, dating back to colonial days. Media coverage may also play a detrimental role of media in perpetuating negative stereotypes regarding veterans (Loughran, 2014; Stone, Lengnick-Hall & Muldoon, 2018). The role of media in perpetuating stereotypes about veterans may be an important awareness for counselors to have, given that veterans may be exposed to television footage and social media that is disparaging to veterans and the military.

The research conducted by the RAND National Defense Research Institute (cited in Loughran, 2014) suggests there may be some truth to participants' concerns regarding civilian stereotypes surrounding the stability of veterans. Counselors could use knowledge of this misperception to target advocacy efforts, and to combat stereotypes about veterans. Similarly, counselors can provide psychoeducation and professional development to employers in their areas. Having awareness about the stereotypes commonly faced by veterans can assist counselors in engaging with them in conversation, when appropriate, about how to address the possibility of such stereotypes in their career path, which is also consistent with a feminist lens (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Counselors can also empower veterans by encouraging self-advocacy and by connecting veterans with other veterans and veteran organizations. Russell and Russell (2018), collected data from 444 veterans via an online survey on the participation in veterans service organizations. Results indicated that participation in a veteran service organization was

linked with reduced isolation, notably when participants indicated they strongly identified with the organization.

Participants also named some stereotypes that may be less related to hiring practices or employment. For instance, KWellss noted that she had been injured before she was able to deploy, and that she experienced a stereotype regarding her status as a soldier who hadn't deployed for combat. Stereotypes surrounding gender were also a part of discussions with participants. More specifically, that civilians had minimized or discounted their service due to their gender. For instance, Roostergirl shared, that when she was married, she and her husband would walk with Argo, her service dog, and that people would assume that Argo was her husband's service dog, even when he was tied to her.

MizDede shared that she experienced discrimination due to the intersectionality of her race and gender. Her experiences of discrimination included civilians expressing surprise that she did not enter military service as an enlisted officer but entered military service as an officer after completing college. MizDede also discussed experiences of facing stereotypes while serving. She explained that she always felt that she had to prove herself before others would take her seriously due to her race and gender.

Counselors need to have an awareness of the stereotypes that women veterans may experience. This awareness can contribute to foundational knowledge for counselors supporting women veterans in their transition into the civilian world of work, as well as for counselor advocacy. However, as with all information presented on women veterans as a group, counselors should not assume that all women veterans have had the same experiences. LKSmith provided insight into the complexity of advocating for women veterans, while simultaneously, avoiding further separation between women and men veteran. Although she

shared her own experiences of discrimination, both while serving and after exiting the military, she also stated that she believed focusing on only women veteran in advocacy efforts inadvertently further separated women and men veteran. This sentiment serves as a reminder that focusing singularly on gender or other socially constructed identities in advocacy efforts can inadvertently further separate people. Recognition of this dynamic is important for counselors to keep in mind when working with veterans.

Counseling Practice

Participants stated that connection with military culture or others who had served often served as facilitative to growth. Counselors and agencies working with veterans would benefit by having access to resources/knowledge on the local veteran community and local veteran organizations to assist clients connecting with other veterans/military culture when relevant. When working with women veterans, it would be beneficial for counselors to include resources and organizations specific to women veterans as well. Provided participants statements regarding their greater comfort interacting with other veterans, especially early in their transition into the civilian culture, group work with veterans may be beneficial. It also seems that many of the therapeutic benefits associated with group work make it an appropriate means for working with veterans.

Given participants' reports of feeling apart from civilians, as well as expressing a desire to help others or contribute to the greater good, universality, group cohesion, altruism, and sharing of information therapeutic are benefits of group work that seem particularly relevant to group work with veterans (Yalom, 2005). Moreover, current literature supports the efficacy of group work with veterans in various settings (De Paul & Caver, 2020; Drebing et al., 2018; Dognin, Sedlander, Jay, & Ades, 2017; Haun, Paykel, Alman, Patel, & Melillo, 2020). In

addition to group work, counselors working with veterans may want to consider the inclusion of family in counseling with veterans, given the notable role they can play in their transition.

