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# Acknowledge Us: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Female Army Veterans in Undergraduate Programs

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A DISSERTATION

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Unknowledge Us:
An Exploration of the Lived Experience of Women Army Veterans
in Undergraduate Programs

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*In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.*

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**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the participants of this study. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me and for trusting me with your stories. And to all of the women who have served and continue to service in the U.S. Armed Forces, I see you.

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done this without any of you.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the lived experiences of female United States Army veterans who have enrolled in an academic undergraduate program post discharge. As higher education continues to be an important transition point for female veterans, understanding the lived experiences of this population provides higher education administrators and faculty the opportunity to create and implement services and programs that will appropriately assist this population in their educational journey. Using a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; van Manen,1990) thirteen female veterans across five different eras (Vietnam, 1980's peacetime, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan) took part in two-semi-structured interviews. Each participant was asked to retrospectively discuss their time in the military; the transition to civilian life; and their transition to and experience in higher education. The interviews were coded, and themes were developed (Braun & Clark, 20107; Saldana, 2016; Seidman, 2013).

Three major themes emerged: military culture, the transition experience, and navigating higher education. These themes were examined through the conceptual frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979) and Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) as well as adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968; Mezirow, 1981) and feminist theory (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Baker Miller, 1986). The findings from this study suggest that female veterans bring habits, skills, and knowledge from their military experience into higher education that facilitates their academic success. Additional findings reveal the importance of the female veteran having a sense of belonging while moving from military culture to the culture of higher education, the impact of their perceived lack of readiness in the transition out of the military, as well as the value placed by the female student veteran on their relationships with faculty.

Dissertation findings underscore the need for more research into the experience of female

veterans' by centering their unique voices and by focusing on understanding the female student

veteran transition between military and higher education cultures and identities. Having a deeper

understanding of the under researched areas of transition and identity will allow higher education

administrators and faculty to create and implement services and programs that will support

female student veterans in higher education.

*Keywords: Female Veterans, Veteran Students in Higher Education, Phenomenology,*

*Female Veteran Identity, Military Culture, Transition, Student Identity, Identity*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the under-researched, lived experiences of female United States Army veterans who have enrolled in an academic undergraduate program post discharge.[1] Topics such as the demographic profile of current student veteran, their strengths, and challenges will be discussed. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the research problem, the purpose of the research, and the scope and the context of the issue. A rationale will be presented for this research, and the researcher's perspective and assumptions will be considered.

### The Current Student Veteran

Higher education continues to be an important transition point for many veterans, as they view it as a way to become financially stable and create a meaningful career post-service (Bosari et al., 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) reports that, since the post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect, they have processed more than 10 million tuition claims supporting more than one million veterans, service members, and their families (2013). This number is predicted to grow as the VA has noted that 73% of all separating service members are expected to use some portion of the GI benefits for education (Kirchner, 2015, p. 117). According to The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (TPNPI), only 15% of those veterans who use their education benefits will be the traditional college age of 18 through 23 years (TPNPI, 2018). Gregg et al. (2016) noted that veterans of all ages perceive themselves as nontraditional students who have specific strengths and challenges that vary widely from peers who are traditional students. These differences can

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[1] A discharge occurs when the enlisted time is up, and an individual chooses not to reenlist. A separation is when an individual has left the military before their time is complete due to an injury or other circumstances.

make it more comfortable for them to align and identify with the other students of nontraditional age (Vacchi, 2012). They can also, however, make it difficult for student veterans to connect with students in their program who have not served in some way. TPNPI (2018) also reported that nationally 61% of the student veteran population are first-generation college students. Students who are the first in their family to attend college tend to be largely nontraditional students who may not have important contextual information about the inner workings of higher education and may not be as academically prepared as other students entering higher education.

As of 2017, approximately 340,000 veterans have completed a post-secondary degree or certificate program, and a majority of these degrees are in business, STEM, and healthcare. Slightly over 56% of these students were enrolled in a public university, with 17% receiving degrees at private universities and 27% of student veterans enrolling in propriety or for-profit universities (Student Veterans of America [SVA], 2017).

**Strengths & Challenges of Student Veterans**

As veteran students navigate higher education, they bring with them many strengths while also facing multiple challenges. Vacchi (2012) addressed the many challenges that student veterans face, while also warning us that "veteran issues do not correlate with student veterans' issues" (p. 16). He stated that the difficulties student veterans face may be exaggerated with false information and misperceptions about mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This may then stigmatize student veterans and may create or add to an already existing narrative that focuses on challenges that student veterans may face.

Researchers have identified particular strengths that student veterans bring to higher education. Vacchi & Berger (2014) as well as Blaauw-Hara (2016) agree that veterans are both team-based and mission driven. Both of these strengths are a result of military culture and

military structure. This structure gives veteran students the stamina and discipline needed to complete tasks. A high percentage of veterans' students come in with a stronger-than-average work ethic, level of persistence, discipline, and initiative—skills that are essential in higher education (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).  Lastly, veteran students are classified as non-traditional students not just because of their age, but because of the wider understanding of the world that they bring into the classroom. Veterans bring experiences, knowledge, and a worldview that add breadth and depth to their classroom experience. This wider perspective may have positive repercussions in classroom discussions and present increased learning opportunities for traditional age students and non-traditional students who have not served (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

Student veterans do face some challenges in higher education. TPNPI (2018) reports that transition difficulties exist, but they often involve shifting from the more methodical and hierarchical learning of the military to the less organized, looser structure of higher education. Osborne (2014) also discusses the difficulty of transitioning from the highly structured environment of the military to the more self-directed environment of higher education. Vacchi (2012) agrees and reminds us that military culture is demanding and has high levels of both discipline and teamwork. As a result, an inability to meet the standards will have a soldier labeled as the weak link and a burden. In higher education, this thinking can translate into a veteran not wanting to burden faculty or administrators by asking for help—which can put veterans at a disadvantage, as they may be unfamiliar with the organization and procedures of higher education (Vacchi, 2012).

**Research Problem and Purpose**

Research shows that female veterans have higher degree completion rates than male veterans or traditional-age female college students (Williams, 2016). Although female veterans have been accessing the GI Bill since World War II to successfully further their education, little is known about their experiences in higher education or about what contributes to or deters their success. Women's voices have largely been absent from the veteran student narrative. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of women Army veterans who enrolled in an undergraduate program post discharge while also illuminating both opportunities and challenges during the transition into an academic setting.

**Research Questions**

This study explored the following two research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?

**Background and Context**

*History of Women in the Military*

Women have been officially serving in the military since the creation of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901 (National Center for Veterans Analysis & Statistics [NCVAS], 2017). They have, however, been unofficially serving for as long as the military has existed (NCVAS, 2017; Street et al., 2009). Prior to World War I, women who wanted to serve and fight in combat disguised themselves as young men in order to avoid detection and fight for their country. This practice ended during World War I when the military enforced the rule that anyone who wanted to enlist

must receive a physical exam, effectively stopping women from serving undetected (NCVAS, 2017).

Historically, women have served in more stereotypical roles, such as laundresses, clerks, typists, and nurses (NCVAS, 2017; Service Women's Action Network [SWAN], 2019). Women were relegated to these roles until they were needed in greater numbers in order to allow enlisted men to fight in combat (NCVAS, 2017). The number of women serving would ebb and flow depending on what the country needed from them during wartime. The 1948 Women's Armed Services Reintegration Act made women a permanent part of the military, but even then, women were limited to being 2% of the total military population (NCVAS, 2017; SWAN, 2019). That limitation was dropped in 1967 when the Women's Armed Service Reintegration Act was updated, thus opening up opportunities for women to join in large numbers, explore other jobs within the military, and attain a higher rank while serving (NCVAS, 2017).

There continued to be small shifts throughout the years that addressed inequities that women faced while serving. These steps, however small, continued to move women into areas that had historically been considered "male only." Initially these areas were non-combat related, such as the 1974 change that allowed women in the Army to apply for aviation roles that did not include combat (SWAN, 2019, p. 8). The shifts, however, began to include combat situations, and in 1989, 770 women deployed to Grenada, including a woman MP (military police) commanding her troops in a combat-like situation for the first time. Additionally, women flying Blackhawk helicopters came under fire in this conflict. Then, in 1990 and 1991, during the first Gulf War, more than 40,000 women deployed to the Persian Gulf, with 15 women killed in action (KIA) and two taken as prisoners of war (POW; SWAN, 2019, p. 8-9)

In the 1990s, more aviation opportunities opened up to women across all branches of the military. Although women were still technically banned from ground combat, programs such as the Lioness program and the Female Engagement Teams have been used in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. These programs enable women to work within male combat units and interact with local women and children who are present during raids or other ground actions (SWAN, 2019).

In 2013, former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta officially lifted the ban on women serving in ground combat units with a plan for fully integrating women into the military by 2016 (SWAN, 2019). In 2015, then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced that all military occupation specialty codes (MOS)—a nine-character code used in the U.S. Army and U.S. Marines Corps to identify a specific job—would be open to anyone who was qualified, regardless of gender. In 2016, then-Secretary of the Navy Ray Maybus ordered that, in order to comply with Carter's announcement, all segregated training had to end (Dickstein, 2016). As of 2020, however, the Marines were still grappling with full integration at the platoon level and struggling to comply with recent legislation put in place to force full integration at every level (Gibbons-Neff, 2020). As a result of these broadened military opportunities, more women have been enlisting in the military.

### Female Veterans by the Numbers

Female veterans continue to play an increasingly important role in our military operations. As of March 2010, approximately 210,675 post-9/11-era women serving in the military have transitioned to veteran status. This number may seem large, but women only make up about 12% of veterans; in the same time frame, approximately 1.5 million men completed this transition (Disabled American Veterans, 2015). The United States currently has 20 million *total*

veterans across all five branches of the military[2]. Nearly two million (9.8%) of these veterans are women, with the following age breakdown: 37.8% are under 45 years; 43.9% are 45 to 64; and 18.2% are 65 and over. As of 2015,16% are single, 23% are divorced, and 61% were married, widowed or separated (NCVAS, 2017).

Although racial diversity within the armed forces is growing, the majority of all veterans is still white. According to SWAN (2019), Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that 1.4 million (73.6%) of all women veterans identify as white, with 406,000 veterans (20.3%) identifying as Black or African American. In addition, just 170,000 (8.5%) self-report as having Latina origin; 32,000 (1.6%) identify as Asian; and 84,000 (4.22%) identify as "other" (women with no further explanation of racial breakdown are classified as "other"; SWAN, 2019).

### *GI Bill History*

In the summer of 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. This bill, known as the GI Bill, was created in response to the treatment of World War I veterans, who were discharged with $60 and a train ticket home (Veterans Administration, 2013). It was hoped that the GI Bill would ease the transition to civilian life for soldiers returning from World War II. There was a worry, however, that the sheer volume of returning soldiers would overwhelm the job market and create an excess of unemployment. Although the GI Bill offered many benefits, such as home loans, unemployment benefits, and financial guarantees for businesses and farms, it is best known for the education and training benefits that it offered. These benefits were, by far, the most successful part of the bill, and by 1947, World War II veterans accounted for 49% of college admissions in the United States. By the time the bill ended in 1956, 7.8 million of the 16 million World War II veterans

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[2] The five branches of the United States military: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard

had taken advantage of the benefits offered by the GI Bill (Veterans Administration, 2013).It is important note that, although the initial GI Bill was created to serve the veterans of World War II in their entirety, it disproportionately was utilized by white, male veterans. Black veterans who attempted to take advantage of home loans and education benefits were turned down or pushed into subpar vocational/trade schools (Ludlers-Manuel, 2017).

In 1984, Congressman Gillespie Montgomery from Mississippi updated the dormant GI Bill and revamped it into what would become the Montgomery GI Bill (Veterans Administration, 2013). This bill carried on the legacy of the original GI Bill, providing both home loans and education/training benefits for U.S. soldiers. Although the Montgomery GI Bill was an attempt to continue this tradition of offering benefits to soldiers, it had many shortcomings. Signed into law in 1985, the bill often failed to cover the full tuition for veterans using the benefit; the original bill had been designed to cover full tuition costs of the program veterans were enrolled in (Howell, 2009). The Montgomery GI Bill did not offer any stipends for living or books and had a 10-year post discharge or separation [2] time limit on use (Howell, 2009). This 10-year limit meant that both Korean and Vietnam War veterans were not covered at any time by any GI Bill. Additionally, in order to take part in the Montgomery GI Bill, veterans had to pay a one-time enrollment fee of $1,200 (Howell, 2009).

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, written in the wake of the attacks that occurred on September.11, 2001, was a response to the influx of men and women volunteering for military service after 9/11. In response to this influx, President George W. Bush signed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Title V of the Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2008)– also known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill–which went into effect in 2009 (Howell, 2009). Spearheaded by Senator Jim Webb of Virginia and Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, this version breaks

education payments into three distinctive parts: a $1,000-per-school-year book stipend; a

monthly living stipend paid to the student; and tuition and fee payments made directly to the

school (Howell, 2009). This newest version of the GI Bill also gives veterans 15 years from

discharge or separation to use their benefits. With the Post-9/11 GI Bill in effect, an entire

generation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans now has the opportunity to attend college in a much

more affordable way while also being able to transfer any unused benefits to a spouse or child, a

benefit completely unique to this GI Bill (Williamson & Mulhall, 2009).

The most recent version of the GI Bill also adds vital financial options, which is

important, as studies show that veterans often make less money and are less financially stable

than their civilian counterparts. Offering veterans', a chance to get a college education could help

improve their financial situation. Under this GI Bill, the government pays for up to 36 months of

full-time tuition at any accredited two- or four-year college, including graduate programs. If the

student can only attend half time, this benefit can be spread out to up to 72 months (Howell,

2009). For colleges that have higher tuition than the state colleges in their area, the government

is offering a program called the Yellow Ribbon Program, in which the federal government

matches financial support given to the veteran student, dollar for dollar (Williamson & Mulhall,

2009). There are certain benchmarks that veterans leaving the military have to meet to use the GI

Bill, such as six years of active duty or reserve duty. Overall, however, the Post-9/11 GI Bill

offers education to the largest group of veterans (both full-time and reservists) since the

Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944.

**Female veterans and the GI Bill.** Very little has been written about how female veterans

have taken advantage of or been successful with the GI Bill. The information that has been

recorded is largely from the era immediately following World War II and shows that a higher

percentage of women used the GI Bill. Of the 332,118 women who served in World War II, 19.5% or around 65,000 took advantage of the bill. Women who used the GI Bill during that period did so to train in the stereotypically female occupations of nursing and teaching. In comparison, of the 15 million eligible male veterans, only 15% of them used the GI Bill for training or education (The Women's Memorial, 2017).

## Research Approach

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas,1994) that included a sample of 13 women Army veterans who had entered an undergraduate program post discharge and were interviewed on their experiences in higher education. A semi-structured interview protocol, based on Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interviewing approach, included two rounds of interviews with each research participant. The first interview focused on both the military and higher education experiences of the participants, and the second interview revolved around their reflections on the experiences and ways they made meaning of their time in the military and higher education.

## Researcher Perspective

My involvement with this population has predominantly been focused on researching and lecturing on the topic of women in the military for the past 10 years. My interest in the military was sparked when a second cousin was KIA during his first 30 days of serving in Vietnam. Warrant Officer Barry Godfrey was killed on August 25, 1970 during a flight demonstration of the AH-1G COBRA attack helicopter in Bien Hoa, Vietnam. As a young girl in the 1970's, I watched as his family grappled with his death. He was memorialized in both the house and yard. His parents kept his medals under glass in the living room alongside his service photo. They displayed a model of the COBRA helicopter he piloted as well as the various patches he would

have worn. The most impactful, however, was the six-foot wooden reproduction of the COBRA patch that was attached to the house to the left of the front door as a constant reminder of the family's loss. This amount of palpable grief made a deep impression on me as a young child, and I wanted to understand more about the conditions that led to his death and the way that others had been affected.

My interest in understanding the impact of war remained with me in adulthood, deepening after 9/11 as our country became involved in wars with both Iraq and Afghanistan. Not only was war on the front pages again, but so were the perspectives of the soldiers themselves. And rather than just seeing reports on what was happening during the war, we were also being informed about what happened to veterans when they returned to the United States. Issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Military Sexual Trauma (MST) were being talked about, and they were being talked about by the people who were experiencing them. Further, in 2007, the Washington Post published a series of weekly articles by two reporters who had gone undercover as visitors of veterans who were patients at Walter Reed Medical Center. These articles detailed the delay of treatment, poor treatment, and sub-par conditions that the injured and disabled veterans were subjected to when they returned to Walter Reed for care (Priest & Hull, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e). These articles cemented my interest in this population and narrowed the focus to their experiences when they returned from serving in the military.

As an adult student finishing up my bachelor's degree, I took the opportunity to delve further into the phenomenon of veterans receiving poor health care by writing my final undergraduate thesis on the pathways to mental health care within the Veterans Administration (O'Neil, 2008). I graduated with my master's degree in Social Work in 2010 and, after a short

time in the field, started my career in higher education. It was there that I continued to research women veterans, while also lecturing and presenting on this population. As I learned more about veterans and the transition to higher education, as a social worker and educator I recognized the need to examine this topic more deeply, especially when it became clear that female veterans were only being represented in small numbers within the research.

### Researcher Assumptions

Based on previous research that I have conducted on female veterans, I made three assumptions going into this study. The *first assumption* was that the majority of the participants would report having experienced difficult transitions out of the military and into civilian life and higher education. This assumption was influenced by both popular media accounts of veterans' transitions and academic research that largely characterize these transitions as difficult. A *second assumption* was that a high percentage of participants—all female veterans—would report struggling academically. Without realizing it, I was also using the same deficit model that Blaauw-Hara (2016) describes in their research. This assumption was also connected to the presumption that these women would be experiencing difficult overall transitions. The *third assumption* was that the study participants would report negative experiences at their chosen schools. This assumption was based on my own experience working in higher education and experiencing a lack of resources devoted to both male and female veterans.

### Rationale and Significance

Educational benefits have been a "gift" to returning veterans since 1945. As the GI Bill continues to provide money for both education and training, higher education remains an important re-entry point for veterans who may have difficulty finding employment due to misperceptions regarding their skill level. An estimated 200,000 to 250,000 enlisted men/women

leave the military every year (Zogas, 2017). As women make up a larger proportion of these returning veterans and schools continue to strive to be military friendly, it is important to understand how female veterans' needs are different and how schools can successfully serve this particular population.

A fuller understanding of the experiences of women veterans in undergraduate degree programs, including the various transitions they are navigating simultaneously, could add to the limited body of knowledge about female veterans' experience in higher education. It may also offer schools attempting to be known as "military friendly" useful information on the needs of female veterans and strategies that could be implemented to help them successfully navigate the transition to higher education.

**Definitions of Abbreviations and Terms**

**ACE**: *American Council of Education*: Membership organization dedicated to shaping educational policy and fostering innovative practice.

**AIT:** *Advanced Individual Training*: During AIT, individuals learn the necessary skills, discipline, and work ethic needed to perform their specific Army job.

**ASVAB***: Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Test*: An aptitude test developed by the Department of Defense that measures a person's strengths and potential for success in military training.

**CID**: *Criminal Investigation Division*: investigates felony crimes and serious violations of military law and the United States Code within the United States Army.

**DAV**: *Disabled American Veterans:* The Disabled American Veterans is an organization created by the United States Congress for disabled military veterans of the United States Armed Forces that helps them and their families through various means

**IRR:** *Inactive Ready Reserve:* An individual assigned to the IRR typically receives no pay and is not obligated to drill, conduct annual training, or participate in any military activities. They must keep their contact information updated and are eligible to be recalled under presidential order.

**MOS:** *Military Operation Specialty:* A nine-character code used in the United States Army to identify a specific job

**MST:** *Military Sexual Trauma*: As defined by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, military sexual traumas are experiences of sexual assault, or repeated threatening sexual harassment that occurred while a person was in the United States Armed Forces.

**Non-Traditional Learner:** Nontraditional learner status is based on the presence of one or more of seven possible nontraditional characteristics. These characteristics include older than typical age, part-time attendance, being independent of parents, working full time while enrolled, having dependents, being a single parent, and being a recipient of a GED or high school completion certificate.

**PTSD:** *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:* A mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event — either experienced or witnessed. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

**SVA**: *Student Veterans of America:* A 501(c)(3) coalition of student-veteran groups on college campuses across the globe.

**TBI:** *Traumatic Brain Injury:*  A disruption in the normal function of the brain that can be caused by a blow, bump, or jolt to the head; by the head suddenly and violently hitting an object; or by having an object pierce the skull and enter brain tissue.

**Voice:** Female veterans have long been left out of the veteran and student veteran narrative. The term "voice" refers to the female veterans of this study bringing their narrative into the situation.

**VR & E**: *Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment or "Voc Rehab":* A service available that helps with job training, employment accommodations, resume development, and job-seeking skills coaching.

**VSO:** *Veterans Service Officer*: A VSO will assist a veteran and their families by answering questions, advising, and educating individuals and groups on what benefits are available from federal, state, county, and local resources, and also by assisting eligible persons in filing the necessary claims.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature pertinent to the experience in higher education. Principles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Schlossberg and Bridges' transition theory, as well as Chickering's student identity theory, inform this dissertation. These theories provide insight into the participant's experiences in both the military and higher education and were used as a guide during data analysis and interpretation. Feminist pedagogy, including Baker-Miller's (1987) cultural relational theory, Gilligan's (1977) ethic of care theory, as well as Belenky and associates' (1986) scholarship on feminist women's voice, were also used as guides as participants' experiences were explored. Figure 1 provides a summary of the literature explored in this chapter.

### Ecological Systems Model

Moving developmental theory away from a theoretical framework that focused solely on the internal workings of the person, Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model instead focused on the person and the context of their environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) equated a person's ecological environment to "a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3), with each of the environment's nesting within each other providing a fuller picture of a person's experience and ways that these experiences are informed by the context that the environment provides. In the ecological model, "environment" is not linear, and it does not follow a preconceived path, but instead, it is analyzed as a system and looked at as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).  Bronfenbrenner (1981) argues that to fully understand human development; you need to examine "the entire ecological systems in which the growth occurs" (p. 37).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1981) developed an ecological systems model that is made up of five individual systems that, working together, create an individual's whole environment. These systems are:

### The Microsystem

The system in which an individual is able to interact in face-to-face activities as well as a variety of social roles. This system is the individual's immediate environment and can include places like the home, classroom, and workplace.

### The Mesosystem

The system that contains the linkages between two of the individual's microsystems, whether past or present. A mesosystem is created as the individual continues to move between microsystems that have been established. Examples of a mesosystem include the linkages between home and school or between school and the workplace.

### The Exosystem

Composed of two or more systems that do not include the individual. The linkages between the two or more systems may indirectly affect the individual, but the events that occur in these systems do not include behavior or action from the individual. Examples of the exosystem include how the relationship between the school and the school board affects the student, or in higher education, how the relationship between the financial aid department and Department of Education affects student choices or decisions.

### The Macrosystem

Often referred to as the "societal blueprint" of a culture or subculture, this system includes all micro-, meso-, and exosystems of an individual's experience (Bronfenbrenner,1984). Included in the macrosystem are any belief systems or ideologies that may also exist in an

individual's domain (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). An example of this would be an institution such as the military that exists in the United States in one configuration while also existing in a country such as England and France in a completely different setup. They may have some similar tenets of operation but overall hold different philosophies.

### *The Chronosystem*

All of the individual systems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory exist in this last system, which also includes all life events and transitions such as beginning school, graduating from school, or starting a new job. These transitions are related to socioeconomic structure, changes in family structure, changes in employment, and residence changes (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Vacchi and Berger (2014) suggest that moving away from traditional student models provides the opportunity to examine the sometimes-complex nature of veteran transition as well as the diverse contexts in which these transitions happen, thereby providing us with a wider more complete understanding of the student veteran experience. The authors further argue that literature on student veterans fails to integrate both the macrosystem and the chronosystem sufficiently, thus providing us with an incomplete picture of the student veterans' transition into higher education: "However, the clear influences of the events of 9/11, combat deployments to the Middle East and the socialization of veterans during military service articulate how the chrono- and macrosystem apply to the student veteran experience" (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 138).

Also linking the ecological model to student veterans, Elnitsky et al. (2017) posit that using this model as a guide provides the structure to examine the "psychosocial and environmental" factors that affect student veterans. Conducting a meta-analysis of reintegration

literature, they found that a considerable amount of literature focuses on individual (or micro)

level issues. They seem to agree with Vacchi & Berger (2014) that there is not enough focus on

factors at the community (exosystems) or the societal (macrosystem) levels.

**Gender and The Military**

The role that gender plays in the military is largely wrapped up in the hypermasculinity that

continues to be at the center of military culture (Harris et al., 2018). Hunter (2007) states that the

infusion of hypermasculinity begins in basic training, which includes language that immediately

depreciates and "others" women as part of the military indoctrination. Upon entering basic

training, recruits may become nameless—often referred to as "recruit" or "you," or male recruits

might be called by their last names. Women, however, are often referred to as "female," which

immediately others them and signals to all of the recruits that women have not been accepted as

part of the overall culture (Goldstein, 2019). Using gender as an insult is prevalent in the daily

language of the military; for example, in the Marines Corps, all related services such as the Navy

are called "sister services" (Harris et al., 2018). Using the feminine as an insult is just one way

that hypermasculinity stays at the center of military culture. Maples (2017) describes how the

military expects women to reinforce the hypermasculine culture:

> The military doesn't just urge women, it requires them—especially if they want to
>
> succeed—to view themselves on the same playing field as their male counterparts. They
>
> are also expected to behave and perform in traditional masculine ways—demonstrating
>
> strength, displaying confidence in their abilities, expecting to be judged on their merits
>
> and performance and taking on levels of authority and responsibility few women get to
>
> experience. The uniform and grooming standards work to downplay the physical female
>
> characteristics (p.1)

Although the military needs women to fill the ranks, especially during this time of an all-volunteer service, they still have not created a culture that values women or their contributions to the military (Goldstein, 2019).

While for men, gender roles in the military are clear from the beginning of basic training—with the message to be tough, to be masculine, and to fill the traditional masculine ideals—the expectations are more complicated for women. Herbert (1998) stated that there is a "treacherous tightrope" (p. 72) that women have to walk. If they are perceived as being too feminine or using their femininity in a way that might be considered negative, they risk being seen as incompetent. If they are too competent, however, they risk receiving negative attention for being too masculine. They have to navigate an undefined middle ground in order to be successful. Harris et al., (2018) state that women are caught in the middle of these undefined rules and that it most often is a no-win situation. Female recruits often feel as though they have to suppress parts of their own identity to simply survive (Goldstein, 2019).

This is not to say that all women have a negative experience in the military, but even those with positive experiences report that there is a discord that exists between being female and serving in the hypermasculine world of the military (Goldstein, 2019). Navigating this middle ground is psychologically taxing and can have mental health repercussions both during time in the military as well as during transition and their subsequent time in the civilian world (Goldstein, 2019).

Upon returning home, female veterans may struggle with their transition back to civilian life for a variety of reasons. Even prior to being allowed in combat-ready positions, women were serving in roles that could expose them to a myriad of situations (such as explosions and gunfire) as well as the general anxiety that comes with being in a combat zone. Additionally, although the

ban on women in combat was lifted in January, 2013 (Harris, 2013), women had long been

included in missions such as convoys and going door to door in "female engagement teams,"

which exposed them to IED bomb blasts, close-range gun fights, and seeing fellow service

members killed or dismembered (Mulhall, 2009). All of these assignments put them directly in

the line of fire and at risk for both mental and physical health issues that can, in turn, complicate

the transition from active duty to veteran status.

**Transition Theory**

In a 2017 study, Elnitsky et al. investigated the broadly defined and overlapping terms

researchers have used for returning military service members and veterans. Their meta-analysis

of the use of terms "transition," "reintegration," "community reintegration," and "readjustment"

suggests that "transition generally refers to either the time period or process during which a

service member or veteran moves from a military to a civilian setting" (p. 5). Using transition

theory to examine a veteran's movement through different settings is a common way to try to

make sense of their experience. Examining transition theory allows us to provide a framework

for veteran's passage through the many stages that make up the  transitions that soldiers may face

when leaving the military. Much like Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, both of the transition

theories discussed here consider the context in which the transition is happening and the effect

that context has on the transition and the person in transition.

*Bridges Transition Theory*

William Bridges, PhD was in the midst of several major transitions in his life when he

began to teach a seminar called "Being in Transition." When developing the seminars, he

imagined a group of people in a room in the same stage of transition working through their

transitions together through discussion (Bridges, 1980).  Bridges quickly discovered two things.

The first was that everyone was in a different place in their transition, and second, he was able to

identify a continuum in their transition experience. It quickly became clear that transition was a

complex multi-step process that began with something in their lives ending; this ending was then

followed by a "period of confusion and distress," which ultimately led to a new beginning

(Bridges, 1980, p. 9). Based on research done by the German Anthropologist van Gennep on

rites of passage, Bridges renamed these three stages "endings," "the neutral zone," and "the new

beginnings" (Bridges, 1980, p. 88). How people experienced this continuum depended expressly

on the context of the transition. People who had started the transition on their own looked at the

ending and beginning in a much more positive light than those who had been propelled into

transition due to outside circumstances (Bridge, 1980).

Bridges created a pathway to assist the person throughout the transition through the

ending. This pathway consists of four stages referred to as the 4 D's. They are:

 *Disengagement:* The person in transition needs to be fully disengaged from the previous

situation or place in order to accept the ending and begin the transition process

**(**Bridges, 1980, 92). This stage is a physical action that separates the person in transition from

one situation as they get ready to enter the next phase of this process. *Disidentification:* During

this stage, described as the "inner side of engagement process," any parts of the identity that are

still attached to the person's pre-transition role need to be removed (Bridges, 1980, p. 96).

Disidentification refers to the person in transition stopping the use of particular titles or

identities. *Disenchantment:* As the person in transition moves on from past situations and

identities, they may begin to feel like they are in between two worlds without solid footing in

either (Bridges, 1980, p. 99). Disenchantment is an emotional experience that allows the person

in transition to look back and see how the old pieces or old identities do not seem to fit anymore

as the individual moves into the next phase of their transition. *Disorientation:* Those in transition typically are unsure of the path forward and unsure of the next steps (Bridges, 1980, p. 102). They may feel lost or confused, a process described by Mezirow (1991) as a "disorienting dilemma."

After completing the *endings* stage of Bridges' (1980) transition pathway, the person in transition moves into the *neutral zone*, which occurs when the person in transition simply takes time to think. While the participants may not appear to be actually moving the transition forward, they may be doing the important internal work of thinking about what is next. This reflection is especially important if the transition was unexpected, but it often can be an uncomfortable and chaotic part of the transition. To help, Bridges (1980) organized six tasks/questions that he thought might help the participant through this period. These are not a series of tasks/questions that have to be followed sequentially in the neutral zone, but rather an à la carte menu of options that might be helpful to the person in transition. These options include:  (1) Find a regular time and place to be alone, (2) begin a log of neutral zone experience, (3) Take this pause in your life to write an autobiography, (4) Take this opportunity to discover what you really want,  (5) Think of what would be unlived in your life if it ended today, and (6) Take a few days to go on your own version of a passage journey which could be a retreat or a ritual that you set up to work through pieces of the transition (pp. 121-122, 124,126).

Bridges (1980) maintained that reflection and internal realignment were key to understanding the next steps of the transition, which he called *making a beginning*. The beginning would present itself as either an idea, opportunity, or a sense of excitement about something. He believed that the person in transition would "know" when it was time to make a beginning, but that they would not be successful if the internal work had not been done first.

*Schlossberg Transition Theory*

Schlossberg's model of transition, created in 1981, is one of the transition models that is most commonly used with veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg presents a theory of transition that was initially used for adults in career transition. The theory integrates the type of transition with the context in which it occurs. Considering the context of the transition allows us to examine the different ways that people respond to transitions and to provide different actions that can be taken to help move people through transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg's work models demonstrate how adults—who will all, at some point, face a transition—differ in their ability to adapt to these changes. For example, what one person sees as an opportunity may seem to another like an immense hurdle.

What Schlossberg (1981) considers to be a part of a transition is fairly broad and encompasses areas that had not been included as a part of the transition. She talks about the usual anticipated and unanticipated events that are normally associated with transitions, such as marriage, a major move, a job change, or the death of a spouse. Additionally, she also takes into account what she identifies as non-events, defined as "non-occurrence of anticipated events" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Non-events include such occurrences as not receiving an expected job offer or promotion or not taking part in social norms such as marriage and having children. By including these non-events in her theory of transition, Schlossberg has provided us with a model that examines the most obvious forms of transition as well as the stress that might occur when a life expectation is not met and an expected transition does not occur (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg's 1981 model is intended to examine not just the transition itself but also the reasons that people might react to the same type of transition in vastly different ways. Schlossberg (1981) depicted transition as a complicated process that is affected by many

variables. Her work focused less on the transition itself than on "how the transition fits with an individual's stage, situation and style at the time of transition" (p. 5).

Schlossberg's transition theory attempts to expose context that surrounds both the events and non-events that she mentions. In the early stages of the theory development, Schlossberg posited that there are three key groups of factors that can either positively or negatively influence how the adult adapts to the transition. The first group of factors includes the characteristics of the transition (Schlossberg, 1981), such as whether the transition was a loss or a gain, if it happened suddenly, and if there was time to prepare beforehand. It also identifies whether the transition would be considered positive or negative and if it was permanent or temporary (Schlossberg, 1981).

The second factor is what the pre- and post-transition environment may have looked like. It includes an examination of the state of the individual's support system, including family support and intimate relationship(s), as well as their network of friends. Identifying both the location at the beginning of the transition and ways that that may have changed during the transition is also key. Finally, reviewing the levels of institutional and individual support that an one might have during the transition and determining what role this support might play are also important (Schlossberg, 1981).

The third factor includes an individual's characteristics, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status as well as the state of the person's health. These are all key in providing a fuller context of the transition. Additionally, looking at how the person's values line up with the transition and how their values may be affected by the transition are all areas that can be examined. An additional piece of contextualization that might help with the overall transition is

identifying whether or not the individual has had experience with this type of transition in the past (Schlossberg, 1981).

When Schlossberg introduced her model of transition in 1981, it was still, in her words, "exploratory" (p. 16). Studies were being conducted on its effectiveness and on how this model could lead to better interventions in a multitude of fields. As research on this model continued, Schlossberg added what are known as *the 4 S's*—situation, self, supports, and strategies—which could be inventoried to ensure that the individual has sufficient resources to move through the transition (Schlossberg, 1998; 2011). Although similar to the initial three categories outlined above, the 4 S's enable a deeper examination into secondary resources that the individual brings to the transition, such as her *situation* at the time of transition, her level of inner strength (*self*), the *supports* that she has available, and her ability to use multiple flexible *strategies* while making the transition (Schlossberg,1998: 2011). Schlossberg developed the model as a set of tools that could be used to help ease transitions of all kinds: "[T]he Transition Model can take the mystery——if not the misery—out of change" (2011, p. 161).

Others have built on this model and used it specifically for veterans in transition to higher education. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) also look at how the 4 S's in Schlossberg's transition framework play a role in student veterans' success on college campuses. Using focus groups, Griffin and Gilbert gathered information about student veterans' institutional experience. They then focused on how "institutional agents" have attempted to respond to the issues that emerged (p. 76), conducting semi-structured interviews with 72 higher education professionals across seven campuses (five public and two private). In their analysis, the authors discussed themes that emerged at the institutional level such as familiarity with veteran issues, a need for veteran-specific policies, and a need for veteran representation at the institutional level. Ultimately, the

authors sought to contextualize the needs of veterans across institutions using Schlossberg's transition model.

Rumann and Hamrick (2011) also use Schlossberg's theory of transition, but they look at it in terms of the role that identity plays in the transition. The authors considered the idea of veterans transitioning to higher education with multiple identities, with the newest identity being "veteran," and incorporating how that affects their overall transition. We all have multiple social identities and we acquire new ones all the time; the difference is that not many of our social identities require us to wear a uniform that, at times, makes that particular identity visible to the people around us.

Rumann et al. (2011) looked specifically at transition as it relates to community college campuses. Themes that emerged in this research inform us that transitioning to a community college campus is fundamentally the same as transitioning to a regular four-year college. Similar to veterans at larger schools, student veterans at community colleges also deal with issues of disconnection, difficulty in new environments, and dealing with faculty members and college administration.

**Female Veterans in Transition**

The transition from military to civilian life is typically complicated and nuanced. Anderson et al. (2011) define transition as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (p. 39). Bridges (1980) talks about transition as an opportunity, a time of unique challenges, as well as a situation that presents many opportunities for growth and transformation. The psychological transition from military to civilian life is often overlooked for female veterans. Society has constructed norms that are related to gender, and women in the military more often than not defy those norms and expectations—and they have done so at the

military's request. When asked about their service, female soldiers will not only have to explain what they did while in the service; they may also have to deal with judgment, disbelief, or, in some cases, strong opinions regarding the role that female soldiers play in the military, especially as these roles have currently undergone large changes (Harris, 2013). Women veterans often think that the civilian world will be "easier," when in fact they have a difficult time simply because people either do not believe that they are veterans or even have a negative reaction to the fact that they have served (Maples, 2017). Transition can bring with it a form of "culture shock" as women veterans try to navigate the divide between their military world and the civilian world (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Maples, 2017). Women leave the military expecting a similar type of camaraderie only to find that the civilian world is not quite as accepting, and they often struggle to find a new community (Davey, 2019).

### *The Invisible Veteran*

Women's lack of visibility as veterans can influence their transition and their tendency to access benefits. Male veterans are fairly easy to spot in civilian culture, including on college campuses. It may be the military haircut, the continued wearing of a piece of their uniform such as their boots, or their posture that signals who they are to other veterans (Sander, 2012). More often than not, women do not have the same physical signals. Unless they are wearing their uniform, there is little to indicate that they have served in the military (Maples, 2017). Women who did not deploy may also feel like their time in the military does not qualify them for veteran's status, or they do not feel like they need the "help" that can be associated with claiming veteran's benefits (Santovec, 2012). As a result of this, they are less likely to claim their veteran's status (Sander, 2012). The military is often referred to as a brotherhood, which almost by definition does not include women: "If women were never part of the brotherhood in the first

place, they may not seek a substitute upon separation" (Goldstein, 2019, "Over It: Invisible Veterans" section).

The lack of perceived social support for female veterans within the VA system has also been shown to play a role in difficult transitions (DVA, 2015). Most, if not all, VA services and programs were originally set up with the traditional military family in mind. In a traditional military family, the husband is deployed, and the wife stays home with the children. Upon return, the husband—along with all of the other male veterans—accesses VA care (DVA, 2015). Additionally, when men return, they return in larger numbers and often form self-selected peer groups. Female veterans returning home in relatively smaller numbers may not have access to similar self-selected peer groups that can provide support (Sander, 2012). The relative invisibility of women veterans further limits their access to peer groups. During her first transition home from Afghanistan, Linda Davey (2019) described difficulties in finding community as a woman, reporting:

> I looked for community in the veteran space but found toxic culture in Veterans of
> Foreign Wars, American Legion post and Marines for Life events. At one VFW I
> snagged a drink at the bar and then walked toward the meeting room. "Vets only!"
> snapped the bartender. "I literally just got back from Afghanistan!" I responded. (Davey,
> 2019, "The First Transition" section)

This overall lack of visibility can cause stress for the female veterans, but also can make it harder for institutions and organizations services to find these veterans and ensure that they are aware of services that are available.

In higher education, being less visible may expose women veterans to different experiences than male veterans face. They can find themselves in situations where they may be

at odds with the opinions of classmates or professors who are unaware of their status. From comments about the intelligence of those that join the military and opinions on conflicts, women veterans often hear conversations that may not happen in front of male veterans simply because they are not immediately identifiable as veterans (Davey, 2019). All of these issues can contribute to the difficulty of transition to both civilian life and higher education.

**Student Development**

Student development theory provides a conceptual framework with which to examine students' overall educational experiences. Long (2012) divides these theories into four categories and explains how each category intersects with and describes the student experience. The first group of theories are *psychosocial theories*, which focus specifically on the self-reflective and interpersonal aspect of a student's life. These theories include subjective changes to a student's "…thinking, feeling, behaving" as well as "valuing and relating to others and oneself" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 2). Theories such as Erikson's stages of development, Chickering's seven vectors, and Josselson's pathways to identify development for women are all included in this group of theories. The second group of theories, labeled *cognitive structural theories*, often follow stages that have been outlined to describe how students "reason, organize and make meaning of their experience" (Long, p. 2012, p. 42). These stages allow students to build upon past experiences and examine the expanding ways that values, beliefs, and assumptions are structured (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Included in this category are Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development, women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986), Gilligan's different voice model (1982), as well as Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1976). The third group that Long (2012) identifies are *person-environment interactive theories*, which are largely used in the academic advising and career

counseling fields and focus on how the educational environment directly affects a student's

growth (Long, 2012, p. 42). This work includes Tinto's theory of student departure and

Pascarella's (1985) model for assessing student change. Lastly, Long (2012) identifies

humanistic-existential theories, which chronicle "how students make decisions that affect

themselves and others" (p. 42). This theory is widely used in counseling and other areas of

student affairs. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identify an additional category, *typology theories*,

which includes theories that describe learning styles and personality types such as Kolb's

Learning Styles (1984) or The Myers-Briggs typology.

### *Student Development Theory: Arthur Chickering*

One of the most widely known and used student development theories, Chickering's

1969 description of seven vectors provides a set of steps or tasks that students must accomplish

to continue to develop their identity. Chickering followed in Erik Erickson's footsteps and

believed that students needed to move through the first three "vectors" or tasks in order to

establish their identity. He later rejected that notion and established that students' development is

not sequential during their college years and that each of the vectors described "major highways"

that allowed students to journey through "major routes" of their college experience (Chickering

& Reisser, 1993, p. 34-35). Chickering came to believe in a diversity of educational experiences:

"Just as students are notorious for not processing through the institution according to schedule,

they rarely fit into oversimplified paths or pigeonholes" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 34).

In the 1993 update to the earlier theory, Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss the

importance of developmental theory and the role it plays in educating college students of all

ages. They believed that development philosophy should be at the center of a college education;

without it, higher education "can become a dispensary of services, a training ground for jobs that don't exist, or a holding tank for those that don't know what to do next" (p. 44).

**Arthur Chickering's Seven Vectors.** The seven vectors, outlined below, provide benchmarks on which institutions can base course work and programming to assist students with their overall development. Keeping the language gender-free and purposefully vague, Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed that these vectors could be applied to college students of any age and of diverse backgrounds.

*Developing Competence.* As students begin their educational journey, the first area that they will be tasked with is developing their competence. When they enter higher education, students typically encounter new technology, new living situations, and new academic challenges that enable them to gain new skills and push them to become competent in three specific areas—intellectual progress, physical/manual skills, and interpersonal competence (Long, 2012). *Intellectually* students create new frames of reference and allow new perspectives to become part of their thought process, while also mastering, analyzing, and synthesizing new content. *Physical/manual competence* may involve athletic or artistic endeavors. Athletically, it could involve gaining strength and self-discipline, while artistically it could involve designing and creating visible items. This vector uses both "competition and creation" as a means to surface emotions as students display their creations (Chickering & Reisser, 1998, p. 46). *Interpersonal competence* involves using skills such as listening, cooperating, and communicating effectively to further a relationship with an individual or within a group. As students develop these competencies, they are more able to tolerate other opinions, choose problem-solving strategies, and align with various social and/or political groups. This process

continues as students begin to trust their own abilities and as their overall sense of competence develops and they continue to integrate skills allowing the development of a positive self-image

*Managing Emotions.* Students may arrive at college in varying emotional states and at varying stages of emotional development. Chickering's second vector revolves around students learning how to acknowledge, deal with, control, and process the emotions that may be present when they arrive or the emotions that may develop during their educational experience. Chickering and Reisser (1993) stress the importance of emotional maturation, stating bluntly: "Emotions have the ability to derail the educational process" (p. 46). They are clear that managing emotions does not mean removing them from the equation but rather learning how to understand emotional signals and follow any cues they may provide.

*Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence.* Although Chickering and Reisser maintain that these vectors can be overlaid on any student experience regardless of age, this vector appears to refer largely to traditional-age undergraduate students. As students navigate their way through their education, they are learning how to become more emotionally and instrumentally interdependent. Overall this vector talks about students taking responsibility, choosing goals for themselves, and being less easily swayed by others' opinions of what they should be doing. *Emotional interdependence* refers specifically to moving away from the need to have family, friends, and classmates provide you with reassurance. Students become more willing to stand up for themselves and more willing to risk relationships with people who do not share their frame of reference or world view. *Instrumental interdependence* refers to the ability to organize actions and to be self-directed in your problem-solving. It involves being able to move through an activity with minimal direction as well as to independently find information that will meet your needs.

***Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships***. "Developing mature interpersonal relationships involves (1) tolerance and appreciation of differences and (2) capacity for intimacy" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). Being able to tolerate differences while also developing mature relationships in both an interpersonal and intercultural capacity allows for greater intimacy. Relationships are created based on healthy expectations and boundaries. There is more acceptance and appreciation and less questioning of the relationships. Relationships that are created in this manner have shown to be longer-lasting and more apt to survive a crisis.

**Establishing Identity.** Establishing identity is a multi-step process that depends on attaining aspects of the previous vectors.  Chickering and Reisser (1993) simply state: "Identity formation depends in part on the other vectors already mentioned: competence, emotional maturity, autonomy and positive relationships" (p. 48). Identity formation is a process that includes having a level of comfort with your appearance as well as your gender and sexual orientation, having a strong sense of self in a multi-dimensional fashion that includes an understanding of your social, historical, and cultural context, and your ability to integrate feedback from respected people in your life as well as a sense of self-acceptance and self-esteem (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Establishing identity leads the students to have a clarity of who they are and the stability to live daily in their established identity.

**Developing Purpose.** Chickering and Reisser (1993) warn against college becoming a holding place for people who have not figured out next steps. At the beginning of higher education, students may find themselves in a holding pattern, and developing a purpose can play an important role in finding a more intentional way of moving through the educational system. Developing purpose is a call for action that integrates three major aspects: career or vocational

plans, a student's own personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments that a student may have while finishing their education.

      **Developing Integrity.** The final vector, which is closely related to establishing an identity and purpose, involves three overlapping stages. The first stage, *humanizing values*, is the process through which students learn not to see themselves as the center of every decision and conversation. It moves an individual away from the "black and white" thinking they may have had and toward a more complex perspective that balances their own perspective and needs with the perspective and needs of others (Long, 2012, p. 44). The second stage, *personalizing values*, relies on the student's ability to affirm their own values while respecting others' values, while the final stage, *developing congruence*, matches students' personal values with behavior that is socially responsible.

## Veterans as Non-Traditional Learners

      Regardless of their age, student veterans are more likely to be labeled or considered non - traditional learners simply due to their experiences outside of higher education. More importantly, student veterans are more likely to consider themselves non-traditional students for these same reasons and may have trouble relating to their traditional-aged peers due to the past history (Gregg, Howell & Shordike, 2016). Borsari et al. (2017) report that student veterans can have difficulty connecting with traditional students for a variety of reasons, including lack of knowledge or appreciation of the military and military service; unpleasant interactions with peers due to this lack of knowledge or appreciation; or inappropriate questions that they have to field from other students related to combat experiences or mental health issues. In addition, faculty and staff generally do not receive enough training about veterans and military experience. This study also found student veterans being treated with the assumption that they have some kind of

deficit. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) point out that not all veterans see their time in the military as a traumatic experience, nor do they want it automatically assumed that they have suffered trauma simply because they have served.

In a 2014 exploratory study done with 10 students, Olsen, Badger and McCuddy identified certain common elements that affected student veterans' experiences. After the camaraderie of military life, veterans may face a startling change, especially if they enroll in an institution that might not even acknowledge veteran students on campus. The veteran students who took part in the 2014 study expressed that they wanted faculty to acknowledge their veteran status and to attempt to understand them, their life experiences, and their points of view. They were aware that they could bring a completely different perspective into the classroom and wanted that to be a part of the overall conversation. The military experience that these veteran students possess brings with it a different kind of maturity, but these experiences can also bring with them challenges with both mental and physical health that *might* interfere with student veterans as they attempt to negotiate their new identities as civilians and as students.

**Adult Learning Theory**

The framework of adult learning theory considers that students bring many different types of experience into the classroom and encourages that that background could become part of the overall classroom experience. Although age is often used as a contextual cut-off point in terms of defining when someone is and is not an adult, Mirriam and Bierema (2017) point out that context should be considered before age.

***Adult Learning Theory and Student Veterans***

Adult learning theory is most often applied to the students who are considered non-traditional learners simply because they are older. It is easy to break down veterans returning to

higher education by age in order to delineate who would be considered an adult student and/or a non-traditional learner. However, the fact that most veterans—even those who would be classified as a traditional student—bring a vast amount of experience with them to higher education suggests that they should all be considered adult students and non-traditional learners.

Adult learning theory intersects well with student veterans because it encourages us to look at them (w)holistically and consider the experience that these students bring into the educational experience. Blaauw-Hara (2016) points out many ways that student veterans characterize adult learners: they are familiar with teamwork; they are task driven; and they bring a wide array of world views as well as experiences to the classroom. Acknowledging student veterans' experience and allowing that experience to contribute to the overall educational experience in the classroom will most likely add to student veterans' overall success in higher education.

### Adult Learning Theory: Malcolm Knowles and Andragogy

The roots of the term andragogy have been traced as far back as 1833 when Alexander Knapp, a schoolteacher from Germany, first used the word in reference to Plato and the educational framework with which Plato taught (Knowles et al., 2005). Theorists in both Europe and the United States had been working in the 1940's to bring to common definition of andragogy to education to the field of education, with Knowles writing the article, "Androgogy Not Pedagogy" in 1968 (*sic*).

In this article, Knowles introduced the concept of andragogy as an educational theory that focused specifically on adults as learners and contextualized adult learners' life situations and considers how these experiences affect their learning. Knowles (1980) initially laid out four assumptions that he felt outlined how andragogy differed from assumptions made in traditional

pedagogy, a list that he later updated to six assumptions (Knowles, 1989). This complete list of assumptions included (1) the need to know, (2) the learner's self-concept, (3) the role of the learner's experiences and (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, and (6) motivation. Although andragogy has become the most-used approach for adult educators, critics questioned whether this was a learning theory that provided a conceptual framework, or a teaching approach that provided step by step instructions on how to teach adults. Knowles clarified that this was a "model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for emergent theory" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 87).

Knowles et al. (1989) assert that andragogy focuses closely on the process of learning, which is vastly different from the model that is predominantly used by traditional educators, which focuses on the educator providing content to the learners. Educators who use the andragogy framework involve the learners in their own education. Students are provided with an open and collaborative classroom where ongoing discussions about what they are learning and how this information will transfer into experience for the real world contribute to the educational process (Knowles, 1988).

Although widely used, as mentioned above, andragogy is not without its detractors. One of the major criticisms of andragogy is that when it was created, Knowles, similar to many white male researchers in the 1960s, did not account for a wide array of social context or constructs specifically related to race, gender, socioeconomic status, or political situations (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Additionally, power dynamics are not explored, nor is the psychological context of the learner (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Johansen and McLean (2006), who looked at adult learning through the lens of the workplace, remind us that "cultural background, assumptions and view of the world influence an understanding of adult learning" (p. 321). Not including these

areas as part of contextual understanding can lead to a privileged perspective that neglects adult

learners rather than including them in the learning experience. Despite these issues, many

educators who teach adults still use andragogy as a guiding framework to understand adults as

learners.

### *Adult Learning Theory: Mezirow and Transformational Learning*

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning began to take shape in 1978 when the

Department of Education sponsored a study to explore the large number of women returning to

higher education programs in the community college system (Mezirow, 2009). Using a grounded

theory approach, in-depth field studies were done on 12 community colleges with

"comprehensive analytic descriptions" done on an additional 24 community colleges and with

further information gathered from 314 schools by mail (Mezirow, 1993, p. 19). Transformative

learning is fundamentally a process of how the learner makes meaning of an experience

(Merriam and Bierema, 2014) and what effect this experience can have on future actions

(Mezirow, 1991; 1997). Transformative learning theory is structured to help adults understand

and make sense of their experiences (Mezirow, 1991; 1997).

Mezirow also believes that as adults we possess frames of reference through which we

view experience. These frames of reference are made of both "habits of mind" and "points of

view" (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are broad, abstract thoughts that orient us to the way we

think and feel. They are, as their name suggests, habitual, and they are influenced by

assumptions we make based on our past experiences (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Points of view,

according to Mezirow (1997), are much more flexible and will continue to change as we add

more information and critically reflect on that information. These points of view will, in turn,

assist us as we solve problems and modify our assumptions. Mezirow (1997) states that points of

view are more likely to change because we actively seek and receive feedback on our points of view as we are much more aware of them in everyday life.