Participants recommended having family members, partners, or friends involved in support programs for veterans, especially early on in their transition. At times family member's lack of understanding regarding how to support veterans contributed to conflict and stress in family relationships. While research regarding family participation in support for veterans is specific to mental health treatment and support, outcomes do suggest that family involvement can be beneficial (Haselden, Piscitelli, & Dixon, 2016; Laws, Glynn, McCutcheon, Schmitz, & Hoff, 2018; Shepard-Banigan et al., 2018) and that veterans would like their families to be more involved in their mental health care (Cohen et al., 2019). The results of one study indicated that veterans would prefer couples or family therapy to individual therapy (Khaylis, Polusny, Erbes, Gertwez & Rath, 2011). However, as previously noted, partners, spouses, and families may also be a source of strain for veterans. Counselors could start by inviting veteran clients to discuss the salience of family (family of choice) in their transition.

In addition to research supporting the efficacy of family inclusion in treatment and veteran preferences, the reality is that there is a greater necessity for family members to provide care due to the increased rates of veterans diagnosed with TBI, PTSD, and chronic pain, has increased since 2001 (Delgado, Peacock, Elizondo, Wells, Grafman, & Pugh, 2018). According to some statistics, close to 1.1 million family members provide care for veterans who served since 2001 (Delgado et al., 2018; Shepard-Banigan et al., 2018). Given the number of family members serving as primary caregivers of veterans, the inclusion of family members in counseling interventions, and veteran support programs and may not only be beneficial for veterans but also those family members serving as primary caretakers (Delgado et al., 2018). Further research

regarding the role of families in veteran career transition services could help provide greater insight into the benefit of including if family members.

Counselor Educators

The findings of this study have implications for counselor educators teaching career counseling and multicultural classes, or supervising students who may work with veterans. It is also important to note that each woman veteran is unique, and counseling interventions should be designed to meet her unique needs and preferences. Based on the findings of this research, it would be beneficial for counseling students to understand the impact that military systems, military socialization, and challenges of acculturation have on veterans' experience of exiting the military and transitioning into the civilian world of work.

Counselors in training would benefit from understanding that the experience of leaving the military can be challenging, and for some, causes feelings of shame and betrayal. In terms of work with women veterans, this may be especially true due to the stereotypes mentioned by participants that women may fake injury to try to avoid deployment. It follows that when working with a client transitioning from the military to a civilian career, focus on concrete actions that can help them move forward, such as resume writing, interview skills, may be beneficial in the early stages of counseling.

Counselor educators should help students gain an understanding of the importance of language when working with veterans. Finding a common language with veteran clients may be a particularly salient point for counseling students who have never served. The work counselors may ask veteran clients to do in counseling (i.e., engage in self-reflection, allow themselves to be emotionally vulnerable) can be antithetical to a veterans' years of training and experience in military service, which can be mitigated in part by the use of a common language.

Participants communicated that military training de-emphasizes the importance of individual identity. Losing their civilian identity included minimizing awareness of internal feelings and emotional responses. Conversely, military training emphasized the importance of following orders, working as a team, and responding to external stimuli. Within this context, an insight-based approach to counseling may not be congruent with veterans' worldview or manner of relating to others, especially shortly after exiting the military. It may be beneficial for counselor educators to encourage students to communicate their approach to counseling and expectations for counseling in a clearly defined, direct, jargon-free manner.

Also related to the discrepancy between military and civilian culture, when teaching counseling students about approaches to rapport building with veteran clients, based on participants' experiences, I recommend encouraging counseling students to engage veteran clients in transparent conversations regarding their status as veteran or non-veteran, and what that status means to the counselor. Counselors in training who have not served in the military should learn about military culture and language on practices that can help provide a foundation for helping them understand how to begin to form a helping relationship with clients who are veterans.

Contributions to Literature

Much of the current literature and theories regarding career transition tend to frame career transition as a shift that occurs when a person transitions from one career or occupation to another, implying certain temporal boundaries. (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019; Super, 1963; Super, 1980). Participants' descriptions of transition into the civilian workforce do not fit current stage models of career transition (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019; Super, 1963; Super, 1980). Their experience of transition did not fit within the boundaries of a distinct period. Their transition

into a civilian vocation appears to impact their career path in an ongoing process. Women veterans' identity, understanding of the world, and the decision-making process surrounding future career transitions may continue to impact by their time in service to varying degrees throughout their civilian career path.