Mezirow (1991) asserts that our own personal histories and social contexts provide the construct for how we make meaning of our lived experiences. It is crucial that we learn to negotiate our own meanings of our experiences by critically examining them and not just passively accept the meanings that may have been socially constructed for us. Doing this strengthens our abilities to make meaning and extends our expectations in various situations. Points of view will shift with the addition of this knowledge, and as we reflect on things, we can overcome previously limited or distorted assumptions (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning describes learning as usually beginning with a disorienting dilemma that triggers a different way of seeing, thinking, and feeling about a situation (Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1991). A disorienting dilemma is defined by Mezirow (1991) as an experience or life event to which adults react in a crisis-like manner because their problem-solving skills and strategies are not working effectively on this particular issue (Merriam et al., 2007). Further research has shown that the disorienting dilemma may be easy to identify as it starts the process of transformation, but that there may also have been "an accumulation of experiences over time that eventually come together to foster a transformation" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 84).

Like many scholars, Mezirow refined this theory over time based on input from colleagues, critical feedback, empirical research, and reflection (Baumgartner, 2012). In the final version of his theory, Mezirow used the phrase "new meaning perspectives" instead of "frames of reference," while also adding the perspective that transformative learning could happen through transforming points, which he called "trying on another's point of view" (p. 21).

Additionally, Mezirow expanded the role of "emotion, intuition and imagination," which he agreed had been initially discounted (Baumgartner, 2012).

Mezirow's original transformational learning theory has 10 steps with four key ones focused for adult learners. These four components are: *experience, critical reflection, reflective discovery (*also called *discourse),* and *action* (Mezirow, 1981). Experience alone does not constitute transformative learning. What makes an experience a transformative learning experience is the critical reflection on the experience, as well as the key piece of discourse— reflective discovery—which Mezirow defines as "dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings and values" (2003, p. 59). Assumptions and experience are discussed, with understanding becoming clearer through conversation with others (Merriam et al., 2007). When examining the trajectory of transformative learning theory, Baumgartner (2012) suggest that the emotions of fear, sadness, anger, joy, surprise, disgust, and contempt could play a larger role in the transformative process instead of limiting emotional reactions to the reflective process to "fear, anger, guilt and shame," as originally done by Mezirow (Mezirow et al., 2000 p. 22).

**Feminist Pedagogy and Adult Learning Theory**

Focusing on women as adult learners reveals that although the dominant theories of adult learning and development seem genderless, that is not always the case. Most adult learning theories omit women's perspectives altogether. The most notable exception is Mezirow, whose adult learning theory was based on a study of women returning to higher education. As Minnich states, "Theories have their own histories of implication in the particular social realities from which they arose" (2004, p. 13). Minnich's research highlights that not only were women excluded in the creation of theories, no one *noticed* that women had not been included. She also notes that the societal definitions of both equity and justice somehow were not extended to

women, meaning that the dominant cultural systems were based solely on the male experience. Minnich (2004) further says that it was more than the fact that women were missing from the discussion regarding knowledge building and learning theory, it was that women were "actively hidden" and as a result had no chance of being considered a part of the discussion (p. 73).

Although andragogy brings the adult learner into focus in a way that had not been seen before, it only considers particular situational information and does not include key elements such as social context or social impediments that may revolve around gender (Merriam & Bierman, 2014). Andragogy assumes that all people attempting to access education are doing so from the same situation, and it relies on the male perspective as the norm. Minnich (2004) asserts that it is "strange to maintain that one small group is simultaneously the essence, the inclusive term, the norm and the ideal for all" (p. 89); yet this is what andragogy does, in assuming not only who will be exposed to it, but also what learning style and method of knowing these students will use.

### Jean Baker Miller & Relational Cultural Theory

Jean Baker Miller (1986) added to the discussion regarding the role that women play in society in relation to men and ways that inequity in turn influenced both psychological theories and cultural norms. Baker Miller (1986) argues that women "have played a specific role in male-led society in ways no other suppressed groups have done" (Part I, The Making of the Mind-So Far). She contends that women's role in creating families with men through relationships is a key factor in creating the larger societal structures in which we operate. As men continue to play the dominant role and as cultural norms are created around this dominance, the role that women have historically played, she argues, has been created for them without their participation and without their opinion (Baker Miller, 1986). As a result, the roles of being mothers, housekeepers, and

housewives were created as those to which women should aspire, and to ask for more was to be considered unacceptable and out of the norm (Baker Miller, 1986).

As a therapist, Jean Baker Miller worked with women in her clinical private practice. It was in those conversations, as women shared concerns about their daily lives, that she began to explore the notion that women were being conditioned to operate in roles that revolved around their husbands and families. Baker Miller began to understand that the greatest satisfaction was gained by women when experiences happened when they were creating relationships and relating on an emotional level (1986). It was clear to her that *connection* provided them with their clearest understanding of self.

Baker Miller's (1986) research was also done in reaction to the premise that the only model of a completely self-actualized person was the model of a man. Baker Miller (1986) thought that women having the goal to become more like men would be disastrous (1986). She wanted to create new models and perspectives for women and believed that the best way to do that was to start with women's stories.

It was through this initial understanding of the role that relationship played in women's development that Baker Miller created the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) in the mid 1970's. She posited that learners were almost always examined as individuals and stated that this approach is often (although not always) a detriment to women learners. RCT was Baker Miller's response to what she perceived to be a lack of understanding of how men and women were different in their development and in how they learned. She was aware that it was not simply context that was missing. Those very theories that were being used to understand women's development were created by the dominant group, which had decided, in advance, what roles women were going to play—and created theories that kept them in those roles. RCT encourages

people to build connections and alliances and asks women to examine the role that these connections may play in adjusting systems that continue to marginalize particular groups (Jordan, 2017).

### *Carol Gillian: In a Different Voice*

Carol Gilligan became a symbol of feminist research when she was working alongside Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard University (Madea, 2009). She noticed the distinct lack of women included in the research studies that ultimately created the theories of development for both women and men. She also noted that Erikson's theory reflected his own life and Kohlberg's his own experience and that neither considered the female experience or perspective. Gilligan's research began when she realized that women were scoring lower on Kohlberg's scale of Moral Development (Eisenstein et al., 1977).

To examine this phenomenon, Gilligan interviewed women who had dropped Kohlberg's course and noted that they were posing questions that Kohlberg's model could not answer. Through this research, she determined that women's moral development was not worse or slower than men's development, but rather that the path of development it followed was different. Much like Baker Miller (1986), Gilligan posited that women relied more on a sense of relationship and what she called an "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan also argued that traits that society has always considered valuable to women (such as caring and nurturing) are downgraded to a lower status in Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development. Gilligan maintained that if women's decision-making were contextualized into their roles in their everyday lives, which included relationship and a model of care, a clear model of moral development would be observed (Woods, 1996). Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982), which still serves to mark an important step in feminist pedagogy,

continued the research direction started by Jean Baker Miller, which looked at women through the lens of relationships rather than the societal and cultural standards that have been put in place by male psychological theorists.

### *Belenky and Associates: Women's Ways of Knowing*

Continuing to look at women's epistemological development, Belenky et al. (1986) published the seminal study *Women's Ways of Knowing*: *The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. As women faculty in the academy, Belenky and her coauthors realized they were hearing and seeing similar areas of frustration from women students across all of their institutions. They designed a study to explore this frustration and interviewed 135 women across higher education institutions, workplaces, and homes using what is known as the "Perry Scheme," a model for understanding the ways in which "knowing" plays a role in college students' cognitive process and thinking (Perry, 1968). The Perry Scheme consisted of nine steps that Perry claimed college students moved through in terms of their intellectual and ethical development (Perry, 1968). Using Perry as a conceptual framework, Belenky et al. identified five different ways of knowing. These five different ways of knowing are listed below.

**Silence**. Women in the "silence" stage of knowing view words as something that can be used against them as weapons. They also live with the apprehension of not speaking up due to their complete deference to authority. These women find the task of speaking about themselves almost insurmountable, and as a result, they are largely voiceless (Belenky et al., 1998)

**Received Knowledge**. Women who are in the received knowledge stage of knowing learn by listening. Their thinking is concrete, and they have little certainty in their own voice. These women believe the authorities are the holder of knowledge and strive to retain the knowledge received from the authorities and return it in general discourse (Belenky et al., 1998).

**Subjective Knowledge**. Women in the "subjective knowledge" stage of knowing are starting to use their own voice but are still doing so in a way that they believe will not challenge any authority or challenge connections that have been made. These women are working towards being less dependent on outside influences and becoming their own authority (Belenky et al.,1998).

**Procedural Knowledge**. Women in the "procedural knowledge" stage of knowing have begun to understand that knowledge is a process and are starting to listen to their inner voice, which plays a larger role in processing knowledge. These women rely more on observation and analysis and do not necessarily believe that being an authority automatically makes you an expert. Procedural knowledge consists of two different types of knowledge. *Connected knowing* involves both empathy and trust. Women who are connected knowers are working to understand other people's perspectives and are open to dialogue about different perspectives. Additionally, *separate knowledge* occurs when women start to question all ideas and knowledge, including their own. Separate knowers will debate ideas and have begun to understand that authority does not always have the right answer and that feelings do not have to be attached to any argument that relates to knowledge (Belenky et al., 1998).

**Constructed Knowledge**. Women in the "constructed knowledge" stage have integrated all of the voices from previous ways of knowing. They have begun to understand that answers are related to context, and they will often look outside of the issue to gather context to help them to understand the issue. They are constantly evaluating and reevaluating this context and see it as a part of the "never-ending quest for learning" (Belenky et al., 1986).

The researchers are quick to point out that these are not developmental stages, but rather stages of learning or positions that reflect women's knowledge of self, of their voice, and of their

relationship to knowledge and power (Belenky et al.,1986). Women may move through the stages, but it is not necessary for someone to spend time as a silent knower before moving to received knowledge.

Belenky et al. (1986) believe that the system of higher education was set up to serve male students and that men ran the institutions and controlled the curriculum and focused more on the teacher's knowledge rather than what the students brought to the classroom. Belenky et al. (1986) also believe that informal learning experiences, such as experiences in the household and in the workplace, are just as influential on how women absorb and construct knowledge as those experiences that happen in the formal classroom. According to French feminist philosopher Margarite Duras, "We are supposed to learn it the way men see it. Men move quickly to impose their own conceptual schemes on the experiences of women. Women must find their own words to make meaning of their own experiences and this will take time" (Duras, 1973 as cited in Belenky et al., 1998, p. 203).

*Women's Ways of Knowing* offers two central critiques of study design: that research used William Perry's 1968 conceptual framework, which was based on research conducted with male students, and that the women in the study were largely white and homogenous for other variables such as social class. Both of these critiques, however, are a function of the historical period in which the research was done. This research was a much-needed important first step into feminist pedagogy at its time and a focus on women's experiences.

Feminist pedagogy recognizes that in order to create an inclusive space for all to learn, structural change needs to happen in education; this applies to women as well as all who have been marginalized due to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or the intersection of any of these areas (Tisdell, 2000). This systematic marginalization has happened through the political

and social constructs that have kept control of the knowledge production and have purposefully left out the above-named groups (Tisdell, 2000).

According to Tisdell (2000), feminist pedagogy examines what facilitates women as learners in the world and is largely constructed of five interrelated themes. These themes—*how voice is constructed, voice, authority, identity as shifting, and positionalit*y—create a loose structure with which women as learners can be examined (p. 155-157). Where adult learning theory failed to address the political side of education, feminist pedagogy made the assertion that not only is education political for the population it serves, but also that traditional education prioritizes the needs of men—especially white men above other genders, races, and classes (Tisdell, 2000).

Feminist pedagogy brought to the forefront the idea that women learners should not be measured against male learners. By focusing on relationships, use of voice, stages of knowing, and the context in which they all happen, the researchers Baker Miller (1986), Gilligan (1982), and Belenky et al. (1986) highlighted that women may learn differently and that the traditional and often male-centric systems of learning do not allow for these essential areas to develop. Using feminist pedagogy as a lens for female veterans learning requires us to look at the context of their military experience. Understanding that both the development of their presence through the use of their voice to create their personal narrative and the ways that they construct knowledge will depend on such factors as timeframe of service, length of service, military occupational specialty (MOS) code or rank, and relationships built while serving will allow educators to start to understand the best pathway toward engaging female veterans in higher education.

*Figure 1:*

*Summary of Theories in Literature Review*

## Developmental Theory

**Bronfenbrenner**

- Ecological Systems Model- looks at the context of a person environment
- Five Systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem & chronosystem

**Chickering**

- Student Identity
- Seven Vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing integrity

## Transition Theory

**Bridges**

- 4 D's: Disengagement, Disidentification, Disenchanment & Disorientation.
- 3 stages: endings, the neutral zone, the new beginnings
- Deep reflection during transition process

**Schlossberg**

- 4's: situation, self, supports & strategies
- Initially used for career transitions
- Identifies context in which the transition occurs
- Includes expected and unexpected events in the transition

## Adult Learning Theory

**Knowles**

- Creator of andragogy
- Focus on adult as learners,
- Contextualize adult learners lives
- Focused on the process of learning vs. providing content to the learner

**Mezirow**

- Transformative learning
- Understanding how the adult learner makes meaning of the experience
- Believes our personal histories and social contexts provide the construct for how we make meaning
- Experiencing a disorienting dilemma a key part of the learning experience

## Feminist Theory

**Jean Baker Miller**

- Relational Cultural Theory
- Understanding of the role that relationship played in women's lives

**Carol Gilligan**

- In A Different Voice
- Identified that women reason with an "ethic of care"

**Belenky et al.**

- Women's Ways of Knowing
- Identified 5 stages of knowing: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge & constructed knowledge

**Female Veterans and Help-Seeking Behavior**

As is typical of literature on veterans, there is little research that pertains to women veterans and help-seeking behavior in an academic setting.  Help-seeking behavior in the veteran's community is often looked at through the lens of seeking mental and physical health care (Brown et al., 2011; Church, 2009; Kulesza et al., 2015; Kiernan et al., 2018). The research that does exist for student veterans focuses on their seeking help from college counseling centers (Currier et al., 2017; Fortney et al., 2016; Fortney et al., 2017).

The military teaches soldiers to problem solve, work as a team and to figure things out on their own. This ethos is often highlighted in an Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) special report, in which DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) stated that it "appeared" that women ask for help more frequently than men. They believe that this tendency is based on patterns that are initially set in adolescence, when women are more comfortable asking for help and society is more accepting of a woman seeking help. Margaret Baectold stated in the DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) special report that women often adopt coping strategies and strategies of staying connected early in their lives and that this is a critical component for success in higher education. The military, however, teaches soldiers how *not* to ask for help and to problem solve on their own, training that can become an obstacle in higher education, which can require a higher degree of self-advocacy.

The one study that I was able to locate by DiRamio et al. (2015) did examine female student veterans and help-seeking behavior, but this seemed to be the only study that focused on that topic specifically. In this study, DiRamio et al. (2015) interpreted that gender playing a role in help-seeking behavior is directly linked with military culture and the focus that exists within military culture. Masculinity as the norm in the military is connected to the stigma that exists

around asking for help, whether it be physical, emotional or academic. In the survey piece of

their mixed methods study (p. 167) DiRamio et al. (2015) found that female veterans' scores on

the Attitudes Toward Help Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS), which

had been adapted for student veterans, did not differ substantially from men's scores. Follow-up

interviews designed to investigate why the scores were so similar across genders found was that

the female veterans embodied three specific mindsets: (1) gender expectations, (2)

accountability, and (3) male dominance (DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 54). The mindsets all played a

role in keeping women's behavior closely aligned with the male gender norms that are expected

in the military—and, in turn, affected their attitudes towards help seeking.

Three main themes emerged from the mindsets. Those themes—pride, worth, and

responsibility—highlighted that women reported feeling "unworthy" of using campus resources

(DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 57). They reported that they did not want to take resources away from

someone who really needed them. Additionally, women reported that their concerns were often

overlooked while serving in the military, so they had, in effect, stopped asking for help. This

behavior became a learned helplessness that then followed them into higher education (DiRamio

et al., 2015, p. 57).

**Student Veteran Experience and Institutional Response**

A number of studies have explored how student veterans, who are mostly male, have

experienced the transition into higher education. In two large-scale studies by Cook and Young

(2009) and McBain et al. (2012), the American Council on Education (ACE) collected data from

a diverse population at 629 institutions of higher education regarding institutional programing,

enrollment, and the effect that a dedicated service office had on the programing and the

enrollment. Results showed that public two- and four-year institutions are more likely than

private ones to have programming directed toward service members. It was found that having a

dedicated service member office on campus directly affects the amount and type of programming

offered to student veterans in a positive manner (McBain et al., 2012). A strength of this study is

that it surveyed student veterans about their experiences across multiple campuses. The ACE

study is currently one of the largest and most thorough studies that exists on student veterans. Its

results are available for higher education administrators, program managers, and professors

seeking to better understand student veterans on a more comprehensive level in order to provide

them with a quality higher education experience. ACE has provided researchers with some hard-

to-find quantitative data along with narrative information directly from student veterans.

Another area to look at is the phenomenon of "stopping out"—when adult students take a

break to deal with life situations. The breaks may be scheduled or unscheduled, but most often

they do not remove them from their academic programs. Bauman (2009) posits that institutions

that are unable to deal successfully with student veterans' educational interruptions may also be

unsuccessful when dealing with adult students in general returning to school. Bauman (2009)

makes recommendations about how the institution could stay in touch with student veterans in a

more intentional way. This study theorizes that students benefited academically when their

institutions made a concerted effort to stay in contact with them during deployment. That is not

to say that better communication solved all of the issues that student veterans may face; even

with this improved connection, when students returned to their studies, they still had to deal with

other, common concerns, such as being overwhelmed by administrative tasks and paperwork,

managing mental health issues, and feeling that they had no purpose or direction now that their

deployment was over.

Olsen et al. (2014) add to the growing literature on the strengths of student veterans and challenges that they face as they transition from the military to college campuses. This qualitative study explored themes such as camaraderie, self-discipline, leadership, and , using perspectives taken directly from student veterans who relate what they think they bring as student veterans to the college experience. In these interviews, obstacles such as social interactions, financial stress, culture, and role adjustment were also identified. The necessity of veterans' centers and engaged faculty and staff were also identified as important to student veterans' success. This study had a relatively small sample size of 10, but the researchers recognized its limitations and worked to give a complete picture from the students who were interviewed. The authors suggested that efforts should be made to educate faculty and staff regarding specific veterans' issues to help veterans be more successful on college campuses. This recommendation is not often made, and I believe it could make a large difference in the student veteran transition.

Reacting to the paucity of research, Whiteman et al. (2013), who were aware that peer social support was often a predictor of academic success in civilian students, wanted to see if the results were the same for student veterans. Creating a quantitative study that began with 380 students (199 military and 181 civilian), they sought to measure the impact that peer social support has on student veterans, looking to see if the results were the same for student veterans. These authors used an electronic survey method and found that although peer social support could be a positive in a student veteran's life, they were less likely to take advantage of peer support due to ongoing mental health issues and a feeling of disconnection in the academic setting. The authors measured factors such as risk-taking behaviors (smoking/drinking) and mental health issues (PTSD/depression)—factors that are not usually measured.

Esqueda et al. (2015) state that student veterans face the same issues of retention, access, and persistence that are discussed among all students. These issues, however, tend to present differently in veteran students due to the experiences they bring to higher education. They feel that institutions must be strategic in the services that they offer to veteran students. The military comes with its own set of values and norms and being discharged does not automatically change an identity from soldier to student. When this is ignored and student veterans do not feel that they are part of the institution in a meaningful way, they most likely will not persist. The transition for a veteran into higher education is "cross cultural" (Esqueda et al., p. 17). Historically, institutions have struggled to provide culturally responsive support to student veterans with the added drawback of students being subjected to ignorant and/or insensitive comments and encounters from administration, faculty, and fellow students. Student veterans will likely need to work to develop new skills and competencies in many areas as they enroll in higher education, and the institutions need to play a larger role in engaging student veterans during this transitional experience.

In addition to a lack of knowledge about higher education culture and the basic ins and outs of higher education, student veterans may also face the barrier of simply not being ready for the rigor of the academic workload. In this case, they might need help connecting their experiences in the military to the work they are doing now in order to be successful. Student veterans may also face the added pressure of delays in processing their benefits, which could cause financial stress. This type of financial strain can cause student veterans to drop out (Molina et al., 2015).

**Summary**

This literature review is intended to give the reader a broad picture of female veterans as adult learners and non-traditional learners in higher education. Using adult learning theory, feminist pedagogy, and transition theory as a framework to examine the higher education experience of female veterans allows us to consider the gap in the literature as it relates directly to female veterans and their experience in higher education. Understanding the gender-based experiences of the participants as well as the ways in which veterans seek help will provide information for higher education agents and administrators to create clearer and more specific pathways for female veterans' success.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This study explored the experiences of female United States Army veterans who entered bachelor's programs post discharge from the military. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the under-researched, lived experiences of female United States Army veterans who have enrolled in an academic undergraduate program post discharge. This study used a phenomenological approach, which allows participants to describe experiences as they "feel it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and discuss it with other people (Patton, 2015, p. 115).  Using this approach, each participant was interviewed on topics including transition, gender, family military history, familial relationships, and experiences in higher education. Important contextual information such as family structure, community, and reasons for enlisting/discharge was also obtained and considered.

This chapter provides an overview of the study design, including participant recruitment and interview method and approach to coding, theming, and analyzing data collected from interviews. It gives a rationale for how the research was conducted along with how the data were analyzed. Also included is a discussion of the researcher's identity and positionality and the study's trustworthiness and limitations.

### Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to highlight the often-underrepresented voices and narratives of female veterans transitioning to higher education and civilian life post military discharge. Earlier research that has explored active duty soldiers and veterans in higher education has not been gender or race specific and has been largely dominated by white male participants (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bauman, 2009; Church, 2009; Olsen et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). In studies where women were included, they usually made up a

negligible percentage of the study sample. By focusing on female veterans, it was my goal to

uncover, analyze, and describe the various ways they experienced and made meaning of this

important transition—ways that may or may not be the same as those described for their more-

studied male counterparts. This research is not a comparison of the female versus male

experience, but rather an opportunity to add an female veterans' personal narratives to the

growing story being told about women veterans.

**Research Questions**

This study was conceived to create an opportunity for women Army veterans not only to

talk about their lived experiences transitioning from the military into higher education, but also

to explore the connections between those two areas of their lives. Sub-questions included in the

study asked participants to give advice both to female veterans considering higher education as a

path post military service as well as to college administrators who want to serve this particular

community.

This study attempts to answer two questions:

1. What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate
   programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to
   higher education?

**Research Approach Rationale**

*Qualitative inquiry*

Qualitative inquiry itself is not a method but rather a philosophy that creates a container

to hold the many methods that allow researchers to explore description-rich data. While

quantitative methods focus on scientific facts and numbers and often have an absolute answer,

qualitative methods focus on context, uncovering unintended consequences, and ways of making

meaning (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research includes rigorous methods that allow researchers to take the words of the participants and sort them into codes or themes that help bring an understanding to the research questions posed for study (Creswell, 2012). This study provided participants with an opportunity to tell their stories from their perspective. Giving the participants a place to provide both depth and detail was key to understanding their experiences as a whole (Patton, 2015).

### *Phenomenology*

Transcendental phenomenology was the guiding methodology for this study. Born from the philosophy of Edmund Husseri and put into practice by Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is both a larger research philosophy and an approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Husseri was concerned with "knowledge as it appeared in consciousness" and believed that intentionally discovering what knowledge existed would lead a researcher to the absolute truth (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). The distinction of phenomenology as a research philosophy versus a research method is that the phenomenological method "focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 2015, p. 117). A phenomenological study seeks to show how we give structure, in words, to our experiences, while also exploring how people make meaning of common experiences (Patton, 2015). Created around the assumption that "there is an essence or essences to be shared" (Patton, 2015, p. 116), phenomenology allows us to examine the human experience with a focus on experience and not necessarily scientific or mathematical facts. Essences create core meanings of shared experiences and allow us to understand not just *wha*t people experience, but *how* they experience it.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) concede that it would be possible to argue that all qualitative research is phenomenological. They explain further, however, that the philosophy of

phenomenology focuses on the experience itself, which in turn can be explored by various

qualitative methods.

Phenomenology proved to be a valuable research tool for this dissertation because of the

focus it puts on the participants' own narrative of their experiences. Given the phenomenon that

enrolling in an undergraduate program post military discharge will be experienced differently by

every participant, phenomenology provides the most comprehensive approach to explore and

make meaning of these experiences.

### Research Design

This research was designed using a variation of Seidman's (2013) three-interview

phenomenological protocol. Seidman (2013) created a protocol in which participants were asked

to explore their life history in the first interview, to describe the details of the experience in the

second interview, and to reflect on the meaning in the third interview.  According to Seidman

(2013), researchers can and will make changes to this structure to fit their needs, but giving

participants time to reflect in between interviews is ultimately the critical piece that should not

be changed. He encourages researchers to make sure their process "is both repeatable and

documentable" as they make changes to his protocol (Seidman, 2013, p. 25).

With this in mind, participants were asked to take part in a series of two interviews. This

protocol of two semi-structured interviews was done via video call using Skype, FaceTime, or

Zoom. The questions for the interviews were structured to be purposely open-ended to encourage

participants to both explore and share their past experiences (Seidman, 2013). Loosely using

Seidman's interview outline, the first interview in the series focused on a participant's overall

life history and experiences. Questions were structured to explore important pieces of context

such as family history, geography, economics, and culture, while also including questions

regarding their military and higher education experiences (Patton, 2015). The interview mainly deviated from Seidman's structure in that I asked to examine their military experiences and identify any habits or skills that they felt might have helped them be successful in higher education.

In the second interview, participants were asked to reflect on their military and higher education experiences as a whole and bring their understanding of the experience to the forefront (Seidman, 2013). First and second interviews were done seven to nine days apart to allow the participants ample reflection time. Changes were made to condense the interview protocol mostly for practicality and convenience. Based on the experience of recruiting a similar population for my pilot study (O'Neil, 2017), it was understood that recruitment of this population could be challenging; since it was difficult to know if asking people to sit for three interviews might influence willingness to take part in the study and reduce participation, the series of interviews was limited to two.

**Research design rationale.** The method of interviewing allowed the researcher to focus on the reconstruction of the participants' lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). Research on phenomenological methods shows that when researchers ask study participants to tell about experiences that have happened in the past, we are relying on them to use both memory and language to surface these experiences (van Manen, 1990). If we think, as van Manen points out, that the lived experience is a "textual expression of its essence" (p. 36), then we can understand how interviewing can be used as a vehicle that allows us to explore the essence or the memory of what "was" from a participant's experience and perspective (Seidman, 2013). Understanding context also plays an important role in phenomenological research. In this study, it was important to ask questions that explored instrumental details such as where someone grew up or what their

relationship with their parents was like, which then allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions so that the participant could offer salient details of the experience.