Correspondingly, the intensity with which participants expressed emotions surrounding challenges of leaving the military and transitioning into the civilian world of work could not be predicted by the amount of time they had lived and worked in civilian culture. Multiple factors may contribute to this dynamic, including participant's tendencies to focus on external goals and objectives as opposed to looking inwards and focusing on internal needs or challenges. Consider the description of military culture as "mission-oriented" and "country before self," in conjunction with the hierarchal communication predominating military culture. Within this context, it is understandable that women and men leaving the military would naturally seek external sources direction and feel unclear on how to move forward when such directives are not present. Therefore, it may not be until they are at a point that their work and other life roles are less demanding that they fully begin to consider the impact of their ongoing transition from the military into the civilian world of work.

In using feminist theories as a lens to understand this dynamic, women veterans' worldview appears to remain ingrained in military culture and values without awareness of how leaving the military entails a shift of their socially constructed identities. Feminist research theory has not been used as a methodology in exploring how women veterans describe their transition into the civilian world of work before this research study. All stages of research, from designing the interview guide to collecting data, to analysis practices, were conducted with the understanding that each woman veteran has a unique lens cultivated her cultural and other life

experiences. I was able to approach this research project from a unique perspective in that the salience of cultural norms, societal constructs, and identity were evident in the findings of this research project. The emphasis on culture and social constructs may be particularly relevant, given that predominant literature on career decisions focus on social agency. However, there is little acknowledgment of the systems and structure that provide context for career decisions (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019).

Limitations

As noted in chapter three, the intention of qualitative analysis is not to quantify findings that are generalizable but to explore a phenomenon in greater depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consistent with that aim, I designed my research with the intent to collect rich descriptive data that facilitates greater insight and understanding into how women veterans describe their transition into the civilian world of work. In utilizing qualitative research methodology, more specifically, a feminist research framework using interviews to collect data, I was able to provide insight into the world of participants. Still, when discussing limitations, it is necessary to state again that my findings are not generalizable.

The homogeneity of the sample in terms of the military branch is another limitation of the study. Every participant served in the army. Similarly, only one of the eight participants exited from the military due to her own choice, without medical and or other factors contributing to the necessity of exit. Finally, all participants, except for one, lived in Virginia at the time of the study. The services available to veterans and the size of the veteran population, which both vary by state, may impact the experience of transition for veterans.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research specific to how women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work could build on current findings by exploring how women who have served in branches other than the army describe their experience of transition into the civilian world of work. In expanding upon this study to include greater diversity in terms of the branch of military service, and other demographic factors, there is potential to gain greater insight into what factors can be considered facilitative or prohibitive of assimilation into the civilian workforce. In addition to including participants from different branches of the military, I recommend conducting research that includes a larger sample size and participants from more diverse geographical locations. Doing so would help identify what experiences may be common to women veterans and which may be more specific to geographical locations, military branch, or other factors.

Future studies regarding how to frame the ongoing transition into the civilian world of work would also be beneficial, specifically how life stages and events impact participants' experience of transition. Some researchers (e.g., Drebing et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018) have noted that it is common for service members to join the military when adolescence is ending. Therefore, their transition into the civilian workforce parallels their entry into "emerging adulthood," another developmental stage (Drebing et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018). Given that some participants had multiple terms of service and the high likelihood of military service members deploying multiple times (Mankowski & Everett, 2016), research on how participants bound their transition into the civilian world of work would also be beneficial.

Finally, as part of my future research agenda, I hope to continue to research women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work. Provided the insights I gained regarding the importance of communication styles and language through conducting this research, I would like

to explore the role of language in women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work further using discourse analysis.

Summary

The purpose of this research project was to explore how women veterans describe their experience of transition into the civilian world of work, a phenomenon worth studying due to the relative gap in current research on the topic, as well as the increasing numbers of women service members. As stated in chapter one, women veterans are expected to make up 18% of the veteran population in 2040, making them the fastest-growing segments of the overall veteran population (Council on Veterans Employment Women Veterans Initiative, 2015).

While there have been programs and support services developed to meet the needs of veterans transitioning out of the military, more understanding of the specific needs of women veterans is needed to design and implement programs unique to women veterans' reintegration into the civilian world of work (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Greer, 2017). Additional research is needed to understand how counselors can best support and advocate for women veterans and veterans in general, during their transition into the civilian world of work.