Josselson (2013) reminds us that we are co-constructing the experience of the interview with our participants. In our role as the interviewer, we are asking the questions and setting the framework for the participant to tell their "narrative truth" (Spencer, 1984, as cited in Josselson, 2013, p. 3). This narrative truth is not necessarily based on precise historical accuracy, but rather on the participant's understanding, experience, and reflection of the situations being explored.

**Sample**

This study sought to study a specific group of women Army veterans who shared a set of distinct characteristics. With this in mind, participant recruitment was done using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when a researcher seeks to understand a central phenomenon that was experienced by a group of people who share common attributes (Creswell, 2012). Patton (2015) advises that "the logic and power of qualitative purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific cases: *information-rich cases*" (p. 53). For this study, the following criteria were used to identify possible participants:

- Fully discharged women Army veterans
- No age requirement/limit
- No Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) requirement
- No deployment requirement
- Entrance into bachelor's degree program post separation from Army

The initial proposed sample for this study included women from all branches of the military. A discussion with the researcher's doctoral committee made it clear that experiences with both

military culture and education differed so greatly in each branch that this discrepancy could dilute the results.

**Data Collection**

The study was approved by the Lesley University Institutional Review Board in March of 2018 with recruitment beginning immediately post approval. Multiple avenues of recruitment were pursued for this study, but using social media resulted in snowball sampling playing the largest roles in successfully engaging participants. The initial phase of recruiting was done using Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Facebook, the most useful recruitment tool, was used in several different ways: the study was posted on my timeline as a status and made public so that it could be viewed by anyone and shared by anyone who saw the post. This public status allowed people to send the post directly to others and to share it on their own Facebook timelines. This social media activity assisted in recruiting participants from all over the country and not just from the northeast part of the United States. Emails were also sent directly to veterans' centers at colleges that are considered veteran friendly and those that have a heavy veteran presence, such as Arizona State University and Bunker Hill Community College. Direct messaging on Facebook was used to contact organizations–such as the Service Women's Action Network–that expressly serve female veterans.

There was minimal engagement on Twitter and LinkedIn with potential participants, but the engagement on Facebook was high, with people asking clarifying questions, sharing the post on their timelines, and sending the post directly to people they knew who fit the criteria. The call for participants was also put out on the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) listserv as well as the message board for the National Association of Social Workers. All

announcements or emails included the inclusion criteria as well as a link to a SurveyMonkey survey.

In total, 52 people responded to the survey with 24 of these women meeting the inclusion criteria. However, only 23 supplied contact information. After receiving contact information for possible participants, I followed up within one day with an introductory email or phone call to explain the study fully and to see if they had any questions and if they were interested in scheduling the first of two interviews. If they agreed, I then sent a confirmation email along with the IRB consent form, which was returned via email prior to our first interview (Appendix A). Ultimately, the study enrolled 13 participants. Eight of the women were from Massachusetts, and the remaining five women came from Oregon, Texas, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Missouri. Participation in this study was voluntary, and interviews were conducted via Skype, FaceTime, or Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Participants were offered a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation, and 10 participants accepted the offer. Overall, recruitment for this study took four months, and interviews were completed as women volunteered.

No parameters were set during recruitment regarding the timeframe of service; as a result, the timeframe of service was longer than expected—from the 1970s until the mid-2010s. The women served during Vietnam, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), as well as during peacetime. Having women from such different time periods raised an unanticipated complication, because the women from the Vietnam era used a different GI Bill than the rest of the women. The implications are discussed in detail in chapters five and six.

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Seidman (2013) suggests waiting until all interviews are completed before any transcription is done. Although that had initially been the plan, transcription was started after the completion of 10 interviews because of a time gap in recruitment. All 26 interviews were initially transcribed with the help of Temi software, with follow-up transcription on all interviews done in the more traditional manner of line-by-line transcription done via the audio to ensure accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant during this process for confidentiality.

Following the data analysis process laid out by Moustakas (1994), several steps had to take place before coding of the data could begin. These steps—bracketing, phenomenological reduction, and horizontalizing—are part of what Moustakas calls epoch. Moustakas encourages the researcher to take part in epoch as a way to attend to researcher bias, and so that "everyday understanding, judgment and knowing are set aside…" (p. 33). Each experience is examined by the researcher as a single event. While examining each experience, any prejudices, judgments or bias are then "bracketed"– that is to say, they are separated and put aside to be examined on their own (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). This process allows the researcher to revisit the phenomena with a fresh perspective.  This reflection is sometimes done in conversation with the research committee or co-researchers. It can also be done by writing research memos that both examine the bracketed thoughts and explore how they are related to the research study as a whole.

The reflective process of phenomenological reduction continued with the initial data-analysis stage of horizontalizing. During this process, all data are treated as having equal weight and value, meaning no one question is more important than the others (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). From there, I organized data into large clusters by reading all 26 transcripts and

highlighting and underlining sections of text that stood out as important. This thematic analysis

is done as a way to steep the researcher in the data. Using a process similar to what Saldana

(2016) calls lumping the data, I highlighted important passages while reading through the

transcripts and also making notes for future codes and analysis. My notes asked questions and

recorded personal thoughts or feelings, which played a role in keeping any bias in check. When

this initial round of coding was completed, the audio files and transcripts were uploaded into the

data analysis software Dedoose for additional rounds of coding using thematic analysis (Braun &

Clark, 2017).

      Phenomenological reduction continued through the initial round of coding, and

information that did not pertain directly to the research question was removed from the data.

Thematic coding was used for the second and third round of coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). The

second round of coding was used to generate initial codes, which were then examined and

collapsed into each other when appropriate. A third round of coding was done using these initial

codes. From the information gathered in the third round of coding, five final codes were created,

with each final code having four to eight sub-codes identified that allowed the researcher to then

identify salient pieces of data that would contribute to the creation of themes. A final code book

was created with definitions of the final codes and sub codes for reference (Appendix B). A mind

map was also created to begin to show the relationships across the various codes and to allow for

further phenomenological reduction (Appendix C). After the second round of coding was

completed, the excerpts of data that were coded were reviewed. This was done to make sure that

there were enough data linked to each code or sub-code to support moving the code forward

(Braun & Clark, 2006).

The third round of coding was done using the major codes in the codebook. It was during this third round of coding that themes began to emerge and be identified. Saldana (2016) defines a theme as "...an *extended phrase* or *sentence* that identifies what a unit of data is *about* and/or what it *means*" (p. 199, italics in original). Themes were not used to redefine participants' thoughts but rather to describe prominent experiences that were identified by the participant. Field notes had been used throughout the interview to track salient information such as interview settings, facial expressions, and researcher reactions. Additionally, analytic memoing was used throughout the interviewing and coding process to allow further development of ideas and the synthesis of concepts and themes (Maxwell, 2013). After the three major themes were identified, memos were produced for each theme. As an additional step, the transcripts were printed out and coded a fourth time using the themes and sub-themes as a way to confirm the amount of data that linked to the themes. This work was then copied into Dedoose so that the data excerpts could be exported into spreadsheets to begin to establish the connection(s) to the research question (Braun & Clark, 2006).

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical issues that were considered when designing this study. During recruitment, once the initial contact with the participants was made and they had expressed interest, the participants were sent the IRB-approved informed consent form and asked to read it, sign it, and return it via email. At the beginning of the first interview for each participant, key parts of the consent form were read out loud and the participant was given the form; each participant was also given the opportunity to ask any questions she might have about the study or her role in the study. Participants had been made aware that the interviews were going to be

recorded, and they were reminded of that fact both in the appointment scheduling email and at the beginning of the interview.

Because of the possibility that the women had experienced trauma while serving, a protocol was put in place should a participant feel that she needed support during the interviews. This protocol included having both state and national mental health information available for a participant should the need arise (Appendix D). As part of the informed consent paperwork, the women being interviewed were told they could leave the study at any time; they were also told at the beginning of each interview that they could stop the interview at any time. It was important that, although I am a licensed social worker, they each understood that this was not a therapeutic relationship, and that keeping that boundary was imperative. The trauma protocol that was put in place was not needed by any of the women.

An additional ethical consideration was the payment offered to the participants of a $25 gift card at the completion of the interviews. Ten of the 13 women accepted the payment and chose Amazon as the gift card. These gift cards were delivered via email. Of the three women who did not accept the gift card, one asked that hers be donated to a women's shelter, and the other two just expressed their gratitude for being a part of the research.

**Researcher's Positionality**

Josselson (2013) encourages us to reflect on our relationship with the research before recruitment of the research sample. Understanding that we, as researchers, bring our own biases and assumptions into the research, it is important for us to not only acknowledge them but also reflect on what role they might play in the current scenario. For instance, I recognize that I have read a considerable amount of literature on female veterans in many different areas, but I also recognize that I have no direct experience as a veteran or a service person. My knowledge is

academic, not experiential; my perspective is one of an outsider. Although this knowledge and perspective inform my research and provide the framework from which I do this research, it was important to be flexible and to work to bracket my bias and assumptions while interviewing the participants and analyzing the data.

Family military history and personal values are two other areas that also affect my researcher identity. My mother's cousin Barry, a Cobra helicopter pilot, was killed in Vietnam in August of 1970 after being there for less than 30 days. Watching his family process their grief as made an indelible impression on me as a young child. As I went back to school as an adult to finish my undergraduate degree, something I have in common with my participants, I started to research trauma, which led to my researching the history of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The history was situated largely in stories of war and the effects of war on the people who had served. At that point, the country had been engaged in Iraq for three years and information was starting to be released in the media about Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals' failures and the proliferation of sexual assault in the military. As someone interested in systems, it was fascinating; as a feminist, it was enraging, especially as more and more stories of military sexual trauma started to be released. It was clear that the system which many of these people had dedicated themselves to—and often trusted with their lives—was broken. It also was betraying them. As I continued to read this information, my interest in the female experience continued to grow, as did my bias related to how the military treated women in the military.

The values that I bring to this work are informed not just by family experiences but also by political beliefs, feminism, and my social work identity. As a politically left-leaning feminist and social worker, I have observed that my interest in the military is surprising to people. As a social worker, I bring a strong sense of social justice as well as a belief in the importance of both

dignity and worth of the individual. With that in mind, I believe that doing this research and giving these women a place to tell their stories and talk about how they make meaning of their experiences is vital to our understanding the female veteran experience.

## Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research was created so that researchers would have the opportunity to convince interested parties that their research deserved attention (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) created benchmarks, corollary to those already used in quantitative research, that broke trustworthiness down into four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Using these areas, qualitative researchers attempt to show that their research is both ethical and rigorous (Nowell et al., 2017).

## Credibility

By continuing to take part in the epoche process discussed by Moustakas (1994), I continually attended to bias by note taking, writing analytic memos, triangulating of data, and debriefing peers. I did not ignore the potential for bias, but rather actively and continually bracketed it to be discussed in all of the above manners. Additionally, I used analytic memos and field notes to track bias and to contribute to the thick descriptions needed for a more comprehensive depiction of the reported experiences (Patton, 2015).

## Dependability

A research audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was created; it included the survey used to recruit participants, signed consent forms, all field notes/memos, final versions of codes for each level of coding, a final code book with descriptions, and coded excerpts used for data analysis. Having this audit trail available allowed me to go back to follow early lines of thinking and reasoning to understand how conclusions were drawn and how information was included or

discarded. This audit trail is kept both in a research binder and on a secure computer and is available for examination at any time.

**Transferability**

This research asked 13 women Army veterans who served at different times to discuss their experiences as they transitioned into higher education. The various systems in which all of the women operated were investigated at length with the women providing detailed, thick descriptions of their experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a more flexible discussion to take place, which in turn provided ample space for the women to give detailed descriptions about their experiences. Due to the small sample size, the experiences of these women will likely not be generalizable to the larger female veterans' population, but rather used as a starting point for further research.

**Limitations**

This study involved women Army veterans ages 25 to 70 who had made the decision to pursue a four-year degree after separating from the Army. A majority of the women served in the currently ongoing Operations Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), with four of the women serving in earlier conflicts or during peacetime. The difference in these time periods meant that the women's military experience and experience in higher education were time bound and at times quite varied. The difference in time frame also meant that some of the women accessed various versions of the GI Bill, causing a difference in available benefits. This difference in time frame also impacted the lived experience of these women both in the military and in higher education and will be examined further in chapter four. This study was based around a set of interviews that asked women contextual questions regarding historical

events. It is recognized that the perception of details is personal and that memories of details are inexact; participants recollected the details in these interviews to the best of their memories.

**Delimitations**

This study recruited women Army veterans who had fully separated from the service and who had chosen to attend an undergraduate degree program post separation with the focus on exploring their experiences in higher education. All 13 participants served in the Army in some capacity, with all of the women attending an undergraduate degree program post discharge.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the phenomenological methods used to explore the experiences of separated women Army veterans who had entered an undergraduate program. The purposeful sample met the agreed-upon criteria, with interviews beginning immediately following participant interviews. Transcendental phenomenology was used to analyze interviews to create codes and, ultimately, themes. My positionality as a researcher was explored, and limitations and as well as delimitations were considered.

## Chapter 4: Participant Profiles

The participants in this study were United States Army veterans who identified as women and who had enrolled in an undergraduate program post-military discharge. They answered a general call for participation, which resulted in a diversity of ages, physical locations, and military experiences. The two-phased phenomenological interviews explored the participants' experiences in higher education and examined the opportunities and obstacles that they may have encountered during their experience. Discussions that took place during the interviews revolved around individual family background; military experience, including enlistment and discharge; and transition out of the military and into both civilian life and higher education.

The profiles in this chapter summarize and present summarized data aggregated from the participant interviews. Each profile provides in-depth background information about a participant and gives key information such as: why they joined the military, why they left the military, and what went into the decision to enroll in an undergraduate program. The interviews also add historical context: ways that their family upbringing may have influenced their decision to enlist as well as history their families may have had with branches of the military.

### Research Questions

This study provides an opportunity for women Army veterans to talk about their lived experiences transitioning from the military into higher education and to explore any connections between those two phases of their lives. Sub-questions included in the study asked participants to give advice both to women veterans considering higher education as a path post-military service as well as to college administrators who want to serve women veterans, information that is discussed in depth in chapter six.

This research study attempts to answer two questions:

1. What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?

Tables 1 and 2 summarize participant information. For the sake of anonymity, general female pseudonyms have been assigned to all the participants and geographical location was purposely kept vague. The participants are listed in alphabetical order.

Table 1

*Participant Information A*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Race | Enlistment | Discharge |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alice | 38 | F | White | B, D, F | A |
| Cathy | 56 | F | White | G | D |
| Cat ^ | 57 | F | White | F (for both) | E x2 |
| Holly* | 39 | F | White | G | A |
| Jill | 63 | F | White | E | A |
| Karen*^ | 45 | F | White | A, F | A, E |
| Linda* | 33 | F | White | B, C, D | D & E |
| Lucy | 64 | F | White | A, F | A |
| Lisa | 34 | F | White | B | B |
| Michelle | 60 | F | White | G | C |
| Terri | 37 | F | White | B.D | B |
| Terra | 35 | F | White | D, F | B |
| Vanessa | 47 | F | White | E | E |

**Reasons For Joining**
A: Wanted to get "out" (parents house etc)
B: 9/11
C: Had always wanted to join
D: Family History
E: Travel
F: Financial/Employment Opportunities
G: Other

**Reason for Discharge**
A: Time was up, not interested in reenlistment
B: Medically discharged
C: Congressional Discharge
D: Not physically viable anymore
E: Other

* = National Guard Experience
^= Multiple enlistments

Table 2

*Participant Information B*

| Pseudonym | Era | MOS | Deployment | Educational Status |
|-----------|-----|-----|------------|-------------------|
| Alice | OEF/OIF | Logistics | Yes: Afghanistan x1 | A |
| Cathy | OEF/OIF | Logistics | Yes: Afghanistan x1 | B |
| Cat ^ | Peacetime x2 | Criminal Investigator | No | D |
| Holly* | Peacetime | Chemical Operations Specialist | No | D |
| Jill | Vietnam | Combat Medic | Yes: Germany | D |
| Karen*^ | Desert Storm & OEF/OIF | Communications, Criminal Investigator | Yes: Kuwait & Afghanistan | A |
| Linda* | OEF/OIF | Truck Driver | Yes: Iraq x2 | A |
| Lucy | Vietnam | Telecommunications | Yes: Germany | C |
| Lisa | OEF/OIF | Intelligence Analyst | No | A |
| Michelle | Peacetime | Administrative | No | C |
| Terri | OEF/OIF | IT Technician | Yes: Multiple (8) | A |
| Terra | OEF/OIF | Combat Medic | No | A |
| Vanessa | Desert Storm | Administrative | Yes: Iraq | A |

**Educational Status at Time of Study**
A: Currently enrolled in undergraduate
B: Completed undergraduate currently enrolled in masters
C: Completed undergraduate currently working - received masters degree
B: Completed undergraduate currently working did not recieve masters degree

\* = National Guard Experience
^= Multiple enlistments

## Participants' Profiles

### *Alice*

### *"I'm capable of doing really well outside of the Army and I want to give that a shot."*

A woman in her mid-30s, "Alice" grew up in the rural South. Her family make-up included three sisters with both parents present in the household. Alice's father was in the Navy and, as a result, traveled frequently. Despite his time away, Alice reported that her family was close growing up and continues to be close. Although she declined to give much detail about her childhood, she was quick to say that it was happy and that she considered herself a happy child. Alice attended college for one summer semester immediately following high school, but said "all

I wanted to do was party and it wasn't for me." She quit college to join the military, explaining,

"I'm out of here. I'm going to go see the world."

      **Enlistment**. In her late 20s, after Alice had been laid off from two hourly jobs, she

started to think about joining the military. It was 2008 and the United States was facing a

recession.  She described herself as "lost" and "not knowing what to do" with herself. She

wanted to find her niche and thought that the military might help. Due to her father's service,

she viewed the military as a positive opportunity. She reported that her family had discovered

that they had a relative in the Civil War and that she has family members who had been in both

the Navy and Air Force. She recalled thinking, "Military runs in my family and I've always

thought about going…it's like nothing else to do, what am I gonna do? So, I just ended up doing

it." She chose the Army through a process of elimination. She thought being on a ship in the

Navy sounded like she would be painting ships—which she imagined would be boring—and the

Marines "wanted push-ups" (she said this with a laugh). The Army had Human Resources

positions available, and she thought, "I can do that."

      **Military Experience.** She recalls basic training as being difficult—the new recruits were

"yelled at" from the moment they got off the bus. A former boyfriend had given her the advice to

"be quiet and listen," but Alice found out quickly that being quiet and observing led others,

including her drill sergeant, to think that she had a negative attitude. As a result, her drill

sergeant "picked on" her quite a bit, and Alice started questioning her decision to join. She was

sleep deprived and kept waiting for it to get better.

      As often happens in the military, she signed up for a Human Resources Military

Operational Specialty (MOS), but the MOS she was actually assigned revolved around the

logistics of supply. She felt that this MOS suited her well, stating "I loved it and I still miss it to

this day." In 2010, Alice deployed with her unit to Afghanistan for a year and three days. While

there, she worked seven days a week in logistics doing everything from supplying equipment

downrange away from any targets, working with personnel distribution, going to the hospital to

report back on the wounded in action, and also attending ramp ceremonies.[3] She noted that all of

these actions were sometimes done while under enemy fire.

Alice described her deployment as extremely difficult, largely because her unit was

understaffed. "[It was] actually seven days a week nonstop... everybody was dependent on me. I

had to get all this equipment to them, like they counted on me or they wouldn't have anything,

you know? So yeah, it was pretty tough." As a result, she was constantly exhausted. The unit was

under-staffed, Alice explained, because "higher ups" did not send the number of people needed

to fully staff the team. She initially did not have a plan when it came to how long she thought she

might serve, but because of the exhaustion, when her three and a half years were up, she was

ready to go. "The reenlistment guy came and talked to me while I was in Afghanistan, and I was

just so sick of it. I told him and said, 'Look, don't even talk to me.'" Upon reflection, Alice said

she would have really liked to have stayed because you did not have to worry about everyday

things like bills. When asked about the transition home, Alice reported that she thought that

coming back to the United States was harder than going to Afghanistan. Being in the Army and

deployed overseas changed her perspective on daily life, and she would find herself getting

annoyed when people seemed to worry about trivial things, because "I started listening to people

on the street…you're worried about a Gucci purse? People were over there dying."

She stated that the transition out of the service was hard because it was so hurried. She

felt that the Army rushed through important topics like benefits. Returning from a combat zone

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[3] A ramp ceremony is a ceremony held at the airport honoring a soldier who was killed during deployment. This ceremony is held prior to the deceased being loaded into the aircraft and taken back to their home base.

made this rushing harder to deal with; she realized that a part of it was she was attempting to deal with undiagnosed PTSD that made it hard to concentrate. In addition, however, she also felt that she received different information from everyone, something that, post discharge, has continued regarding her Army benefits. As a result of the incomplete transition and the inability to get straight answers, Alice has had to figure out most of her benefits (both medical and educational) on her own.

      **Education.** In 2011, Alice started her education at a community college, which she really enjoyed because it "kept her mind busy." She reported that she was dealing with PTSD during this time but was able to "push through" school. She worked at the veterans' center at the community college and liked that the college was relatively small, keeping student-to-faculty ratio low. Alice noted that she brought her organizational skills with her from the Army, as well as the ability to be professional in any situation. She transferred credits to a larger university in the Southwest to complete her bachelor's degree and, at the time of this interview, was on track to graduate with her bachelor's the following May. Unlike at the community college, Alice has not enjoyed her time at this larger university and told me that she tries to look at it like a "horrible deployment." The school is in a large city, but it was the only one in proximity of where she was living that had the bachelor's degree that she was interested in receiving. She has found the veterans center there unhelpful with no one able to answer her questions. She also mentioned that she does not like dealing with some of the traditional-aged students due to their disrespectful attitudes in the classroom. Despite this, she reported that she was confident in connecting with faculty in a multitude of ways. She asked questions in class and would go to office hours when necessary. She also stated that she has found a lot of the information discussed in her required general education classes to be unhelpful and a waste of her time. She did not

understand why students had to come into the classroom and listen to lectures "when they could have just put it in a PowerPoint and let them do it at home." She has connected with one other veteran, and she stays in touch with this person.

**Reenlistment Question.** Although her time in the military exhausted her, Alice said she still misses the structure of the Army and the convenience of having most things taken care of for her. "I kind of wanted to stay because over there you don't have to come back home and worry about, oh gosh, I got these bills to pay or I have to worry about this person." She said it gave her a sense of belonging and that she knows "what I am capable of doing—I know I could make a difference." When I asked her if she would reenlist again, she responded with an emphatic yes. She said that she had some health issues when she left the service and that she wanted to give civilian life a shot. "I know I'm capable of doing really well outside of the Army and I want to give that a shot."

*Cat\*[4]*

**"I needed some money and didn't have a lot of job training, so I went into the military."**

A woman in her mid to late 50s, "Cat" moved a lot growing up due to her father's position with a chain supermarket. Her family finally settled down in the rural South. Her father was in the Air Force in the 1950s, and both her older sister and brother attempted to enlist but did not make it through basic training. Her decision to go into the Army was economic: "I needed some money and didn't have a lot of job training, so I went in the military." When she went to the recruiter, she told them she was interested in law enforcement. Because of her interest, she was assigned an MOS as a criminal investigator and was happy with that assignment.

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[4] Participants with an asterisk next to their name were not asked the recruitment question and did not respond to an email inquiry with this question as a follow-up to our interview.

**Military Experience.** Cat enlisted in the Army on two separate occasions. Her first enlistment was in her mid-twenties from 1980-1981 and ended due to a pregnancy. In between enlistments, she went to a local four-year college. She had a friend who worked at a nearby college who was able to get her a scholarship. She did not finish her degree but was able to get many of her general education requirements completed. For economic reasons, she reenlisted a second time four years later in 1985 and, because it was within a brief period, she did not have to repeat basic training. Her second enlistment was for seven years ending in 1992. She was not able to deploy because of health issues, and instead she became the Casualty Notification Officer for her unit. She had planned to stay in the military this second time and make the military her career. Instead, she left the military due to personal/family issues, but in hindsight, she wishes she had stayed in the service.

**Education.** When she went back to college to finish her degree, she did not take advantage of any veterans' support services except for the person who helped transfer her credits. She had instructors at her school who themselves had been in the military, and she thinks that that really helped her transition to higher education go smoothly.

*Cathy\**

***"When you live such a structured lifestyle for so many years where you're not to make a lot of decisions on your own. I have to figure out what I'm going to do for food. Um, I have to find a job. Just little things like that can really catch you off guard".***

*"Cathy"* was born and raised in the Northwestern part of the country, and both her parents had been in the military. Her father was a WWII Army veteran, and her mother was a Navy veteran. Her parents divorced when she was quite young, and when she was growing up, Cathy and her mom lived with her grandparents. For the most part, she enjoyed her childhood.

That changed when her mother went to work for the state, and they ended up moving around a lot for the job. Cathy remembers that she did not enjoy the instability and did not feel that she easily fit in with the cliquishness of high school.

**Enlistment.** Cathy left high school early without graduating. She tried Job Corps several times but ended up in "serious trouble"—trouble that she did not define, just described as enough to land her in front of a judge, who told her that she could either join the military or go to jail. Given those two choices, she decided on the military. She did have a significant military presence in her family, all the way back to the Spanish-American War, but she did not connect that with her decision to enlist.

**Military Experience**. Cathy had an extensive career with the military starting in 1981. She served 26 years with a mix of both National Guard and active duty. When asked about her experience with basic training, she commented that although her basic training was integrated (male and female), in the early 1980s there was still a serious backlash against females, and it was still a "man's-man's Army." Regardless, serving the military suited her. "I kind of fell in love with the military after that, kind of what I needed. I needed that. That structured life."

She had to go through basic training twice due to illness. Her first experience was positive. She had good drill instructors and said that the worst thing that happened was some name calling. Unfortunately, she got "pretty sick" during her basic training and had to be "recycled," meaning she had to repeat the training. Her second time through basic was not as pleasant. She had a drill sergeant who made it abundantly clear that women had no place in the military. He was relieved of his duties early in her training because of his behavior, but the drill sergeants who replaced him were no better. Cathy's platoon was forced to drill and run on days where the heat in the South reached a category that made doing so an "illegal order." In another

instance, a drill sergeant was unhappy that the recruits did not seem to be paying attention on a

day of inside instruction (due to the heat). "He took everybody out on the asphalt in the afternoon

and dropped them in the front leaning rest position, which is down on your toes, your hands on

the asphalt." Ordered to hold this push-up position on the hot pavement, soldiers ended up with

first-, second-, and third-degree burns on their hands. The drill sergeant was escorted off the

property, and Cathy "never saw him again."

During her military career, Cathy performed many different jobs. These jobs included:

combat medic, civilian nurse, diesel mechanic, communications, dump truck driver, and a

logistics and supply position. However, she spent most of her time as an ammunition specialist.

Cathy did a tour in Afghanistan, where she was a combat medic and mechanic and served as an

instructor in the Afghan women's Army. She was injured in Afghanistan and discharged in 2007.

She stated that her discharge was partly because her injury made continuing "not physically

viable," and partly because she was "tired being told I couldn't do things because I was female."

**Education.** Cathy described her transition out of the military as "difficult."  Because she

did not have an undergraduate degree, she was unemployed for quite some time. She felt that her

experience in the service qualified her for jobs, and she was angry when a possible employer said

that having a four-year degree would show "a level of commitment." In her mind, 26 years in the

National Guard was already a commitment. She realized, however, that the only way she was

going to be able to move forward and get a suitable job was to get a degree. She started in

community college and then moved on to a small, private liberal arts college close to her home.

Although she struggled with some of the traditional aged students due to their "insubordination"

in the classroom, she really loved the small liberal arts school that she attended. While at school,

she felt that she did a good job at "teaching" faculty and staff how to communicate with service

members. She described how she often would be asked by upper administration to talk to

program managers and faculty about how to work with service members.

Cathy described her overall experience as a student as excellent and faculty as extremely

supportive. She would meet with professors prior to the first day of class to talk to them about

who she was and about her history. They would discuss where she needed to sit in class (this

depended on the class set up) and any other related details. This approach worked well, and she

felt that faculty saw her more as a peer because of her age. She only remembered one negative

faculty experience. After hand surgery in her last year of university, she could not write and

needed to audio tape lectures. She had one faculty who did not allow this. The professor

suggested that she should drop the course and retake it later, but it was one of the last courses

that Cathy needed for graduation. She was able to take the course and graduate. She had not

taken summers off and pushed through to graduate as early as she could. After graduation, she

tried to immediately enroll into a master's program, but did not do well. She was burned out and

needed some time off. She took a few months off, and at the time of the interview was enrolled

in an online master's program in military psychology and was hoping to use this experience to

work with college administrators to build veterans programs at their institutions.

*Holly\**

*"I would say that I've always been pretty good at just getting a job done, like just shut your*

*mouth and do it, don't ask questions. Um, and I mean it's not like in basic training they were*

*asking us to do something like horribly ethically questionable."*

Soon after she was born, the family of "Holly," now 39, moved to the Southwest. With

two siblings who are 10 and 15 years older, she grew up feeling like an only child. She enlisted

in the National Guard when she was 17 and did so with her mother's signature. She had

graduated high school early in 1995, and by the middle of the summer she figured that it was "too late for college applications." She had a job at a grocery store and "a lot of time to kill." She was dating someone in the Army and had gotten to know his recruiter and felt she had a sense of what to expect.

**Military Experience.** Holly thought that Advanced Individual Training (AIT), the training for an assigned MOS, would be an effective way to advance her skill set. Her boyfriend at the time was going through the recruiting process; she got to know the recruiter and thought he seemed like "a pretty good guy" and started the enlistment process. Unfortunately, a second recruiter "swooped" in at the last minute, took over her file, and did not give her the time and attention that her first recruiter did. She reported that this recruiter gave her bad information about key details, including where she could go to fulfill her drill requirements. Receiving this inadequate information ultimately had a negative effect on her entire military experience. Holly did her basic training at Fort McLellan, Alabama. She recalled that the physical aspect of basic training had been challenging, but that she had always been particularly good at moving through tasks: "I would say that I've always been pretty good at just getting a job done, like just shut your mouth and do it, don't ask questions." She watched the men in her unit who struggled and questioned orders end up receiving "the brunt of the badness" in their basic training. She stated that although basic was physically challenging, it was not intellectually challenging. When she took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) job placement test, she qualified for whatever job she wanted. She picked the MOS of Chemical Operations Specialist, because she felt the job sounded interesting as well as more intellectual than physical.

Ultimately, Holly served in the National Guard for six years. She knew quickly that she would not reenlist when her time was up, and she would have left earlier if that had been

possible. She felt that because her recruiter did an inadequate job with her enlistment, she had

trouble finding a nearby drill location that did not cost her money for bus and hotel expenses.

Because her MOS was not needed, the National Guard had her go inactive reserve quickly. She

decided not to go on active duty because she knew that she wanted to go to college.

**Education.** When she did go to school, Holly went to a large Midwestern university and

enjoyed being "just a number" at her school. She stated that "she didn't want to be babied" and

did not feel the need to stand out. She did not take advantage of any veterans' services while at

school and did not use either the GI Bill or Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR & E)

through the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay for school. She said that these opportunities

and benefits "were never discussed" and she was not sure if she was eligible for them or not.

Overall, Holly stated that she does not feel that the military affected her life that much,

although it did influence the way she approaches tasks in her life. "It definitely gave me the

mentality of, like, do what it takes to get the job done. Like, I think in any aspect, any aspect of

life, be it the military, college, whatever. Like, there are hoops that you're going to have to jump

through."

*Jill*

**"It was almost like I woke up two weeks into it, going, what the heck did I just do?"**

A self-described "hippie," "Jill" grew up in New England with seven siblings in a

working-class family. Neither of her parents had completed high school. Her father served in

both World War II and the Korean War, and she had one brother who served in the Army and

one brother who served in the Navy. When Jill turned 18, she realized she had no job and wanted

to get out of her small New England town. She enlisted in the Army in 1974 and remembers

showing up at the recruiter's office in shorts, a tank top, and bare feet. She made it clear to me that she joined to get out of her town because she had actively protested the Vietnam War.

**Military Experience.** Jill did her basic training at Fort McClellan in Anniston, Alabama. She said that basic training was "bizarre," and she found it difficult to be told what to do. She pointed out that the "discipline was unbelievable." She spent a good part of her basic training questioning her decision. "It was almost like I woke up two weeks into it, going, what the heck did I just do?" Her biggest concern during basic training, however, was that they were going to make her shave her legs, and she was quite happy that they did not. After being assigned the MOS of combat medic, she was deployed to Germany for 18 months and worked in a maternity ward in an Army hospital. While in Germany, she got terribly ill with hepatitis and was sent home. When she recovered, she went back to Germany and finished her tour of duty. After spending two years in the Army, she decided not to reenlist. Jill enjoyed her time in Germany and said that it "did not feel like being in the Army."

**Education.** Once back in the States, she moved to California and used the GI Bill to go to school. She did not finish her degree at that time. She then got married, started a family, and moved back to New England. She was making a career in the social service field and, realizing that she could only get so far without a degree, she enrolled in a weekend adult bachelor's degree-completion program.

Although everyone in her classroom was a non-traditional student in terms of their age, she still experienced some challenges about the program and being in school in general. She stated that time management was a big one challenge because she was working, had a family, and was in school. She also mentioned that her program was largely populated by policemen. She thinks that at the time she was in school, the state was trying to incentivize policemen to

either obtain or complete their bachelor's degrees. She found that having that many policemen in her classes was difficult because they were so "weird." The policemen, she explained, had certain behaviors and beliefs that she felt made them difficult to deal with. She was quick to point out, however, that being in a classroom with non-traditional, older students was also one of the best aspects about completing her degree.

Although she used the GI Bill to pay for college immediately post discharge, the Montgomery GI Bill had a 10-year post discharge limit, and she was past the allotted 10 years when she finished her degree.  She did not believe that there was any s support at her school at that time. If support and services were available, she was not made aware of them.

Although she initially struggled with time management, she credits the organization skills that she developed in the Army to her success in balancing work, family, and school. Jill believes that obtaining her degree made her more employable. "It definitely made me employable because I have the initials to go behind the name—even though I had all the experience, I just didn't have the degree."

**Reenlistment Question**. She stated that she would "absolutely not" go back to the Army.

*Karen*

*"I mean, if anything, the military teaches you to be a leader but a humble leader not an arrogant…"*

 Adopted as an infant, "Karen" grew up in a New England suburb and had a brother who was also adopted from another family. Her father was a Korean War Navy veteran and an active alcoholic during her childhood. She felt that he definitely suffered from PTSD that had not been addressed properly after the war, and she called his drinking "self-medication."

Her decision to join the military grew out of her family situation. Her parents did not have the money for college, so when Army recruiters came to her high school, she spoke with them. She said that she was intrigued by the opportunity of traveling, which made the military attractive. She visited the recruiter after her parents had a particularly terrible fight and said, "Sign me up, get me out of here." Although she has a history of military service in her family with four male members of her father's family serving in either the Army or Navy, the decision to join the Army was made by a process of elimination. She knew she did not want to fly planes or be on a ship, and the Marines seemed "too gung-ho," so she went with the Army.

Karen recalled a pivotal event. Late one evening after she had completed the paperwork to leave for the Army, she was in the kitchen with her mom and her brother having what she described as a "very quiet" discussion about her decision. Her father woke up unexpectedly and came downstairs. When he asked what was going on, her mother responded, "I'll tell you about what you've done." Her father then promised that if she enlisted, he would quit drinking. Since that was all she ever wanted, she called the recruiter and asked to defer her enlistment. The Army agreed to do so, but in a few weeks her father started drinking again. She reconsidered her enlistment and decided to go into the National Guard instead of enlisting for full-time active duty. She initially served eight years in the National Guard before reenlisting for active duty.

**Military Experience.** Karen completed her basic training in South Carolina. The trip there was her first time on a plane, and it was a difficult, bumpy trip. Her basic training experience was exclusively female, which was typical at that time. Although the physical training was separated by gender, she does not feel that the training was different in any way. Both men and women went through the same training and had to do the same tasks.

Karen's military career took an interesting path with multiple enlistments that were all different. After discharging from the National Guard after eight years, she went back to her New England and got a job as a corrections officer in a women's correctional facility. She did not like the work and was just generally unhappy, so she went to see a recruiter to talk about reenlisting. Because she was former National Guard, she did not have to repeat basic training and could pick where she wanted to be stationed. Half-jokingly, she asked about Hawaii, which turned out to have an opening, so she was stationed in Hawaii for the next five years. While there, her MOS was communications, and she also got involved with the Criminal Investigation Division (CID). Karen explained that CID investigators were like plainclothes detectives who handled things like sexual assault, homicide, and major burglaries. She learned how to process cases, photograph and sketch crime scenes, and interview witnesses. Before she could complete the schooling that goes with the on-the-job training, though, she was deployed to Afghanistan.

During her one-year deployment in Afghanistan, she continued with her communications job, although she was also asked to help with searching female Afghan prisoners of war. Her communications job involved carrying a small piece of equipment—about the size of an iPhone—and transporting it between bases by helicopter. One day when Karen was busy with other work, she had one of the men who reported to her do this task. The helicopter he was on was shot down, and there were no survivors. She says that this incident, along with the ending of a long-term relationship, played a role in her wanting to leave the military. She explained she was both "sad" and suffering from "survivor's guilt" and thought it was time to move on. She pointed out that she still has survivor's guilt over this incident.

After leaving active duty, Karen began working as a police officer in Washington, D.C. While working the perimeter of a crime scene, she met a Navy officer who could tell that she

was former military. He asked her how long she had served. At that point she had served 13.5

years. Surprised that she had not finished her 20 years (which gives you a pension), he let her

know that he was recruiting Military Policemen for the Navy Reserve and that this enlistment

came with a $20,000 bonus. She signed up, and her father, as a Navy veteran, was elated. She

completed her 20 years in the Navy Reserves and will now receive pension checks when she is in

her late 50s. When I asked about her pension, she laughed and called it "bingo money." Overall

through her three separate enlistments, Karen served 23 years and deployed to Kuwait during

Desert Storm and Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.

      **Education.** Karen left the D.C. area to return to New England to be closer to family, and

she got a job in airport security. She started looking at ways to continue her education; while on

active duty, she had earned an associate degree in criminal justice. She enrolled at a small,

private liberal arts college, but soon realized she was using her benefits too quickly there. She

also found the college administration unhelpful when, due to a job offer, she had to drop a

course. She transferred to a larger state school, where she has had a much more positive

experience. The state school has an office dedicated to veterans' services, and military liaisons in

this office "work to make sure you are successful." She enjoys her courses but struggles with the

traditional aged students' attitudes and behaviors. She recalled how just a few days prior she had

witnessed students in her class cheating on a test, and she is uncomfortable with their lack of

engagement in discussion. She is looking forward to graduating and going on for her master's, a

program that she believes will have more students her age.

      At 48 years, Karen said she has "renewed" appreciation for education and sees how she

can apply it both "globally and locally." She attributes the military to giving her discipline and

integrity. She also reported that working with VR & E has been helpful because they track your

benefits, so you always know what your financial responsibilities are at any time. She considers beginning college during active duty a "high point" and is looking forward to starting her master's degree.

*Linda*

***"I'm in my early 30s, but my body feels really old."***

Currently 33 years old, "Linda" joined the Army at the age of 17. When asked why she joined, she said that there were two kids in high school who did basic training in the summer, "and when they came back, they just carried themselves differently." A week later, the events of 9/11 happened, which further propelled Linda to join. Because of her age, her parents had to sign her paperwork, but they had no objections. She described herself as "already self-reliant"; her home life included divorced parents and an alcoholic mother. She stated that she knew then that joining the military would change her life and confirmed that it did just that. She had always wanted to challenge herself and thought that this would be an effective way to do so. Her grandfather and uncle had both served in the military, but that family history did not really have any effect on her decision. She picked the Army for the challenge and because she "wasn't bad ass enough for the Marines."

**Military Experience.** Linda chose the MOS of truck driver because it had a $5,000 bonus, not knowing it was the most deployable and most dangerous job. No one in the recruiting office told her this fact. Linda did two tours of Iraq one for 15 months and a second for 12 months. Her initial enlistment was for six years of National Guard duty. She then completed two years of Inactive Ready Reserve (IRR). She was called up several times during her IRR and after the full eight years, she was "completely done."

**Education**. Although Linda took a few college courses while enlisted, she stated that she was "too young to appreciate them." She deployed mid-semester, which derailed her. After both of her deployments, she partied a lot and was suffering from undiagnosed PTSD, and, she said, it took her a long time to get back on track. When she went back to school, she started at a community college and then transferred to a medium-sized state university. While completing her undergraduate degree at the university, she interned in the Veterans Affairs Office, which she enjoyed. After graduation, she enrolled in a master's program. She had to quit her job because of her class schedule and sought help finding a new job through the state Veterans Office. They connected her with a company that helps veterans with job placement, which ended up hiring her. She considers working with veterans her career; she loves her job and plans to continue after she finishes the graduate degree program. She feels that she found her niche working with veterans. Although she used her post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for school, she did not really take advantage of any other veterans' services, and no one really knew she was a veteran. She said she did not go to school to be social, just to complete her degree. "I was older. I was just there to get the credit for me. If I didn't, I didn't do any of the, um, you know, socials or anything like that, I had a full-time job…"

**Reenlistment Question**. When I asked her if she would reenlist, she said that she would not while Trump is president, because "Who knows where my butt would end up." She also said, "I'm in my early 30s, but my body feels really old."

*Lucy*

***"He said I don't think I need college, and I said well this whole damn thing was about college for me, so good luck."***

One of four children born in the Midwest, "Lucy" grew up in what she described as a "suburban cracker box" neighborhood. When I asked what that meant, she stated, "Housing was cheap and went up fast." Both parents worked, which she said was unusual in the 1950s and 1960s. When discussing her family, Lucy described her father as a "functioning, illiterate alcoholic who had only completed an eighth-grade education." She had an older brother whom her parents treated differently than the three sisters due to what she labelled "older male privilege." Lucy stated that she and her sisters did not have the same opportunities or the same support in any areas of their life that he did. She believes that their childhood also would have been considered neglectful by today's standards, as she was always showing up to school in dirty clothes with little attention paid to cleanliness in general. She considered herself a "latchkey kid," except "no one locked their doors." She ended up leaving high school early and taking tests to pass her classes and graduate.

**Enlistment.** Lucy got married in 1972, and she and her husband tried to work on a failing family business. One day at home she was reading an article in the *Ladies Home Journal* about the military giving equal pay to women. She remembered, "I felt like we were going nowhere fast," which motivated her to research the possibilities of joining the military. In addition, having dealt with depression and hospitalization in high school also motivated her; she was afraid of being "a lost cause." Her brother had joined the Army, and Lucy had seen him thrive during his time in the service. With all of this in mind, she and her husband discussed it and decided to enlist as a couple. After some research, she learned that the Army was the only branch that was

giving equal pay to women, so that solidified their decision to join the Army. Even though she

had researched the possibilities of the military, she still called the enlistment an "impulse"; they

shipped out four days after signing their enlistment papers.

**Military Experience**. Lucy served in the Army from 1973-1976. She was assigned an

MOS that revolved around telecommunications. The work originally involved using teletype, but

communications technology was changing so quickly at that time that by the time she finished

basic training, that MOS did not exist. Her basic training was done in Fort McClellan, Alabama,

and the women were trained separately from the men. Lucy stated that her basic training was a

mix of "makeup classes, flag folding, marching and playing Army." Although she received no

weapons training, knowing how to clean and fire a weapon was part of the testing to complete

basic training. She reported that she did not feel like basic training had really gotten them ready

for anything. She stated that "[she] began basic training wondering if her mental health could

handle the stress, and at the end of basic, she graduated with honors." With her then-husband,

she deployed to Germany in 1975—during the Vietnam War—and was there for a year. She

made the interesting point that at that time, the idea of "women's liberation" was often used as a

form of intimidation. She remembers being assigned a task that she did not know how to do;

rather than being given instruction, she was just told "Well, you wanted women's liberation…"

Lucy had always planned to serve for three years. She and her husband wanted to remain

in Europe, but he could not get embassy duty, so they discharged. During the discharge process

her husband stated, "I don't think I need college." Lucy responded, "Well, this whole damn thing

was about college to me, so good luck." They got out of the service in the summer, moved back

to Iowa, and started school the following spring. It is unclear whether he graduated or not, and

they divorced during this time. Lucy said she was "forever grateful to have had a companion during her time in the service."

**Education.** She enjoyed school because she was older; the faculty treated her as an equal, not a student. She said that it was a bit isolating at times and that no one knew she was a veteran. In terms of education benefits, the VA made sure that everything was paid for. All the arrangements were made for her, and she is still unsure if her schooling was covered by the Montgomery GI Bill or if it was related to her 10% disability rating, which had been assigned to her during her discharge. She finished her bachelor's degree and achieved a master's degree in social work; through a transition program, she then trained to teach special education and received a special education teaching certificate. She has also been an adjunct professor for a social work program. She is currently working in the field of mental health as a therapist.

**Reenlistment Question.** Lucy was one of the oldest women in my sample, and she was ecstatic that someone was finally researching the experiences of women veterans and asking them to tell their stories. When I questioned whether she would ever reenlist in the Army, she answered with a quick "yes." When I asked her to explain that reaction, she stated that she "loved the learning experience, loved the opportunity to travel and do things culturally that you wouldn't get to do." She said that the military makes you much more politically aware — something she still carries with her.

*Lisa*

*[My school] was really good about doing wrap-around services once I told them I was a veteran. It was like the red carpet went down, like it was crazy."*

"Lisa" grew up in a rural community. Her parents divorced when she was a baby, and both remarried. She has two siblings and six step siblings. Despite the divorce, she reported that

her childhood was good, but she did not give any more detail. She had a brother in the Air Force and an uncle who served stateside during the Vietnam War.

**Enlistment.** Lisa's decision to join the military revolved around 9/11. She investigated both the Air Force and the Army but said "the Army recruiter was easier to get a hold of." She joined May 2002, three days after her high school graduation.  Lisa did her basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. She loved the structure and loved working out. "I had strength but not endurance," she said, chuckling. She explained that although she had trouble running, she could do sit-ups and pull-ups. She enjoyed basic training, she said, "even with the yelling." When asked about her experience in the military as a woman, she reported that she felt that some of the male drill sergeants were a little easier on some of the female soldiers, but that was the only time gender stood out to her.

**Military Experience.** Her MOS revolved around intelligence and helping people get extremely high security clearances. Had she deployed, her job would have been "the person with the map who sees the big picture and plans infiltration. Hmmm, my job, yeah, I screw up and everyone dies." Lisa enjoyed her time in the military and especially enjoyed the structure that was offered to her. She had planned to make the military her career but had an unexpected health issue that caused her to be medically discharged. She stated that this was done "against her will." Her medical issue was related to her blood sugar, which caused her to faint if she had not had enough to eat. The Army thought that this was too much of a liability and discharged her.

**Education**. Lisa had gotten married while in the Army, and after she was discharged, she went with her husband when he deployed to Germany. There, she transitioned into getting her education as a military spouse. She was able to take courses while on base through a large American university. She and her husband divorced, and she continued to go to school on and off

until she moved to New England, where she finished her bachelor's degree at a state school. She used a combination of her GI Bill and school loans to cover tuition.

Lisa stated that she really enjoyed her bachelor's experience. There were excellent veterans' services at the state school, and she felt that they were instrumental to her finishing her degree. She met some veterans on campus and said that "we all stuck together because we were the older people." She recounted a negative experience with traditional age students that was particularly difficult. While sitting in the cafeteria, she overheard a group of traditional students talking about some of the "losers" with whom they graduated who went into the military. Lisa added that this was when she "realized I might have an anger problem." She did not engage with the students; she packed up her things and left the cafeteria.

On a more positive note, the person running the veteran's services asked her to serve as the women veterans' liaison, which she was happy to do. The veteran's services largely followed veterans' academic performance to make sure they were keeping up their grades and made referrals based on the veterans' needs. Working with women veterans, Lisa specifically made referrals to services, including day care, information about medical benefits, GI bill benefits, and academic advising. Working with the veteran's services at the university level got her interested in working with veterans in the civilian world. She has since served as a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) for her geographic area. Lisa was accepted into graduate school and plans to study macro social work. She would like to work at the VA, "but more in the background," as being on the front line as a Veterans Service Officer has triggered some PTSD issues for her, and she would like to avoid that in the future if possible.

**Reenlistment Question.** When asked if she would go back, she took a deep breath and said "ummmm some messed-up things happened to me when I was in the Army. So, part of me wants to say no, but the main part of me wants to say yes."

*Michelle*

***"I mean, it's not just for college, it's for everything, you know. Be there. Be there on time. Be prepared to do the best you can, you know, give 110% and you know, and as a woman you're expected to give 210% because then you'll be considered 50% as good as everyone else."***

The oldest of three, "Michelle" grew up with her two brothers in the Northeast part of the country. She described her family and neighborhood, respectively, as a "blue-collar, lower-middle class, Catholic family in a working-class neighborhood." Both her parents worked outside of the home. Her mother had graduated high school, but her father only finished tenth grade and later got his GED. They did a lot of volunteer service for the church near their home. She described herself as a tomboy who grew up watching war movies and shows like MASH on television, while also "playing war" with the kids in her neighborhood. Her father was drafted at the end of the Korean War. She grew up during the Vietnam War, but was young enough that she did not really understand what was happening, so its impact was minimal on her early childhood.

**Enlistment.** She admits she had the "Hollywood version" of the military when she decided to join and said, "I have no idea what the hell I was thinking." In 1975, she attempted to enlist in The National Guard at 17, but she needed a parent's signature, and both parents refused. The recruiter called and told her she did not need a parental signature to be active duty at 18 years. That and the fact that her fiancé had decided to go active duty ultimately made her enlist as active duty in the Army. She processed in early August and shipped out after she turned 18 later in August.

**Military Experience**. Michelle described herself as "clueless" and "sheltered" prior to joining the Army. Growing up in a white part of the country the Army was her first exposure to women who came from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. She said that the news reported on issues that revolved around race, like race riots, and she could see them on television. Because they had not affected her directly, though, she had not paid much attention. She pointed out, however, that when she enlisted in the military, it did not matter what race or gender you were; "We were all useless in the military's eyes."

Michelle's enlistment occurred during the initial stages of male/female integration in basic training, and other areas of the military and the upper male echelons of the military did not know how to handle this integration. Her basic training was with an all-female unit at Fort Rucker, Georgia, but unlike women who had enlisted earlier in the 1970's, who had different requirements, her unit received technical firearms training on the M16 because, like then men, they had to qualify at the range.

After basic training, she tried to apply for any MOS that was not administrative in nature, such as supply, equipment, or infantry. She was not interested in the stereotypical jobs that usually were assigned to women. Most of these jobs just "magically" were filled or, like infantry, were not available to women. She tried to transfer out of her unit three times before the commander told her it "wouldn't look right." When Michelle pressed him, he explained that he was worried what it would look like to have a woman who wanted to go into combat. She desperately wanted to deploy as she "wanted to go fight a war," but she never deployed. Despite her best attempts, she ended up with an administrative MOS assignment.

Michelle did not enlist thinking that the military would become a career path, but when it was time for her first reenlistment, she realized that this was "a pretty good gig." She stayed in

the military until 1992. At that time when she went to reenlist Congress had started to refuse

reenlistments. At that point Congress realized they had an inordinate number of soldiers who

would be retiring after 20 years of service. This was problematic as these soldiers would receive

50% of their pay as retirees for the rest of their life. This was not an expense that Congress was

willing to take on, so they began to officially refuse enlistments as an overall military cost-saving

measure. Michelle was disappointed but as she was describing this scenario, she shook her head

and said, "They still didn't know what to do with women."

    **Education.** Michelle had started taking classes while enlisted, and when she left the

Army in 1992, she almost had earned an associate degree worth of credits. She knew she had to

finish college to get a decent job, because she did not expect that her military experience would

transfer into the workforce. She went back to community college and then to a state school to

finish her bachelor's degree. The GI Bill and housing stipend covered all the expenses of

completing her degree. She did not take advantage of any veteran's services at school and was

not sure that any were offered. Her mother did not understand why she was going to school

because she "already had a husband," but Michelle was motivated to finish her degree to make

herself more valuable on the job market.

    Michelle reported that her overall experience at the state school was positive. She

engaged the faculty in a lot of conversation and asked a lot of questions. She was there to get the

degree and not take part in campus life. She went to class, took care of her child, and took care of

her household. She felt, however, that it was the military that gave her the tools to be successful;

"I mean, it's not just for college, it's for everything, you know. Be there. Be there on time. Be

prepared to do the best you can, you know, give 110% and you know, and as a woman you're

expected to give 210% because then you'll be considered 50% as good as everyone else."