I used feminist theories as a framework for in-depth interviews with eight women veterans. Coding was used as a method to identify initial categories, patterns, and themes. The three primary themes, Moving Forward, Connection, and Sense of Purpose, provide insight into how women veteran experience their transition into the civilian world of work. In this chapter, I discussed the findings and limitations of this research and identified the need for future research on women veterans' transition into the civilian world of work.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Title: Exploring Ways That Women Veterans Describe Their Experience of Transition to the Civilian World of Work

Study Number:

Why is this study being done? I am interested in learning from you how you describe your experience of entering the civilian world of work after leaving military service. I hope to share what I learn from your experiences, and the experiences of other women, with counselors and other helpers with the hopes of providing insight on how to best support women veterans in their transition into the civilian world of work.

What will happen while you are in the study? Once you express interest in the study by contacting me by phone or email, we will speak by phone or video conference software to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, race, role in the military). I will answer any questions that you may have so you can decide whether or not you want to participate in my study. If you agree to participate in the study, we will meet two (2) times, either in person or via the use of web conference software/the internet so that I can learn about your experience transitioning into the civilian world of work. The first interview will be about 90 minutes, and the second interview will be about 60 minutes long.

At the beginning of our first meeting, we will talk about the information on this consent document, and I will let you know some about myself and my research interests. I will ask you about what interested you in participating in the study, what led to your decision to join the military, and to share about your experiences after leaving the military, especially about moving into the civilian world of work. Of course, I will also invite you to ask any questions or express any concerns you have regarding this study. During our second meeting, I will review my summaries from our first discussion and may ask for clarification in hopes to reliably capture your description. As we speak, I will ask questions to help you describe the parts of your journey you want to share. At any point, in time during the study (including during the demographic questionnaire) you can choose not to answer part or all of questions.

Time: As mentioned, we will meet two (2) times, with the first meeting lasting approximately 90 minutes and the second meeting lasting approximately 60minutes. The entire study should be completed within three (3) months from our first meeting.

Risks: I do not anticipate that there will be any unusual risks to you in completing this study. Our discussions will likely bring up about the memories of leaving the military and moving into the civilian world of work. You may feel sad or angry, depending on those memories. If you experience these feelings or other emotional distress in-between our meetings, please reach out to me immediately or contact a local mental health center hotline on the list that I will provide to you during our first meeting. If you experience these feelings, we can also talk about them when we meet. If at any time during our discussions, I notice that you seem very stressed, I will help you contact a place on the referral list for support services.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for being in this study. While you may find that talking about your transition into the civilian world of work may bring up difficult or challenging memories, you may also find that talking about your experiences help you find new meaning them. Others may benefit from this study because counselors and other helping professionals will hopefully gain insight about how to better help women veterans in moving from the military to the civilian world of work based on your descriptions.

Compensation: No monetary compensation.

Who will know that you are in this study? Although the results of this study may be used in publications or presentations, you will not be linked to any of these. I will keep your identifying information confidential. The transcripts of our interviews will be identified through the alias you select. I plan to use an application that will allow me to encrypt audio recordings (so no one but me can access them). After interviews have been recorded, I will upload them to a Dropbox account (an account where I keep information in the Internet Cloud), which is designed to protect your privacy. I will use a service that works with recordings of interviews to change them to word-for-word written documents. This service will upload recordings directly from Dropbox and send me the written transcripts via Dropbox as well. I will be using a transcription service that is designed to protect your privacy. Outside of the transcription service, the only individuals who will have access to these transcripts and information about our meetings are the members of my dissertation committee and a doctoral student who is assisting me with my research. They will not know your name and will not share your personal information with anyone.

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study and nothing will happen to you. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You will still get the gift card you were promised for participating, and I will completely respect your decision.

Do you have any questions about this study? If you have any questions, please contact me, Meghan Reppert, by email at reppertm1@mail.montclair.edu, phone at 540-820-7119, or mail c/o Dr. Glosoff at 3189 University Hall, Montclair, NJ 07043. I am conducting this study under the direction of my faculty advisor, Harriet Glosoff, PhD. at Montclair State University. If you wish to reach her, please contact her at 973-655-3482 or glosoffh@montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or

email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

Future Studies

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: Yes No

Study Summary

I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial: Yes No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial: Yes N

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here Sign your name here Date

Name of Principal Investigator Signature Date

Name of Faculty Sponsor Signature Date

Appendix B

Interview Guide

I will be completing two semi structured interviews with each participant. The initial interview will be approximately ninety minutes in length. The second interview is designed to be approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length. I will review the informed consent document at the beginning of the first interview. Once the informed consent document has been reviewed, and individuals have agreed to participate in the study, I will ask them to choose a pseudonym to use for the study to avoid the use of identifying information.