**Reenlistment Question.** After she finished school, Michelle went into civil service and served as a parole office. She felt that this work was just an extension of the "good ol' boys" network that she experienced in the military, but that was okay because she knew how to navigate and be successful in that world. She did not see the need for anything higher than a bachelor's degree and continues to work in civil service. When asked if she would reenlist in the Army, she answered "Oh hell yes, in a heartbeat."

*Terra\**

***"And if we were getting in trouble, especially towards the end it was probably a female drill sergeant that we're getting in trouble with verses the males"***

A 35-year-old woman currently living in the Southwest, "Terra" recalls that her father enlisted in the military right before her first birthday. As a result, she grew up a military dependent and moved around the country, "from coast to coast," as well as overseas with her family. Moving around as much as she did kept Terra and her sister close, but it was difficult for her mother who, at the time, had an undiagnosed mental health issue. This family situation was compounded by the fact that her father could have lost his security clearance if anyone knew about her mother's mental health struggles. Terra had completed a bachelor's degree post high school but had not done as well as she could have: "I was working full time and still trying to have a social life. There's just not enough hours in the day for all that." After she earned her first bachelor's degree, she went on to work in a day care. Although she found it a great fit—she really liked what she called the "helping professions"—the pay was inadequate. She stated that finances and building her skills up for employment were her two reasons for enlisting.

**Enlistment.** Terra's family has an extensive military history that goes all the way back to the Texas Rangers and is spread through multiple branches. Prior to enlisting, Terra had been

laid off from a job at a day care; struggling financially, she started to investigate enlisting in the military. She spoke to a representative from all the branches during the recruitment phase and went with the Army because they offered her an immediate space. Her MOS was combat medic; she purposely picked something that gave her civilian skills or what she called "real world skills." She was not looking to make the military into a career, but rather thought of it as a way to build skills and be more employable when she was discharged.

**Military Experience.** Terra completed basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. She reported that basic training included some of the hardest times she had in the military. She felt that being about 10 years older than most people made the training harder for her physically. She had also gotten married the month before, and she missed her husband. When asked about her overall experience in basic training in relation to gender, she said that she noticed the women had a much harder time working together and that they often were punished for that. She also noticed that the female drill sergeants were less flexible than the male drill sergeants on the platoon.

Terra had originally enlisted for four years, but she was diagnosed with a vascular disorder during her enlistment. She received poor medical treatment while serving, which led to a partial foot amputation. Because of this amputation, she was not deployed and was eventually medically discharged. Not deploying was a huge disappointment for Terra. She felt that she was letting down the unit she had trained with by not being deployed with them, and she felt a lot of guilt. Two soldiers were killed on that deployment, and she stated, "Although I know not deploying was the absolute right call, I still felt a sense of responsibility over that loss." Terra's father was instrumental in supporting Terra through her discharge and transition to civilian life.

He worked closely with Terra to make sure she understood all her benefits, and she felt that as a result, it "wasn't as bumpy as it could have been."

**Education.** After leaving the military, she enrolled in a second bachelor's degree in social work. At the time of the interview, she hoped to graduate in May 2019 and continue to the Master's in Social Work (MSW) program at her school. She is using benefits through VR & E to pay for school and said her VR & E counselor was instrumental in making sure she had registered for school before her transition out of the military was complete. VR & E helped with funding and paperwork and made sure that she stayed on track and did not run into any barriers. In terms of her current school's support system, she knows that there is a veteran's center as well as several veterans' groups on campus, but she really has not had time to interact with any of them. She was waiting to hear about her admittance into the MSW program.

*Terri*

***"Don't assume because I'm 37 years old I'm an idiot because I'm not, you know not everyone is ready for college right out of high school."***

Currently in her late thirties, "Terri" grew up in a small town in Virginia. Her parents both served in the military, with her father serving in the Air Force and her mother in the Army reserves. She has one sibling, a younger brother who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. She had what she described as a "normal" childhood with both children being treated equally. She said her brother was always just her "annoying little brother."

Terri did one semester of community college but said she did not have the "heart" for it, so she quit and went to work. After leaving community college, she said she always had at least two jobs at the same time to try to make ends meet, "It was such a struggle. It sucked." Having been an athlete in high school, she liked to stay active by running the track at the high school.

One day while doing this, she was approached by a recruiter who was impressed with her speed. She thought she might be able to get some free tuition money if she joined, so she started the process. In addition to tuition, she said that the reason she joined was friends, family, and 9/11. She signed her recruitment paperwork right after 9/11 in 2001 but did not officially enter the military until 2003. She tested well on the Arms Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test and chose the MOS of an IT technician because those positions were in high demand and shipping quicker than any other position. The skills she learned in her MOS have successfully transferred into a civilian position.

**Military Experience**. She described herself as "naïve" and "sheltered" before joining the military and stated that she had not been exposed to a lot of diversity before her enlistment. When asked about basic training, she said she thought it was fun. She played team sports in high school and thought basic training was set up like a team sport. "It was a really fun experience because it teaches you how to team-build, and you get to meet new people. You're all you, you, you...it's not you, you are working as a team."

During 14 years in the Army, Terri was deployed eight times, including one 30-day exercise that turned into a nine-month deployment. Overall, she was deployed for nine years and 11 months (roughly 71% of her time). Her deployments happened so often that she had to sign waivers because she was not being given the appropriate rest time in between. She mentioned that she felt that she got guilted into some deployments because she was single and had no kids. People would often get out of deployments due to family obligations, and it made her angry: "Why did you join?" She went on to say, "A lot of single soldiers were getting abused." She felt that single soldiers were getting deployed more than married soldiers, and that felt unfair to her.

Terri followed orders well and as a result, after four years, she was promoted to Staff

Sergeant. She reported that a fast promotion like that only happens if you have a spotless record.

The fact that she was a bit older than other recruits may have also played a role, as her superiors

would speak directly with her and explain what she needed to do to be promoted. She followed

the path they laid out and as a result was successful. When asked about the leaders she had while

serving, she said that some took care of their people and at other times she had "toxic"

leadership. She wanted to serve her 20 years so that she could receive her pension, but she had an

accident during one deployment and her knee was injured. She received poor medical care, and

the injury made it impossible to continue. Army doctors told her repeatedly that there was

nothing wrong with her knee, until finally someone suggested that she leave the military and get

care from a civilian doctor. She followed this advice, and one small surgery quickly fixed her

knee.

**Education.** Terri completed her first bachelor's degree while in the service and then

applied and was accepted to law school. She initially decided to defer enrollment into law

school, but a year later she decided not to go. "I didn't feel like I was going to do well in the

civilian sector after having this routine for so long, so I didn't do it." After her discharge, she

realized she needed a bachelor's degree in IT to be able to be hired in the industry, so she

enrolled in a well-known, fully online and accredited program. She mentioned wanting to make

sure the school had the correct accreditation, because she did not want to have a piece of paper

that was from "Hogwarts." She also thought that because a lot of training in the military occurs

online, an online program would not be that difficult. The program she enrolled in has military

liaisons that are scaffolded into the entire application, orientation, and veteran student

experience. The liaisons ultimately act as advisors on all school related things, but also help with

tasks such as getting appointments at the VA. There had been education advisors on base, but they had given Terri inaccurate advice on how to access her GI Bill while completing her first bachelor's degree. As a result, she ended up taking a small federal loan. The liaisons at her institution gave her more accurate advice on how to access her GI Bill, as well as scholarships and Pell grants. Accessing her benefits has allowed her to pay for school and books while also paying off the federal loan well before it was due.

Returning to school posed some additional challenges. In the same accident during deployment in which she injured her knee, she sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). With the TBI comes some memory loss and retention issues with reading, which can make school a bit harder, especially when it comes to tests. However, Terri described having no problem reaching out to professors and working out the details to help her be successful. "If you have any questions, you know, you can email the professors at any time. They, even, some of them even give out their number, especially in the classes like my database class, my coding class, my web class, they're like, call me like I'll step into your computer, will figure this out. I don't think I've ever had a bad professor." The organizational skills that she developed in the military have also helped her to stay on track. She usually tries to complete her work early, because "if you aren't early you are late."

The university where Terri is enrolled offers not only the one-on-one liaison services mentioned earlier, but also Internet discussion boards and forums that are open specifically to veterans. These resources have allowed Terri to discuss and give advice across all branches about the transition out of the military and into higher education. At the time of the interview, she hoped to graduate in summer of 2019 and did not plan to go on for her master's. Instead, she

planned to explore several types of certifications that most people in her field continue to add and that employers typically want to see.

   **Reenlistment Question.** When asked, Terri did not hesitate to say she would go back into the Army. "Oh, I think it's because ahhhhh the structured life, once you get used to it. It's just, you know, you know what's going to happen no matter if you're on deployment or if you're in the states…" She also liked being around people who "understand." She currently works for the military as a civilian, and the years at this job count towards her military retirement.

*Vanessa*

***"I don't argue with people in authority. I do what I'm supposed to do."***

   **"**Vanessa" was born and spent most of her childhood on the West Coast in Southern California. Her parents divorced when she was a baby. She has six siblings, but they are not close. While explaining this she simply said, "not everyone communicates well." Vanessa mentioned her shyness several times throughout the interview and mentioned that she joined ROTC in high school hoping that it might help with her shyness. She knew people who had joined the military and gone to Germany, and she thought she would like to do that as well. She also thought the military would be an effective way to get out of the house. When asked about a military history in her family, Vanessa thought that her father and grandfather may have served a few years, but she was unclear on the details of what branch they were in and how long they served. She also reported that her brother served a few years in the Air Force, but she did not think that that played an influential role in her decision. She did say that now she considers the military a "family business," because her husband and three children are all involved in some way, including a son in the National Guard.

**Military Experience.** When she was 17, Vanessa went to the recruiter's office with her parents to join the Army. Her parents signed the paperwork, and her recruiter then attended Vanessa's high school graduation. She later had her eighteenth birthday while in basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Vanessa did her basic training with all women. She stated, "Basic was hard, fun. I kept pretty quiet." Her MOS was personnel management (administrative). She wishes now that she had picked an area with more transferable skills that worked for her, such as skills in the medical field. In 1991, she deployed during Operation Desert Storm for a three-month period, but she was sent back to the States because there was not enough administrative work to do. She served for six years and planned to stay longer, but she got pregnant with her third child. Because she was about to deploy to her next duty station in Korea, she made the decision to be discharged. She previously had had to leave an infant for an earlier deployment, which she describes as "the hardest thing I have ever done." Nonetheless, she enjoyed her time in the military, saying, "it was a good experience; I loved the military."

**Education**. Vanessa took classes throughout her time in the military, which the Army, she said, made both "easy and convenient." When she was discharged, she enrolled at a community college. When I asked her about veteran support, she said that she knew that the college had a veteran's center because they advertised it, but that she had never gone to the center or taken advantage of any services. She is currently still in school and is waiting to hear from a state school regarding transfer credits. She is concerned that some of her credits from coursework done in the military might be too old. When I asked Vanessa about skills from the military that may have helped her in higher education, she said, "I don't argue with people in authority. I do what I'm supposed to do." She felt that this attitude, along with organizational skills, have helped in her higher education. She also stated that she is trying harder in college

because "I have a focus now." Her benefits have run out, and her biggest barrier to finishing her degree has been financial.

**Reenlistment Question.** When asked if she would reenlist, Vanessa said that she had almost joined the National Guard when her son joined. She retook the ASVAB and did well. Unfortunately, the recruiter was in an accident and never followed up with her.

**Summary**

This chapter provides in-depth profiles of each of the 13 women Army veterans who were interviewed for this study. The profiles have been divided into four distinct categories that include familial history, enlistment, military experience, and education. Additionally, nine of the 13 women were asked a question about reenlistment. Initially, this was a follow-up question in the interview of the fourth participant, which then became a standard question for the rest of the participants. The first three interviewees did not respond to email inquiries posing this additional question. The details provided by these interviews provide context about each women's familial history, enlistment, discharge, and education experiences.

This study asked the following research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?

The data produced from the interviews were analyzed using qualitative methods described previously to explore and answer the overall research questions. Themes that emerged from the data are addressed in the following chapters.

## Chapter 5: Findings

This study uses a phenomenological methodology to explore the experience of female Army veterans who have enrolled in an undergraduate program post military separation. This research was completed by interviewing 13 female Army veterans using semi-structured questions that allowed each participant to retrospectively discuss their time in the military; the transition to civilian life; and their transition to and experience in higher education. The area of female veterans in higher education continues to be under-researched, and I believe that further examination of this topic may lead to a better understanding of the nuances of the female veteran experience post military discharge. More specifically, I believe that having a broader and more in-depth understanding of this experience will provide higher education administrators, faculty, and advisors with knowledge that could support the implementation of systems and programs that will create structure and support for female veterans in higher education.

This chapter presents the key themes and the correlating subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data from the 13 semi-structured interviews. These findings attempt to address the two overarching research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?

The research questions are addressed, and participant quotes are woven throughout the narrative to support the themes and subthemes that emerged through field notes, reflective memos, and multiple levels of coding all outlined in chapter three.

**Phenomenological Approach**

For the purposes of this study, each participant was interviewed twice with the interviews scheduled at least two weeks apart to allow time for participant reflection (Seidman, 2013). The first interview explored such areas as the decision to enlist in the Army, participants' experiences in basic training, MOS designation, reason for discharge, and the decision to begin or return to an undergraduate degree, or, in the case of two participants, begin a second undergraduate degree. The second interview explored the transition from the military into higher education as well as the transition to civilian life. The participants were asked to reflect on their time in the military and experience in higher education and to identify any connections that they might be able to make between the experiences.

The interviews produced an extensive amount of data that were analyzed using the five - step phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994). These steps consist of: *epoche, phenomenological reduction, clustering for meaning, imagination variation (synthesis) and synthesis of texture and structure* (see pp. 66-68). Together, they provide a pathway for breaking down data to its core essence to understand "the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people" (Patton, 2015, p 573). Field notes were taken during the interviews to capture impressions and to explore emotions and bias described in the epoche and phenomenological reduction stages. Reflective memos were used to explore data and to begin to sort data into purposeful clusters (Patton, 2015). Data were then horizontalized, meaning all data were given the same weight while being analyzed. Data were then clustered together, and delimitation was used to remove repetitious data that were not pertinent to the research questions. Coding continued, and as themes and subthemes began to

emerge through multiple levels of coding, they were examined for both structure and essence (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Through the multiple levels of coding, two things happened.  First, several meaningful common elements materialized (see figure 2). It became clear that the elements of *identity*, *culture,* and *voic*e were important to the overall understanding of the participant's experiences. By using the ecological model as a framework as well as situating information in these three common elements, I found that three main themes emerged: (1) Military Culture, (2) Navigating Higher Education, and (3) Transition and The Transition Experience. Each of these themes represented key dimensions of the female veterans' experiences in higher education. These themes each produced two to three subthemes that further characterized the essence of the female veterans' experiences in higher education. Both the themes and subthemes are discussed in this chapter.

*Figure 2*

*Themes & Common Elements*



**The Role of The Ecological Model, Identity, Culture, Voice**

Student veterans are often examined through the lens of transition theory. Schlossberg's (1981) transition model is most commonly used as an overlay to the veteran transition

experience. This model was initially created for adults who were making changes in their career. It is a broad model that examines the context of transitions as well as anticipated and unanticipated events as a way to determine what actions should be taken during the process. The broadness of the model has not made it a natural fit to examine veteran transition into higher education (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Bridges' (1980) transition theory was also considered as a possible framework for veterans' transition into higher education. His model of the 4D's relies heavily on reflection and internal realignment as critical parts of the transition experience, making it a better model for the transition out of something rather than the transition into a situation. Instead, the data analysis of this study suggests that student veterans are better served if we look at the areas of identity and culture as they relate to voice in feminist methodology (Belenky et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Giving female student veterans the opportunity to explore how they use their voices to create their personal narrative while also examining the role that voice may have had in their overall experiences provides an opportunity for a richer reconstruction of their personal narrative as well as a way to highlight the female student experience (Belenky, et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982, McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2017; Thompson, Rickett & Katy, 2018). The analysis also suggests that looking at the role of the different systems present in a student veteran's life during the transition experience will offer greater insight into the overall experience. Made up of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, and sitting in a particular place in time called the chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1974; 1979) offers the opportunity to examine the veteran student experience from multiple perspectives, which in turn offers multiple opportunity for interventions.

### *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model*

Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological model encourages us to look at the context that surrounds a person during development. Within this context we can examine the multiple ways that identity, voice, and culture are represented in each of the ecosystems in the participants' lives. Bronfenbrenner (1981) contends that "in order to understand human development, you must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs" (p. 37). Made up of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, and sitting in a particular place in time called the chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner's model examines the interactions between these various systems in a veteran's life. When examining the student veteran's experience in higher education, we are seeing the collision of two ecosystems as well as the collision of identities that existed within these ecosystems. Both ecosystems are built on culture, values, and norms that, in all likelihood, are vastly different from each other.

The military is based on the need to integrate groups of people into a demanding culture to work together in order to achieve goals that are set by a hierarchical command structure. Higher education is far looser and leaves more up to the students by asking them to work alone to work out their own goals and create a plan to achieve them. A student may receive help along the way in the form of advising or conversations with faculty, but overall higher education is built on the more individualistic nature of U.S society. Whereas basic training can be seen as the first step of the indoctrination into military culture, higher education does not have a similar all-encompassing event that all students attend. Colleges may provide an orientation for new students, but this is more likely to be aimed at traditional undergraduates who are living on campus. This lack of structure is even truer of non-traditional students who are more likely to be older, commuter students with full lives outside of the classroom. Vacchi & Berger (2014)

suggest that *some* veterans may attempt to recreate the structure of the military or the feel of military culture by using veterans' services that are available or even by taking advantage of faculty office hours to understand exactly what is expected of them.

Using the ecological model as a conceptual framework allows us to compare context at every level of the participants' experiences to see where intervention may be helpful. While student identity theory gives a narrower view of student development and is often directed at traditional age students, applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory conceptualizes student veterans as making a transition from one ecological system to the other. Examining this experience from a wider and more complete perspective gives us the opportunity to take such factors as identity (Josselson, 1987; Suter et al. 2006), culture (Berger 8 Vacchi, 2014), and voice (Belenky et al.; Gilligan, 1982) into account as we consider the experience as a whole

### Identity & Culture

Moving from the military to higher education is most certainly a significant transition, but it is also a substantial culture and identity shift. This shift has been explored in some of the literature, but it deserves a deeper look (Suter, et al., 2006). Josselson (1987) states that "identity is the interface between the individual and the world" (p. 8). Identity is formed gradually and sometimes unintentionally and becomes a way that we situate ourselves into various communities (Josselson, 1987).  Identity is not a fixed phenomenon, but instead it is altered and reshaped through both time and experience (Suter, et al., 2006). Demers (2013) stated that "Identity is composed of multiple dimensions and is socially, historically, politically and culturally constructed within community" (p. 493). The military focuses intently on identity— when recruits enter the military, actions are centered around stripping them of their civilian identity, which operates as a single entity or an "I." This civilian identity is detrimental to the

development of the soldier's military identity, which operates as a "we." This new identity is

constructed in response to being inundated by experiences that constitute military culture.

Military training is entrenched in the notion that centering the group experience over the

individual experience creates a group mentality that takes precedence over individual wants,

needs, and decisions (Tick, 2005). The group becomes a soldier's identity and provides them

with a sense of belonging.

As previously mentioned, military culture has recruits engage in activities and behavior

that are far outside of the norms of civilian behavior (Arminio, Grobosky & Lang, 2015). These

activities begin to shift the recruit's worldview as they start to form the military identity and

assimilate into military culture. Military culture provides soldiers with the opportunities to obtain

the skills that many of the student participants identified as making them a successful student.

These skills—such as being organized, being punctual, being tasked focused, and getting the job

done—were all skills that the study participants associated with their success as students.

The move into higher education is often a culture shock for student veterans (Vacchi &

Berger, 2014).  To a group of people who are more used to a hierarchical, top-down

management, higher education can seem disorganized or like "organized chaos" (Cohen, March

& Olsen, 1972 as cited in Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 123). This apparent disorganization,

combined with the sudden identity shift, can leave student veterans feeling isolated due to a

general lack of cultural competence about the military in higher education (Dillard & Helen-Yu,

2018). Some study participants, such as Cathy, saw this lack of cultural awareness as an

opportunity to work with faculty and administrators to develop the skills needed to work with

this population so that future student veterans would not feel the same way. Others purposely

sought out institutions with a robust military presence in admissions and advising. Those

institutions that had large veterans' centers staffed by former military personnel provided a structure that mimicked military culture and a level of comfort for students who were navigating the identities of soldier and student.

*Voice*

Feminist research is built on examining women's experience and listening to their voices separately from their male counterparts. Researchers such as Baker-Miller (1986), Gilligan (1982) and Belenky et al. (1986) focused their research on women when they realized that women were not being represented in the theory development in their respective fields. The voice in feminist research seeks to center the female experience in a way that does not silence others, but rather highlights the voices that are often "obscured in the structure of power and privilege" (Thompson, Rickett & Day, 2008, p. 94). The overall narrative of the military has historically been focused on the male experience, and we have seen the same general trend in the literature on the veteran experience in higher education. One of the goals of this study was to provide a space for women to tell their stories and document their experiences of their time in the military and higher education.

"I'm just so glad someone is finally asking about my experience," Lucy, a Vietnam era participant, exclaimed at the beginning of the first interview. Several other participants made similar comments. The study participants had stories to tell and opinions to give. They wanted to be heard, and this study provides them that opportunity. Although the voice-centered relational method was not a part of the methodology, it became clear while analyzing the data from this study that there were three distinct speaking voices that these women used while discussing their experiences (Gilligan et al., 2003). It felt important to recognize this variation and highlight it as an opportunity for future research.

The three separate speaking voices were identified as participants moved through the

topics in the interviews. Some women spoke in all three of the voices at different times

throughout the interview, while others may have only used one or two. These voices often

intersected with the amount of confidence the participant seemed to be embodying at the time of

the interview or how confident they felt about answering particular questions. As a result, no one

participant could be labeled with just one voice for their whole interview. The three voices that

were identified were:

- *Military Voice:* This voice was clear, powerful, organized and to the point. Participants

  used this voice as they described strongly advocating for themselves in various situations

  both in the context of higher education as well as other areas of their lives.  This use of

  this voice did not correlate to how long the women had served in the military. The

  participants who used this voice the majority of the time seemed to have a clear career

  path and place a high value on education.  They also had a higher chance of wanting to

  return to the military. The transition or aspects of the transition out of the military was

  most likely difficulty for these women. Cathy, Karen, Lucy, Michelle and Terri all

  showed aspects of the military voice in their interviews.

- *MilCiv Voice*: This voice sounded clear but more conversational than the military voice.

  Participants using this voice appeared to be more relaxed. With this voice, I could hear

  the military identity and the student/civilian identity coexisting. The women who used the

  MilCiv voice were using in their current life skills obtained in the military, and while

  they might have referred to their military identity occasionally, they did not center it in all

  conversations. They are unsure about returning to the military but may consider doing so

  if the opportunity arises.  They may have a semi-clear/clear career path and place a high

value on education. Their transition experience was mixed, but they have been able to

move successfully through the hard parts, and their military and civilian identities now

mostly peacefully co-exist. Linda, Lisa, Terra, Alice, Cat and Vanessa all showed aspects

of the MilCiv voice in their interviews.

- *Civilian Voice:* This voice was conversational, casual, and disconnected from the

  military experience. Participants who used this voice did not sound like they had served

  in the military at all**.** Military culture had minimal observable effect on them post military

  service. They did not refer to or report connecting with any sort of military identity.

  These women seemed to consider their military service unimportant in their overall

  identity development and did not have obvious problems transitioning. They may have

  had a semi-clear to unknown career path after higher education. Education was an

  historical artifact of their life. Jill and Holly showed the most amount of civilian voice in

  their interviews.

Distinguishing these multiple speaking voices allowed me to add another layer of detail to the

participants' identity and recognize how their voices changed depending on the situation they

were recalling.

**Research Question 1**

*What is the lived experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate*

*programs?* Through the process of semi-structured interviews, the study participants provided

rich contextual descriptions of their experiences in higher education. The majority of the

participants reported having a generally positive experience, with most of the women citing skills

obtained in the military as a part of this success. The participants believed that these skills, such

as the ability to be organized, task oriented, and timely, and the ability to follow specific and

sometimes complex directions bolstered their ability to be successful in the classroom. These skills appeared to be especially important to the participants who had no or minimal college experience before enlistment and those who did not take any classes during their enlistment. Blaau-Harra's (2016) assertion that veteran students are mission driven was evident as participants repeatedly used phrases like "getting through" and "getting it done."

### *Relationship Building*

Building relationships with faculty was also a significant piece of the participants' experience. The women in the study predominantly reported feeling supported by faculty, with some participants like Cathy going out of their way to connect with faculty prior to classes and others like Mary, who specifically engaged faculty in discussion in the classroom. Other participants such as Alice, Cat, and Lucy all spoke of connecting with faculty in various ways such as utilizing office hours, reaching out by email, or setting up appointments outside of office hours—thereby using their relationship with their faculty to ensure their success in the classroom. Participants such as Karen, Terra & Lisa attended schools where there were structured military services available. These women used those services as well as connecting with their faculty.

**Peer Relationships**. Creating peer relationships with other veterans did not appear to be a high priority for study participants. Alice spoke about meeting veterans whom she was still friendly with, and Cat mentioned being in a study group with several veterans, but others did not seem to prioritize this kind of social interaction or attempt to create relationships for support. Vacchi & Berger (2014) suggest that peer connection is a common theme among student veterans, but I would argue that this more likely to be a common theme among male veterans, as women veterans are harder to identify, often do not self-identify, and do not always want people

to know they are veterans for various reasons (Sanders, 2012). It was clear from the interviews that as non-traditional students, the typical social aspect of higher education of parties, social clubs, and sports events was not something that played an obvious role in the study participants' higher education experience.

**Research Question 2**

*What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?* Veterans' transitions to higher education is usually looked at through the lens of the transition itself. Using transition theory such as Schlossberg's 4S's or Bridges 4 D's, an attempt is often made to connect or match the veterans' transition experiences to one or more of the stages laid out in these theories. Although women spoke about the transition, it became apparent that identity and culture played a larger role than anticipated. This role is examined further in the discussion section of chapter six.

When asked about the barriers that they experienced, many of the participants first discussed issues that they had during the transition. Several participants expressed an uneasiness that came with not being ready, or not feeling adequately equipped to begin life outside of the military community. Both Alice and Linda described feeling rushed through the process, while Cathy would have liked to have had a clearer idea of how hard it was going to be. So although these events did not happen in higher education, they underscore how the military could provide a stronger and clearer transition experience out of the military.

Only one participant discussed a higher education barrier that stopped their progression in their degree plan. Lisa described that because she was activated on Inactive Ready Reserve, while she was enrolled in classes she was deployed twice. Both of these deployments interrupted her course progression, she stated. "It took about a year after each deployment to like,

decompress and figure out where to go from there." However, these types of events were not seen as barriers to their higher education experiences but rather issues that happened as part of the overall military experience.

More common issues or concerns reported by participants did not stop the progression of their higher education. For instance, Alice mentioned having to take classes that felt repetitive, entry level, or otherwise a waste of her time. She suggested that these classes did not have to be offered in an actual classroom but thought that they could be done with PowerPoints online. A second issue that several of the participants brought up was having to deal with student or faculty comments or beliefs about the military and current/past military action as well as assumptions pertaining to why the participants may have joined the military. As Terri said, "Don't judge us. I think a lot of people have the impression that we joined the military because we were the stupid kids in high school." Mary similarly talked about faculty treating her poorly after they learned that she was a veteran due to their beliefs and misconceptions about the military. Lisa told a story about overhearing students in a cafe area talking about student veterans in a derogatory manner and said, "that's when I knew I had an anger problem." Multiple participants also mentioned their disdain for the casual nature of higher education. In particular, the discomfort revolved around traditional students coming into classes wearing what looked like their pajamas or repeatedly arriving late for class.

Lastly, several participants mentioned the behavior of other students in the classroom. Karen described traditional students not talking in class and wanting to work with them to draw them out during discussions. She also recounted how in another class; she saw three students cheating on a test. Her reaction to the cheating was to chalk it up to age and said "Uh, the integrity is really a different...it's just a young thing too, you know…" Cathy, who enjoyed her

experience at her small liberal arts college, described a slightly different experience. She

explained that in her last year the school admitted so many students that the classrooms were

overcrowded. With that came some bad behavior, including talking during lectures. After

multiple attempts to reason with the involved students, Cathy finally reported them for breaking

the institution's code of conduct. Again, with the exception of Lisa's being deployed, none of the

issues stopped the participants' progression  and it is clear that military culture/training in

addition to maturity had given the participants the tools to work through the situations and deal

with them in the ways that they were most comfortable.

### *Opportunities*

Opportunities were much more specific. Lisa spoke about being offered an employment

opportunity to work in the women veterans' program at her large state school. This experience

helped her solidify both her decision to go to graduate school and the direction she would take in

her career. Alice also mentioned the opportunity to work at the veterans' center at the community

college as an opportunity to connect with other student veterans. Cathy talked about being able to

educate faculty about what they needed in the classroom, and Terri talked about being available

on the discussion board in her online program for other veterans in transition. The participants

saw the ability to earn their bachelor's degree an opportunity in itself but had a keen awareness

that it was in exchange for their service. As Linda said, "It's free, but it's not...you know what I

mean?"

### Themes

### *Military Culture*

Military culture emerged as a theme early in the coding process. Out of 13 participants,

only Holly stated, "I mean, I kind of don't really think that the military had like a huge impact on

my next steps." For the other 12 women, the indoctrination into military culture was thorough, reaching into every corner of their experience to change their thinking from "I" to "we." They described how military culture promoted self-sufficiency, a chain of command, and teamwork. Military culture provided a structure that sometimes was missing from soldiers' civilian lives. They also described how the role that military culture plays in a female veteran's life may be subtle, but it often could be identified in the routines, habits, and mindset that transitioned out of the military with the veteran. Understanding the role of military culture in a veteran's life gives us insight into what veterans might expect from civilian life and from civilian institutions.

### Sense of Belonging

The subtheme of the military providing a sense of belonging was subtly woven through the conversations with the participants. Alice was the only one who used the actual phrase while speaking about what she missed from her time in the military: "Just because it's ahhhh, I don't know, it's just a sense of belonging." Others referred to the importance of this sort of sense of belonging in the way they spoke about their time and experience in the military. Military culture provided recruits with a structure that left little to chance. It also left little opportunity for individuals to have to make their own decisions, especially during basic training. For some participants, this structure was a positive part of the experience that added to the sense of belonging. Lisa stated, "I love the structure. Um, I'm very structured oriented so umm waking up at a very specific time, having everything very scheduled—I enjoy that." Holly agreed, saying, "I enjoyed my time in training…in basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training], because things were very regimented and there was a standard of excellence that you're just expected to achieve."

For some, however, the culture was a shock and the sense of belonging was slower to come, if it came at all. Jill struggled with the culture, and as result her sense of belonging was slower to materialize. Jill stated, "The beginning was really hard. It was almost like I woke up two weeks into it going, what the hell did I just do, you know, kind of talking, you know, what am I doing here? Why did I do this?" The sense of belonging eventually did materialize for Jill, as she later described: "This was like being a grownup and having all these friends that I never knew before. So that, it was that camaraderie kind of thing."

### *Experience as a Woman*

Questions were constructed to ask participants to reflect on gender and whether or not it was a limiting factor in their military experience. For most of the participants, the answer was a resounding "No." Some of the women who served in the years 1975-1995, however, described how gender hindered them in multiple ways. Several of the participants described classes teaching them how to apply makeup as a part of basic training. Lucy reported "… basic training was this ridiculous hodgepodge of makeup classes, flag folding… that was a lot of useless information." Casey alluded to the culture by simply stating "So, um, I went in in '81 when it was still a man's—man's Army." When asked to explore this further, she went on to explain, "We had a drill sergeant who was very out about the fact that females had no business being in the military, and he let us know it." Mary, a self-described tomboy growing up, attempted to push the boundaries related to gender during her enlistment and applied for multiple MOS's that were not open to females:

> …[T]hey told me there were 11 openings for 11 different jobs that were available at Fort Rucker at the time, and I think seven of them were infantry. One had to do with the supply, something to do with any initiative, storage and supply, one was asphalt

equipment operator. And I think two of them were administration. So, I volunteered for

everything but administration…. So next thing I know I ended up being administration

for the first four years in the military.

At the end of her interview Mary stated "…even by the time I got out in '92, they still really

weren't sure what the hell to do with women."

Terra made some observations on gender that related to female drill sergeants. She said

that she noticed "how much harder they [female drill sergeants] had to work to prove

themselves." She explained further, "Um, they were a lot more rigid, a lot more attentive to

rules, where some of the male drill sergeant's kind of relaxed towards the end. The females were

all very, excuse my language, hardasses through the entire process." Terra further said that she

noticed that the female drill sergeants never really took the same opportunities to loosen up that

the male drill sergeants did: "Some of the male drill sergeants towards the end of the cycle would

start playing music or that sort of thing. Whereas the females, it was always still yelling, you

know; they never seem to relax even a little bit."

The observations that were made about gender were era driven and largely related to

military culture such as Lucy's experience in basic training and Michelle's experience trying to

move on to a MOS that was not administrative in nature. When speaking to the participants who

were active in the OIF/OEF era, those experiences and perceptions seemed to change drastically.

Terri recounted her experience "No, no, my first duty station in Fort Hood, definitely. They're

the ones that really molded me into the leader that I became…they're still my mentors today.

These gentlemen helped me through". Alice, Cathy, and Lisa all commented that there were no

differences in their training and seemed at a loss for examples of ways that gender played a

deciding role in any part of their military experience.

**Navigating Higher Education**

The participants had a range of experiences in higher education. These experiences were affected by factors such as the non-traditional age of the participant, interactions with faculty, and ways that they were able to articulate what they needed in both the classroom and the larger sphere of higher education. Participants were also asked to reflect about how they may have brought skills and experience from the military forward into higher education.

*Relationship with Faculty and Faculty as Peers*

Faculty were very important in the participants' experience in higher education. It was apparent that how the participants were treated in the classroom and what kind of ongoing relationships they had with their faculty played a considerable role in their overall success in their undergraduate program. Terra described her experiences as overwhelmingly positive and thought it might have to do with the type of undergraduate program she was enrolled in: "It's been good. Everybody has been very accommodating. My professors, and again, it may just be social work program and social work mentality of, you know, they are very easy to approach. They're very willing to work with the students…"

Connie credited her success to the fact that most of her faculty had had military experience: "Um, probably the fact that I had instructors that were prior military, um, and understood some of the requirements, because there's requirements that the VA has that you've got to meet…It's like, oh, they might actually care."

Relationships with faculty were critical in other ways. Lucy felt that as an adult she related more to the faculty than her classmates "We tended to, to hang with professors a lot more than our fellow students because we felt we had more in common and [shared] world experience with them." Terri expressed how surprised she was by how far some of her faculty went to work

with students and to make sure they were successful: "They, even, some of them even give out their number… they're like, call me, like I'll step into your computer, will figure this out." Overall, most participants expressed surprise and gratitude for the level of involvement that faculty were willing to offer.

Participants did describe some negative faculty experiences but made it clear that they were not enough to derail their progress. As described in chapter four, Cathy recounted a negative experience with a faculty member who would not allow an accommodation in the classroom after she had surgery on her dominant hand. She expressed her disappointment with that individual: "She just pretty much thought it would be probably easier on her if I just dropped the class. Right. I think that was one of my lowest points when I really didn't feel supported by an instructor." It was Cathy's last semester, and she needed the course to graduate. Despite this experience with the faculty, she successfully completed both the course and her undergraduate experience. Michelle agreed that one of her low points had to do with faculty who did not manage their relationship with certain groups of students well:

> And then consequently the low points would be the one or two professors that just kinda like looked at you and just like a number, they automatically discounted you because you were a woman, a woman in criminal justice. And then the fact that you were military, which was even harder for them to wrap their head around.

The discussions with participants regarding faculty relationships emphasized the multiple ways that participants intersected with faculty in the classroom and how those interactions affected the overall classroom experience.

***What They Bring to Higher Education and What They Need from Higher Education***

Veteran students bring a set of unique skills to their higher education experience. The structure and discipline of military culture often provide a framework that they can use for their classes and classwork. Most of the participants discussed their experiences in higher education through the lens of the strict discipline and organization that is often absorbed in the military as well as the approach of "just getting it done." The participants did not seem to be interested in the typical undergraduate college experience of clubs (academic or otherwise), parties, or sports and were just there to finish their degrees and move on. Holly summed it up:

> And I think that the military was a really good lesson [for higher education] in that it was just a lot easier if you just shut up and did what they told you to - like nothing they told you to do is, challenging. When your professor gives you some stupid homework assignment, just do the damn homework. Like, just do it. It's pick your battles. It's way easier to just do it.

Linda had stated early on in our interview that "she hated school and couldn't believe she was still here [in school]," and she credited the military with her success in her undergraduate program. Reflecting on the classes that she took in between deployments and while on Inactive Ready Reserve, she could see how those experiences changed her as a student. She said: "I started to, uh, get better the more I was in the military; it taught me structure and getting things done."

Others agreed that aspects of the military culture eased the transition to higher education. Speaking about the organization skills that she brought with her to college, Alice stated, "Oh yeah, definitely. Organization. Get the whiteboard out. Okay. Let me check it off." Terri agreed and explained how the routine of being early has played a role in her current degree program:

"So, I've learned to get everything done early because the Army's all about, if you're not on…if you're on time, you're late. So, I make myself early, if that makes sense."

In addition to discipline and structure, participants also brought a level of maturity to higher education, regardless of how old they were when they left the military. Whether they were deployed or not, the participants felt that they had a wider global perspective that shifted their view of everyday experiences. This perspective led the participants to want to get more out of their education and to take advantage of opportunities with faculty and in the classroom. Michelle explained that being 35 years old pushed her to get as much as she could from the experience: "…I went into the class with the attitude that I was actually going to get something out of it…I engaged the professor in a lot of discussion." Karen talked about integrity in the classroom and how important this was to her overall experience: "Making sure you get to class, paying attention, not cheating on exams, which I saw three kids doing on Friday right next to me. Uh, the integrity is really a different… it's [integrity] just a young thing too, you know…"

Coming from such a highly structured environment, some participants struggled with the casualness that sometimes appears in the higher education environment and with traditional age students. While shaking her head in disbelief, Linda spoke about students "showing up in pajamas." Lisa also struggled with the sometimes-laid-back attitude of some of the students: "…school was very lackadaisical; people could just come and go and do whatever they wanted…"

Two of the participants told stories about student behavior that caused them distress. Lisa overheard a conversation in the cafeteria that alluded to people who joined the military being "losers." As a result, she got extremely angry, but she "did not engage," chalking their comments up to age and inexperience. Cathy was also distressed by unruly behavior in the

classroom and recounted how a group of incoming freshmen behaved terribly and had no respect

for their classmates or their faculty. She stated that she would "blow up" in the classroom

because students would be talking while she was trying to listen to the lecture. She would tell

them that she was going "to turn them in" [to the college administration] because they were

violating the student code of conduct. This warning did not stop the behavior and she finally had

to take action, "And I finally did have to turn a group of them in and I…and I did, you know, I

don't have a problem with that."

Not all direct interactions with students were negative, however. Karen described an

experience in her creative writing course that showed the mutual benefits that can come with

having older veteran students in the classroom: "I would encourage them to contribute and talk

and kind of pulled them out a little bit…so that was good to see…If anything the military teaches

you to be a leader, but a humble leader."

The attitude of just getting it done was one that came up in several of the interviews.

Linda touched on this topic "…you know the routine and structure and, and umm getting things

done. Being serious about things. Um, you know, sticking it out even when it sucks. That's

huge." Vanessa agreed "Um just pretty much my work habits. I mean, I don't argue with people

in authority. I do what I'm supposed to do."

**The Transition Experience**

In the interviews, the participants explored their experiences making the transition to both

general civilian life and higher education. These discussions highlighted the areas where the

participants may have struggled and the services that they found useful. Although the overall

experience of transition was a shared phenomenon, every transition experience is unique, and the

details varied widely from person to person. When I asked the participants what they would have

liked to have known in general before discharging out of the Army, Cathy stated simply, "Just

how hard it would have been… it was."

### Lack of Readiness

Multiple participants discussed receiving insufficient preparation and programming in the

military for making the transition to civilian life. Alice explained that some of the preparation

happened when she was still adjusting to having just returned from Afghanistan: "…When I got

back, they were rushing me because I had 90 days to get out because my contract was ending."

She added, "They were rushing me through what [benefits] I'm entitled to and stuff as far as the

VA goes, and it was just like my mind wasn't there." Linda, who had a similar experience,

explained that the speed of the transition contributed to making her feel unready for civilian life,

"...and then it's like 10 days and I'm home. Nothing prepares you…"

Although Cathy had served over 25 years in the military and transitioned to civilian life

with an excellent skill set in logistics, she faced a year of unemployment upon her return. After

being turned down for several jobs because she did not have a degree, she decided to go to

school. She also stated, "...when you, yeah, when you live such a structured lifestyle for so many

years where you're not allowed to make a lot of decisions on your own...what am I going to

wear? Just little things can catch you off guard."

Alice further described experiencing an ambivalence about returning to civilian life, in

part because she just did not feel ready for its demands:

> I kind of wanted to stay because over there you don't have to come back home and worry
>
> about, oh gosh, I got these bills to pay or I have to work about this person. Pretty much
>
> over there it was just do your job, worry about your soldiers that you're with and stay
>
> alive. Coming back to the States, I feel like it was harder.

Others described resources and conditions that proved useful during the transition. Terra, who enlisted at the age of 28, indicated that she thought that enlisting when she was older had given her an advantage. "I think I was in a really good place. I had the background, I lived as an adult in the civilian world before I went into the military." She also found a resource in her father, who had been in the military and helped her during her transition process: "You know my dad was really helpful and things like they give you options like selling leave time or taking it ...he helped me a lot through the process so it wasn't as bumpy as it could have been." Terri recognized that returning to civilian life could be scary and typically gave this advice to people who asked for advice: "... I tell them, I'm like, it is scary. I was like, but as long as you have a plan, you're good to go."

### *Role of Veterans Services in Higher Education*

Participants made it clear that having veterans' services scaffolded into the admissions or orientation process had made a significant difference in the transition from the military to higher education. Some participants described how their schools made the veterans' services a part of the overall higher education experience. As incoming students who were veterans, they did not necessarily "choose" the services; the services were a part of the institutional plan. Lisa described how helpful the services were at the large state school she attended in New England, especially once they found out she was a veteran: "[My school] was really good about doing... like wrap-around services once I told them that I was a veteran. Um, it was like the red carpet went down, like it was crazy... Like yeah, it was really easy."

The schools with beneficial veterans' services offered a wide array of services that went beyond just creating a space where veterans could use to hang out in between classes. These were schools that had advisors specifically assigned to the veterans to assist with both academic

and non-academic needs. The advisors communicated with the veterans directly, provided course

plans and answers on financial aid, and helped to arrange appointments with the Veterans

Administration. Cat, who served two separate enlistments during peacetime, explained how

helpful this service was:

> There was, um, there was an individual that works… she had to approve your classes. I
>
> don't know that I would call her an advisor, but in my view, she was... if you needed
>
> additional support…, anything that would enhance and was part of the program… she
>
> would make sure you had them available.

Terri, an Iraq veteran, had received some poor financial advice from education advisors on base

while serving and taking courses. She had been advised to take out a federal loan rather than

draw on the GI Bill benefits for which she was eligible. She mentioned the unnecessary loan

several times during her interview, and it was clear it had upset her. The undergraduate program

in which she subsequently enrolled had a robust military/liaison advising program that worked

with veteran students from admission through graduation. Her liaison helped her to take care of

the outstanding balance "...When I told [my veterans' representative] that this had happened, he

said, 'well, we have some Pell grants and scholarships...' I got them. And that paid for my stuff

until I started getting my GI Bill." She credits the advisors at her school not just for helping her

pay off the student loan, but also for making her transition to their school seamless: "I mean [my

school] stayed right on top of me, so like if they needed something when I was first applying to

college, it was just email after email after email, 'Hey we need this,' or they would call me."

Karen, who had served in both Desert Storm and Afghanistan, started school at a small,

private liberal arts university. The university was expensive, causing her to go through her GI

Bill too quickly, and it also did not have adequate resources to serve veterans in a satisfactory

capacity. For example, when she needed help with a situation related to the GI Bill, there was no one who could help her. She recounted going up the chain until she finally emailed the dean of her college, but she received no reply. As a result, she transferred to a large state school that works hard to serve veterans and where she seems much more contented. During our interview she explained, "Yeah, it's, it's an entire office just dedicated to veterans' affairs… there's upwards of like maybe one to 200 veterans that go in there." She went on to say that they handled everything that a veteran would need to be successful in school. They also worked in tandem with academic advisors to make sure that veteran students are successful. Karen summed it up by saying, "if you have a disability [like] PTSD, so it interferes with your learning, they will arrange all that stuff for you. You can just go there and talk if you need support and everything in between. It's really fantastic."

Several participants took it a step further and became part of the services that the school offered. Lisa, who had received assistance from her school's veterans center, became the women veterans' liaison. She stated, "...my job as the female veteran's liaison was more or less, I'm helping female veterans with any issues they may have had, whether it be... like... with daycare and helping them to find daycare or um things of that nature." Alice reported that she went to work at the veterans' center at the community college where she started her education and found it worthwhile: "I loved it there."

### Help-Seeking Behavior

The subtheme of *Help-Seeking Behavior* overlaps with the above subtheme of *The Role of Veterans Services in Higher Education*. It emerged as a less prominent but still important subtheme as participants discussed the reasons, they did not make use of veterans' centers and other services available at their institutions of choice. It became clear that participants in this

study were less apt to take full advantage of veterans' services at those schools that did not

scaffold them in as part of the admissions or orientation process. Lucy, who attended a large state

school in the post-Vietnam era, mentioned that there was a school employee who provided

assistance, but she did not have much more information than that: "So, I had an individual who

said…you go to the bookstore and buy everything you need. Pens, papers, books, everything.

Government pays what? Yes, every bit." Other than this, she stated, "No one gave a shit that we

were veterans." Vanessa, who served in Desert Storm, mentioned that her benefits had run out

and she was not sure if she still qualified to use the veterans center and other services, so she did

not bother to go in and did not ask anyone if she was eligible. Holly, who had ultimately served

her time in the National Guard, pointed out "It was never discussed" (referring to benefits and

services).

Other participants who had not experienced the scaffolding of services into their higher

education experience had varying reasons to make use of services that were available. Alice, who

had a positive experience at the community college level, attempted to take advantage of the

services at the large state university after her transfer, but found them disappointing: "I felt like

the veterans center, every time I went in there, they weren't any help to me at all." She

commented that the staff of the veterans' center did not seem to have answers to any of her

questions, and the director of the center was never available. As a result, she had to resolve most

of her questions on her own.

Others reported not having made the effort to use the services, even though they knew

that they were available. Their reasons ranged from not being interested in services to not

knowing if they were eligible for services. Linda, who had not researched or used any of the

services at her institution, expressed regret for not having done so:

Ummmm yeah, I kind of wish I knew who was a veteran. I kinda wish I did get involved

but we don't know and it's like you just blend in. So, um, maybe identifying who, who

was military, and you know, the ones that speak the military language and can

understand. There is a veteran's lounge at [my school] but I just never went to it.

Often, the veterans who did not know if they were eligible did not ask questions or investigate to

see if services were available to them. Vanessa, who served in Desert Storm, said, "I mean, I

know they advertise...they have a veterans service office. They advertise it and everything, but I

never went in." While Linda simply stated, "Right. And so, we got like chain emails and stuff,

but I would never open them."

Others did not take advantage of services because they felt they did not need them. Terra

explained that, "They had veterans tutoring, but I didn't utilize any of it." She later added that

because she did not need academic tutoring and already was working with VR&E on her tuition

costs, she did not feel that she needed any services that the school offered. She also explained

that her bachelor's degree was in the helping professions, and the program's director was a

veteran, so her experience was that faculty were open to offering indirect help through

conversation.

**Peer Support**. When asked in the interviews if any of the participants had sought out

other veterans while in school, the results were decidedly mixed, and of the women who had

connected with veterans (both male and female), it seems as if those connections were made

accidently or in passing. No one reported deliberately seeking out veterans for any type of

support.

Some of the participants had provocative perspectives on other veterans on campus. Cat

reported that she met some veterans in her program when students formed a study group, but she

felt that she could not always rely on fellow veterans to be open to discussion or be open to

answering her questions. Alice reported that she usually avoided other veterans on campus

because she felt that they acted as though they were owed something, and she did not feel the

same way. Nonetheless, she did meet some veterans in class with whom she became friends:

"Just maybe like one veteran, and we're still friends to this day." Lisa had a similar experience;

she met some veterans through her classes and connected with them partly because of their age:

"Um, I did meet a couple in my classes. Yes. Um, we kinda stuck together because we were all

the older people." Michelle thought her age was a reason that she did not want to attempt to

connect with anyone during her education. When asked if she knew if there were any other

veterans on campus, she answered,

> I'm sure there were. At the time though, I mean, like I, I wasn't looking for anything at
>
> that time just to maintain contact with anyone was. Yeah. Uh, most of my classes, I
>
> mean, like I was in my thirties, a 35 at the time, so I went into the class with the attitude
>
> that I was actually going to get something out of it.

Age was also a factor in Karen's not connecting with fellow veterans on campus. Karen

attended courses at a large state university with excellent veterans services, so she understood

there were other veterans on campus, but she did not have a strong interest in connection with

other veterans, "I mean I've seen other people in the office area waiting to go in or, you know,

just to kind of say hi and stuff like that" Overall, the participants gave the strong impression that

they were more interested in keeping their heads down and getting their degrees than making

connections that would provide peer support.

Two of the participants, Terra and Terri, described enjoyed serving as resources for other

student veterans. Terra has spoken to both students and faculty in her program: "We have an

elective that is for transitioning military. So, I've talked with a lot of those students." Terri is

attending a large online school and explained how she supported student veterans through the

forums available to all students:

> They do have online forums that you can get on, and there have been some of my
>
> classmates during my discussion boards who would email me through [my email] and be
>
> like, "Hey, I just read in your discussion board you just got out. Can you tell me what the
>
> transition is like?" So, I've made a few friends.

Both Terra and Terri have reached out to student veterans on their own and did so, they

expressed, because they felt a sense of duty to help them. But there did not seem to be any

formal structures in place for this peer-to-peer mentoring/support to happen outside of meeting

veterans in the veterans' center.

**Summary**

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the 13 participant

interviews and the key themes and subthemes that emerged. It also attempts to answer the two

research questions that were the guiding framework for this study. The first theme of *Military*

*Culture* explored how the structure, leadership, and overall groupthink that can exist in the

military affected the participants while enlisted. Participants explored such subthemes as the

*Sense of Belonging* that comes from being in the military and ways that military culture

intersected with their *Experience as a Female* in the military. Participants outlined and

highlighted their positive and negative experiences in the military. They also emphasized ways

that military culture has continued to play a role in their civilian life, including in higher

education.

The second theme of *Navigating Higher Education* expressed the ways that participants dealt with unfamiliar structures within higher education. The training that the participants received while serving in the Army provided them with an elevated level of discipline, an understanding of teamwork, an elevated level of organization, and a straightforward vision of how to operate in a highly structured environment. Through the subthemes of *Relationships with Faculty and Faculty as Peers* and *What They Bring to Higher Education and What They Need from Higher Education*, participants discussed how these, and other traits absorbed through military culture helped them succeed in higher education. Participants also discussed relationships with traditional students and faculty and the roles they played in their experiences in higher education.

The final theme of the *Transition Experience* explored the subthemes of *Lack of Readiness, The Role of Veterans Services in Higher Education*, and *Help-Seeking Behavior.* This theme and subthemes emerged from conversations regarding the lack of transition planning from the military, the roles that veterans services played for some of the participants during the transition, and participants' reluctance to reach out to veterans services that were not provided as part of an institution's admission or orientation. Additionally, participants explored the idea of peer support and networking through meeting other veterans in classes and on discussion boards. It was the intention of this study to explore themes that would allow the readers to expand their understanding of female veterans' experiences in higher education post discharge, while probing positive impacts as well as areas that could be improved. The following chapter presents an interpretation of these findings as they relate to this study's research questions. The next chapter also addresses limitations of the study and areas for future research.

**Chapter 6: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

This dissertation explores the under-researched, lived experiences of female U.S. Army veterans who have enrolled in an undergraduate program post-discharge. My interest in the broader topic of veterans began as a young girl when a first cousin, once removed, was killed in action in Vietnam. His death, the ways the family processed it, and our continued discussion of it many years later had a lasting impact on me. When I went back to school in 2006 to finish my bachelor's degree, my interest in veterans' experiences was reignited. While I was working on a study on PTSD, the U.S. press was beginning to report on various situations soldiers were facing upon their return from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The newspapers' front pages were filled with stories about the Veterans Administration hospitals' backlog, the veteran suicide rate, and women veterans' experiences with military sexual trauma. The horrific conditions that soldiers were subjected to as they recovered at Walter Reed Medical Center were also being exposed (Priest & Hull, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e). Women veterans began to receive more and more media attention during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. That fact, along with the continued coverage of sexual harassment and assault, is what narrowed my focus to the lived experiences of women in the military and women veterans. All of this, combined with my career in higher education, led me to this dissertation topic.