The initial part of the first interview will focus on rapport building and maintenance, minimizing power differentials, and setting the tone for a comfortable interview through discussing non-threatening culturally appropriate topics. In the second interview, I will also provide time for participants to review patterns I identified from their first interview, provide feedback on those patterns, and continue to explore their stories. Based on emergent patterns, feedback from my critical friend, committee members, and participants the following open-ended questions and prompts may be altered.

Interview 1: Experience of Transition

Opening: Here is a little about me, I am a professional counselor, mother, and doctoral student at Montclair State University. While in my doctoral program, I had the opportunity to facilitate a group of women veterans surrounding career topics and realized how little I knew and understood about military service and the culture of the military. All that is to say: I appreciate your willingness to tell me some of your story. Most importantly, I want you to share your experiences with me, teach me, and tell me what you think is important for me to know as an

outsider since I haven't served in the military and I value your willingness to share your expertise.

I will then ask participants about what made them interested in being part of my study, after which I will ask the three primary questions noted in chapter three (and below). Based on their responses, in combination with the demographic information, I gathered during the phone screening to prompt for clarification when appropriate, I may change the presentation of the questions below.

Question: While I have read the statistics researchers and government agencies have provided, I want to know what it's like for women who have served in the military to return to life after they leave. Before talking about why you left, maybe we could start by explaining a little bit about what led to your decision to enter military service and what your time in the military was like?

Prompt: How old were you?

Prompt: What aspects of military service appealed most to you?

Prompt: What type of work did you do while in the military?

Question: How would you describe what you do during your day to day life now?

Prompt: To what extent do you think the timing of your shift from military life to civilian life played a role in what's happened to you since you left?

Prompt: What would you consider to be the biggest factors that led to your decision to leave the military?

Prompt: What reactions or responses from friends, families or others stand out to you when you think about that time?

Prompt: When you look back on the time immediately after leaving the military, is there one thing that stands out to you?

Question: Tell me about your experience of re-immersing yourself in civilian life after leaving the military? What was it like for you to return to civilian life and the civilian world of work?

Prompt: What services were available to help you in your transition to the civilian world of work when you exited the military?

Prompt: What were your hopes regarding your career when you exited the military?

Prompt: What contributed to your decision to participate in/not participate in available services?

Prompt in the instance participant did participate in services: What specific services did you participate in?

Prompt: What would have been helpful to you during early stages of your transition?

Prompt in the instance participant did participate in services: What did you find most helpful about *insert name of specific program*? What did you find least helpful *insert about name of specific program*?

Question: Given my interest in women veterans' experiences during their reintegration into the civilian world of work, is there anything we haven't discussed yet that you think I should know or that you'd like to tell me?

Interview 2: Further Exploration

After checking in with participants about what they may want to discuss, I will share patterns that I identified from the participant's first interview.

Question: I am wondering how well what I just shared with you represents what you recall from our first interview. How do the emergent patterns I identified capture your experiences transitioning from the military?

Prompt: What was your first reaction to the emergent themes I identified?

Question: After having time to reflect on our previous interview, was there anything we missed that is an important part of how you have experienced the transition from the military into the civilian workforce or anything else you want to share with me?

Question: When you think of your journey to where you are today in your career, what factors have impacted you the most?

Prompt: What would you consider to be the most positive and/or rewarding aspects of your career path since leaving the military?

Prompt: What would you consider to be the most difficult aspects of your career path since leaving the military?

Prompt: What advice would you give to colleagues who are about to leave military service?

Question: When transitioning into the civilian world of work, did you experience stereotypes or negative assumptions (based on your identity as a woman veteran) that you think others, and counselors working with women veterans should know about?

Prompt in the instance participant answers affirmatively: What was that experience like for you?

Prompt in the instance participant answers affirmatively: What helped you cope when you faced *insert above mentioned stereotype*?

Prompt in the instance participant answers affirmatively: How do think others can help challenge *insert above mentioned stereotype* and counselors can best advocate for women veterans?

Question: What do you think would be most helpful for counselors to know to provide effective support for women veterans as they reintegrate into the civilian world?

Prompt: How could counselors provide support unique to women veterans transitioning into the civilian world of work?

Prompt: What do you wish counselors or other helping professionals would have offered you or done with you to help (e.g., was there specific information you

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