The exploration of these women's lived experiences in undergraduate programs was completed using a phenomenological framework to examine the participants' experiences while enlisting, serving, and discharging from the military and their lived experience in a higher education undergraduate program. With women currently being underrepresented in the research, my goal is to add the current research with this qualitative exploration of female student veterans lived experiences.

Chapter six presents a discussion of the research findings and how they relate to the two research questions:

1. What is the experience of fully separated female Army veterans in undergraduate programs?

2. What opportunities and challenges do female veterans describe during the transition to higher education?

A discussion of the results is presented as related to the major themes discussed in chapter five and the relevant literature on both female veterans in higher education and applicable social science theories. This chapter also discusses the limitations of this study and gives recommendations for future research.

**Discussion and Implications of Results**

The lack of literature that centers the female veteran's experience and voice in higher education was one of the motivating factors for this study. The shortage of these studies may simply reflect the relatively small number of women veterans, with only 9.8% of all veterans currently being women (SWAN, 2019). Lower numbers, along with the tendency to not always self-identify as veterans, may make this group harder to find and less likely to come forward as willing participants in research (Goldstein, 2019; Sander, 2012). As higher education continues to be an attractive option for female veterans, a clearer understanding of their time in the overall military transition experience and their time in higher education could only provide institutions with a better understanding of the direction their programming needs to go in order to provide support for this population.

**Military Culture**

When discussed in the literature, student veterans—both male and female—are described as "serious, motivated, goal-oriented students" (Brown & Gross, 2011) as well as team-based and mission-driven (Berger & Vacchi, 2014; Blaauw-Hara, 2016). These skill sets are often attributed to the structure and culture of the military. The descriptions in the literature fit the study participants well. The findings from this study indicate that they focused on their schoolwork, moved through their degree programs with little issue, sought help from faculty and advisors when they needed it, and, as appropriate, also accessed university services such as tutoring or disability services. Problem-solving is "second nature" in the military, and it was clear that this skill had carried over for the majority of the study participants (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 125).

Student veterans typically enter higher education with an intimate understanding of the top-down, hierarchical, discipline-based approach that is present in military culture. They are used to being given complex instructions that relate to a specific task or tasks. Many student veterans look at their classes and finishing their degree as one more set of responsibilities to be completed or, like Alice, as one more deployment to get through. When Alice transferred to a larger university, she was not happy about the city's area where the university was located. However, that did not stop her. She stated, "I didn't like it, but I took it like, ok, I'm stuck in this horrible deployment right now. I'll get through it..."

The structure of military culture provides veterans with a sense of belonging to a group or a team. Soldiers become embedded in the military way of life but lose their individual identity. The restructuring of their personal identity to that of a military identity is a crucial component of acculturation into the military. The analysis indicates that using feminist research methods to

uncover and highlight female veterans' experiences and voices or stories centers the female

veteran in a way that is rarely done in the current veterans' literature (Gilligan, 1982; Thompson,

Rickett & Day, 2008).

### *The Role of Gender*

Understanding the role that gender may have played in the participants' experience was a

focal part of this research. Research shows that gender is wrapped up in the hypermasculinity

that the military puts at the center of its culture (Harris et al. 2018). Degrading women is often a

central piece of this hypermasculinity, and women are expected to adapt and reinforce this

culture by acting as masculine as possible (Maples, 2017). Gender roles are clear for men in the

military, but are often harder to navigate for women, which often can cause women who are

serving to feel the need to suppress parts of their own identity simply to survive (Goldstein,

2019).

The participants of this study overwhelmingly did not feel that gender played a

significant role in their experience. They did report a few issues such as Cathy recounting a drill

sergeant that did not think women belonged in the military, and Michelle not being able to get a

non-administrative MOS, but overall their gender did not seem to be something they were

focused on when telling their story. The absence of a focus on gender was an unexpected finding

and one that I connect directly to military culture. Military culture was built around masculinity

and has not shifted drastically even as women continue to take on more prominent roles in all

military branches. Women are expected to adapt to the culture that is already in place, which

means that being a woman in the military is secondary to being a successful soldier. From this

perspective, it isn't surprising that the participants did not focus on gender in their experiences.

Gender does, however, play a role in the transition experience and is discussed below.

**Navigating Higher Education**

As noted above, skills gained in the military provide a particular framework for veterans to be successful in higher education. An understanding of military culture may also provide an opportunity for higher education institutions to recognize this population as one that could use specific programming. Less recognizable and less visible than their male counterparts, women veterans may find that the more obvious settings such as a veteran's center is not their first choice to go for information (Sander, 2012). The combination of not wanting to be the "weak link" asking for help or holding the class back, combined with some women's belief that they don't deserve the status of veteran, makes the job of identifying female veterans that much harder for higher education administrators (Berger & Vacchi, 2014; Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Maples, 2017).

An additional path that female student veterans will need to navigate is one of the non-traditional students. No matter what their age, when student veterans enter higher education, they are considered non-traditional due to the experience and worldview that they bring into the classroom (Gregg, Howell & Shordike, 2016). Military experience and an expanded worldview may put them at odds with faculty who may not understand the needs of a non-traditional learner and may also cause issues when the veteran students attempt to connect with traditional-aged students with whom they may share the classroom (Borsari et al., 2017). Faculty and traditional-aged students may lack understanding of the military or the role the student veteran may have played while in the military. They also could have incorrect assumptions as to the reasons that the student veterans enlisted in the first place. All of these assumptions may play a role in the way of thinking that Borsari et al. (2017) and Blaauw-Hara (2016) refer to as *the deficit model*. The deficit model assumes that the student veteran carries some sort of trauma from their time in the military, which will somehow preclude them from being able to perform in the classroom

setting. It also assumes that they could not go to college at a traditional age. As Terri said in her interview, "Don't assume because I'm 37 years old, I'm an idiot because I'm not, you know not everyone is ready for college right out of high school." DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) remind us that not every student veteran (of any gender) sees their time in the military as a traumatic experience, and that deficits should not be the lens used to examine student veterans.

The data suggests that student veterans' relationships with faculty played a significant role in their success in their higher education experience. Using Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as a lens to examine these relationships offers another approach when researching female veterans' experiences in higher education (Baker Miller, 1986). Jean Baker Miller created this theory in the mid-1970s to understand the role that relationship-building played in women's development. Baker Miller realized that using the dominant male narrative to examine the female experience provided little leeway for narratives to exist outside the "typical" female roles. Using RCT to examine women veterans' relationship in higher education may provide clues into the types of services that would better serve and how they could be delivered to have the most positive impact.

**Transition and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model**

When examining female Army veterans' lived experiences in higher education, the transition becomes a natural focal point. Participants in this study discussed their transition both out of the Army and into higher education. Although Bridges (1980) and Schlossberg (1981) each provide frameworks that consider the contexts of the period in which the actual transition occurred, neither considers the entire ecological system in which the transition happens. The analysis of the participant's experience suggests that transition is not a finite event that occurs in

a vacuum, but rather a multi-level and multi-context event that needs to be considered from many angles.

Both Bridges (1980) and Schlossberg (1981) consider the transition context as it is happening in the moment. Schlossberg's 4 S's, discussed by Griffin and Gilbert (2005), examines the contextual needs of student veterans across the situation, self, social support, and strategies for coping (Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg, 2012). Understanding these specific contexts does provide a nuanced understanding of the transition from the higher education side. However, it does not address contextual factors that may still exist from a student veterans' time in the military. It could be argued that neither Bridges (1980) nor Schlossberg (1981) provides a broad enough view of transition that includes an entire understanding of the full ecological systems, in this case, the person's military and higher education in transition.

For the participants in this study, understanding both the military and higher education as two separate entities, including the core values, culture, operating structure, and political influence, provides a clearer understanding of the chronosystem, macrosystem and exosystems. Examining voice and identity represented in the mesosystem and microsystem also provides an way of understanding the veteran students experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Vacchi and Berger (2014) argue that the literature on student veterans does not sufficiently consider either the chronosystem or the macrosystem and cite events such as 9/11 and the socialization of veterans during their service as events that are not given enough weight in the transition process. Many of the participants of this study expressed the feeling of not being ready for the transition. Gaining an understanding of which system is not providing adequately for transition offers us the opportunity to target this particular system with appropriate services.

**Gender and Transition**

Although obvious, gender is another critical piece to consider in the transition. Gender is an understudied aspect of the student veteran population and understanding what (if any) role it plays in the transition provides an opportunity to ensure that both the ecological systems involved in the transition (the military and higher education) can provide adequate support. While exiting the military, female veterans may be reluctant to ask for help, but it is also entirely possible that in the quick transition, some participants are entirely unaware of the support that is necessary. At the same time, while entering higher education, female student veterans may be reticent to identify themselves and are not as easy to identify as male veterans on sight. This may further mean that they could enter into the transition without an adequate understanding of the support needed (Maples, 2017; Sander, 2012; Santovec, 2012). Lastly, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are extensive differences in the transition experience offered non-commissioned officers (NCO's) versus the experience of officers. Services offered to officers during their transition include professional resume services, practice with interview skills, and networking opportunities, including private contractor recruitment events. NCO's are offered services of the Transition Assistance Program, but many report that the information is gone over quickly and they are often not ready to hear the information. On the other hand, after being fully immersed in the military identity, soldiers are being asked to shift to a civilian identity with little assistance. While enlisted in the military, soldiers typically give little to no thought to the time it will take to transition back to civilian life. The gap in the literature on the inner workings of the transition experience could mean that key parts of the event are unknown, causing missed opportunities for appropriate services.

**Implications for Practice in Higher Education**

This study has direct implications for higher education professionals, especially those who may have contact with female veteran students. More significant efforts must be made in recognizing and providing dedicated and appropriate programming for female veterans. For these efforts to be successful, institutions have to commit to listening to what women veterans want and need and creating circumstances where female veterans will self-identify and take advantage of what services are offered.

Institutions may want to consider providing a liaison (see epilogue for example) who would work directly with female veterans to obtain this information. A dedicated liaison, who is also a female veteran, could help female veteran students navigate the higher education landscape and also make referrals to outside resources such as VA Hospitals or veterans centers. This liaison could also be available to help women veterans with issues around daycare, housing, and benefits. Institutions that want to serve student veterans must make an effort to offer more than a "military-friendly" label on their website; they must provide an environment that is welcoming and helpful to veterans as a whole with specific programming carved out for the women veterans who wish to access it.

In addition to a military liaison having dedicated military advisors that are available for veteran students from the moment they express interest in the institution could provide the type of "wrap-around" services that many participants in this study described. These military advisors were in touch with the student veterans throughout their entire admissions process by makings sure that all of the necessary pieces of the application process were complete. These same advisors then stayed with the student veteran throughout their program and worked with them on registration, transfer credits, GI Bill questions, choice of major, course selection, and anything

else that the student veteran might need to be successful while completing their degree. It is most

impactful and beneficial if these advisors are also former military, as the student veterans then

feel as if they are dealing with someone who understands them and what they have experienced.

Since it is not always financially feasible to have a dedicated liaison or separate military

advisors for veteran students, institutions need to consider staff and faculty development that

focuses on understanding military culture and veterans' students. Providing faculty and staff with

the opportunity for a deeper understanding of military culture could enable a more welcoming

environment and may provide opportunity for deeper interactions between faculty and student

veterans in the classroom. As a part of this training, student veterans should be examined through

the lens of adult learning theory so that they are being provided with a higher education

experience that that is comparable to life experience.

**Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion**

*Limitations*

As with any dissertation, this study had some limitations. Utilizing a phenomenological

methodology meant that as the researcher, I needed to bracket or put aside all of my prior

knowledge of this topic as well as any bias I might have held (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 2014).

Bracketing was done by utilizing reflexivity practice and creating research memos throughout

the dissertation process, including immediately before and after interviews, while coding and

when making decisions about data (Lincoln & Guba, 2015). This reflexive practice allowed me

to work through bias and identify preexisting information that may have interfered with the

process. However, although bracketing and reflexivity were practiced throughout the entire

project, there is always a chance that bias may have been inadvertently inserted into any step of

the research.

Additionally, using an interview process that relied on the participants to self-report accurately information that was sometimes more than 20 years old itself was a limitation. Additional limitations existed in the lack of follow-up on some questions and the fact that some questions emerged organically from the conversation and were not asked of all participants. This limitation provides an opportunity for future research that could expand on these questions, and it creates an opportunity for follow up if newer questions emerge during the process.

Lastly, although the sample represented multiple states and a wide range of ages of women veterans, it did not represent a range of race or ethnicity with all of the participants of the study being white. The racial profile of women in the military is changing, but it is still predominately white (Barroso, 2019). As of 2017, white servicemembers made up 57% of the veteran population with 16% being black and 16% Hispanic. Only 4% identified as Asian with the remaining 6% identifying as other or unknown (Barroso, 2019). These smaller numbers compared to male servicemembers in addition to a lack of visibility and reticence to self-identify as veterans made female veterans in the BIPOC community more difficult to access during this study.

### *Multigenerational Perspective an Asset*

Although inclusion-criteria for building the sample that included gender, education, and branch of service, the criteria did not specify which era the participants served. As a result (and quite unexpectedly), women from the Vietnam era, the post-Vietnam peacetime era, and the Desert Storm era responded as well as women from the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since there have been six updates to the GI Bill's educational part since 1944, the participants from different eras were eligible for various benefits (Berger & Vacchi, 2014). This variation made it challenging to analyze how the benefits were accessed and how they were used

across the participants' experiences. However, interviewing participants from multiple eras provided the opportunity to examine the ways the female veteran experience has changed both while serving and while accessing higher education, which, in turn, provided a richer broader view of the female veteran experience across multiple eras.

This phenomenological study sought to provide insights into the experiences of 13 female Army veterans in higher education. Participants were asked to reflect on experiences in the military and higher education and explore the connections between them. Women veteran students are an under-researched population, and with that in mind, this study attempted to add to this gap in the existing literature.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

The most important findings of this study led to recommendations for future research. Those findings revolve around the role of identity and culture in the higher education experience for female veterans, the role the ecological model plays in the female veteran's transition, and the lack of data that exist on the female veteran student's overall experience, including the area of transition itself. Because there is such a gap in the literature, these areas are broad and offer many opportunities for smaller studies within these general topics.

*Identity and Culture.* Qualitative longitudinal research dedicated to understanding the role that identity and culture play in the female student veterans' transition will add to the literature and inform administrators on what programming would best serve this population. This information could also be used to train faculty and staff who will work with veteran students within higher education.

*Identity and Transition.* Further research is needed to explore and understand the identity shifts that occur during the transition out of the military and into the various roles that female

veterans play in their civilian life. There is little acknowledgement of these shifts, which, coupled with the lack of support given to female veterans as they attempt to move through these various roles, provides opportunity on multiple levels to better serve this population.

*Role of the Ecological Model.* Moving away from using only transition theory to the ecological model provides researchers the opportunity to examine the context of the various systems that the veteran moves through during the transition out of the military and into civilian life and higher education. Understanding these experiences would make it easier for interventions to be planned at the various levels of the ecosystem.

*Lack of Data on Female Veteran Students.* At a minimum, more studies of both the qualitative and quantitative nature that collect data on the female student veterans' experience in higher education should be completed to allow institutions to assess whether they are serving their current female student veterans in ways that are beneficial to them. The results of these studies should be published and presented so that other institutions can mirror the successes and avoid pitfalls that may have been experienced.

*The BIPOC veteran experience.* The number of BIPOC female veterans continues to grow. Having an understanding of their experiences in both the military and higher education would provide us with a more complete picture of the female veteran experience. Actively seeking out BIPOC female veterans to include in the literature is key to understanding the female veterans experience.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the under-researched, lived experiences of female United States Army veterans who have enrolled in an academic undergraduate program post-discharge. Major themes of differences between the military and higher education, the

challenges of navigating higher education, and the transition experience were explored and used as a lens to examine the transition experience and any connections between the military and higher education experience that might exist. Understanding the transition experience of female student veterans will provide higher education institutions with information to create programming and provide services specific to this population.

The lack of literature on female student veterans in higher education continues to minimize the importance of their experiences by centering more typically accessible male voices and narratives. Women veterans may be a smaller percentage of the veterans entering higher education, and they may be harder to find due to those numbers, but it is my experience that they want to tell their stories and they are enthusiastic when someone wants to listen. The 13 women who took part in this research project were not seeking the spotlight nor were they seeking any particular recognition; they simply wanted to tell their story in case their experience might help another female veteran. Women veterans need to be acknowledged on a wider scale; they are an untapped source of knowledge and information that could be passed on to those that are attempting to provide them services. As researchers, we are doing them a disservice by not parsing out their stories and understanding their experiences in higher education and beyond.

**Epilogue: Advice/Recommendations from Participants**

During the course of these interviews, it became clear that some of the participants wanted to pass information about their experiences forward to female veterans thinking about attending college after their military experience as well as make recommendations to higher education administrators. Recommendations had not been a part of the original interview questions, but after rather they came up organically in one of the early interviews, I adjusted the interview guide (Appendix E) and asked every subsequent study participant what advice and recommendations they might have to offer. Ten out of the 13 participants responded to these questions. Below are excerpts from some of the discussions of these questions.

**Advice to Female Veterans**

When asked if they had any advice that they wanted to pass along to women veterans who are considering going to school after they leave the military, participants offered varied answers. While some of the advice revolved around the themes and subthemes that emerged during analysis of the interview data, the area the participants felt the strongest about were their benefits. The participants cautioned the women to make sure they understood clearly what benefits they were owed and how they could take advantage of them. Karen advised, "Check your benefits. If you're on disability, look into Voc Rehab, how much bang for your buck you basically have at your school." Vanessa recommended that women make sure that they get it done within the time period that is commensurate to their version of the GI Bill. In addition to understanding the benefits, Karen recommended that veterans make sure that their school had sufficient resources dedicated to veterans, "Um I would do research ahead of time and make sure they have a dedicated office for veterans and not just that one person that kind of knows what they are doing." Lisa cautioned other women to be sure to take advantage of their benefits:

"...utilizing the benefits that you earn and like don't let those go to waste, those are very hard-earned. And um, you know, just use those to the last drop."

Several of the participants wanted to offer future veterans' encouragement of what they might feel like at times while pursuing their degrees. Understanding that life outside the military can be difficult, they warned the women not to give up. Lisa put it bluntly:

You went through basic training, and you're tough and you can persevere, and you know, homework isn't the worst experience you've probably ever had. And just to keep that in mind, to be grateful to be sitting your butt in a chair and getting the education.

Cat agreed with the notion of perseverance, but also encouraged women to try to appreciate school and not just rush through the experience, saying, "Just take the time and really learn." Alice similarly encouraged women veterans not to give up, even when school seemed as though it might not be worth it: "Just stick with it because it's going to be annoying. It does get annoying. Just stick with it and you'll get there, you know."

As discussed above, the transition from the military to higher education is from a highly structured environment to a more casual one. Lucy pointed out that veterans should make immediate use of the discipline that they gained in the military, and that tapping into it quickly would lead to success, "Well, I'd probably say get going as quickly as you can while you have the discipline and um, because I think it's tempting to want to park your butt for a little bit."

Several participants gave concrete suggestions about finding a pathway through college and making decisions that would make that path beneficial. Holly suggested that veterans appreciate the personal growth that education can make possible, saying, "…really kind of take advantage of it and to let yourself grow through it" [college classes]. Michelle highlighted the importance of choosing a pathway carefully and recognizing the financial benefits that college

can bring: "... if you're going to get out and go to college… look…go for something that (a) you find interesting but (b) is going to give you the money to be successful later in life."

The participants gave other practical recommendations about understanding the requirements of the institution and degree. Cat suggested that veteran students "look at the courses you are required to take" for a degree plan so that they would be prepared and not caught off guard with unexpected courses. Terri agreed, but wanted to make sure that women know "it was okay to change your mind too" about even going to college. However, she added, "if you're set on going to college, just know what classes you need within that degree plan."

Overall, none of the women who engaged with this question suggested that the women not explore higher education. They wanted future student veterans to be prepared, have proper support, and have the belief that they could be successful. Participants were also quick to remind future students to tap into the skills that they acquired in the military to help them in higher education.

**Recommendations to Higher Education Administrators**

Participants also gave advice on a wide variety of topics to administrators in higher education. One of the topics brought up most frequently was how women veterans were perceived and, more importantly, the respect that they hoped future women veterans would be shown while pursuing their degrees. Terri hoped that they would be treated with greater respect, without assumptions made about the reasons that they had enlisted or options that they had. Lucy also hoped for greater respect for women veteran students as well as acknowledgement of their service and sacrifice:

Back then [Vietnam] I was an anomaly. And so, um, and even working in hospice, the question was always asked to men, are you a veteran but rarely of women. So, I just want

to say, always ask the question of everyone now, are you of that and um, so I would just

want to be acknowledged and that was important to me.

Michelle agreed about the importance of recognizing women veterans: "Number one,

acknowledge that we exist." She went on to recount how almost every time she wears something

that says "Army" on it, she gets asked about her husband's service. Jill also spoke about respect:

"I think it's, um, important, to recognize that they have served the country against all odds."

Others referred to the points discussed above about the preconceptions and

misconceptions people may have about the military. Holly suggested tactfully that a more

personal touch may be needed and that people should questions their own assumptions: "And so

you, you kind of need to get to know each person on more of an individual level than just

assume, so, so, she was in the military therefore this checklist applies." Terri made an even

stronger point about the ways that misconceptions about the military can negatively affect

experiences in higher education. She told a story about a friend who is a female veteran, and a

member of a support group for veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries, who recounted how she

was treated in one of her classes at a school that Terri considers to be non-military-friendly:

I think it's one of the girls in my support group, she, the teacher, she said she felt

ostracized by the teacher. Um, so she was explaining to one of her professors one time

that she was struggling, and he was like, well, don't think I'm gonna take it easy on you

because you're a veteran, he like literally ostracized her. He said you had the opportunity

to go to college when you got out of high school, but instead you probably slacked off.

Uh, and instead your last resort was the Army.

This story had clearly resonated with Terri, who added, "Don't assume because I'm 37 years old I'm an idiot because I'm not, you know not everyone is ready for college right out of high school."

Several of the study participants stressed the need for support that specifically targeted women veterans in higher education. Alice was one of those who made this recommendation, saying, "[T]hey need more support programs for women, female veterans." She clarified that she was not talking about "special classes for veterans," but rather that she would like professors to "tailor the work around adults" and not assume everyone comes into their courses at the traditional age or with the traditional experience.

Others thought that colleges and universities needed to do more than just offer support— that they needed to acknowledge the ways that veteran students differ from other students and provide specific programming or support based on this difference. Cat spoke to faculty attempting to understand who veterans are and what experiences and expectations they may bring to higher education:

> They're going to have a different mindset completely. And I'm not saying that they [faculty] have to make special accommodations, but they do need to understand that [the veteran students] are going to approach material, they're going to approach lectures, simple class attendance, they're going to approach the whole college experience differently than most, I guess recent high school graduates would.

Participants also recommended that faculty use empathy when working with student veterans. Laura, for example, suggested that faculty have patience and try to understand the state of mind of the veterans in the classroom:

That some, some, um, you know, they might seem a little off, but you have to. I mean, every individual, you never know what background they're coming from. Just be patient with everyone because really don't know, um, and just, just try to be helpful.

Finally, others made specific recommendations for how to best be available to student veterans. Cathy was clear that "you cannot develop a program for veterans' students if you don't have a veteran developing the program because you as a civilian, you, you don't, you just don't know." Cathy also suggested that she would like to see faculty who are veterans themselves clearly identify in their syllabi that they served in the military:

I would always tell them to put it in your syllabus if you talk about it [being in the military], nobody thinks anything of it but that veterans going to know, for instance, if you're a vet yourself, put it in your syllabus, you know, let them know what branch...right there's going to let them know actually that they can come to talk to you.

Overall, the women in this study wanted the faculty in their classrooms to have an understanding of who veterans were and what they may have gone through. They want faculty to be patient with them as they navigate the brand-new ecosystem of higher education, its culture and their new identity of being a student.

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## Appendix A

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM: [Fill in date sent]

Title: Women Army Veterans Experience in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley, Dean of Faculty, Lesley University
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Co-Investigator/Lead Interviewer: Jennifer O'Neil, MSW, LCSW, doctorate student at Lesley University in the PhD program:  Educational Studies with a concentration in Adult Learning and Development.  Joneil2@lesley.edu  508-577-8969

Institutional Review Board (IRB) contact: There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at irb@lesley.edu

Purpose: This study will explore the experiences of women army veterans in higher education. It will examine the transition from the military life to civilian culture including the role gender and identity may play in such transition. The goal of this study is to explore how these women make meaning of their transition and their experiences in higher education. The hope is that outcomes from this exploration will be used to address some of the gaps that currently exist in the research literature on this topic and may be applied to the practice of supporting women army veterans in the transition to civilian culture including higher education.

Description: This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of women army veterans who are currently engaged or have engaged in higher education. Participants are consenting to be interviewed twice regarding their experiences in the military and their experience in higher education after transitioning out of the military

a: Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary, and your refusal to participate will involve no prejudice, penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

b: You are being asked to volunteer due to your former enrollment in the army and enrollment in an undergraduate program post military experiences.

Procedure: You will be asked a series of questions in a one-on-one interview done either in person or via video conference. There will be a total of 2 interviews with each lasting no more than 90 minutes. **Interviews will be recorded.**

Risks: Participation in research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop the interview at any time and decide not to continue. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity: You have the right to remain anonymous. If you elect to remain anonymous, we will keep your records private and confidential **to the extent allowed by law**. We will use an agreed upon pseudonym rather than your name on all study records. Your name and other facts that might identify you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. If for some

reason you do not wish to remain anonymous, you may specifically authorize the use of material that would identify you as a subject in the study.

<u>Signatures and names:</u>

a.      **Investigator's Signature**:


_____ _____ _____

Date                    Investigator's Signature                      Print Name


   b.  **Subject's Signature**:
I am 18 years of age or older. The nature and purpose of this research have been satisfactorily explained to me and I agree to become a participant in the study as described above. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation at any time if I so choose, and that the investigator will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.


_____ _____ _____

Date                    Subject's Signature                      Print Name

**Appendix B**

**Final Code Book**

| Codes | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Help Seeking Behavior** | Any behavior that is related to asking for help from any institution |
| Asking for Help in HE | Asking for help in HE |
| Choosing School | Asking for help choosing the school they attended |
| Having Help (VA, Person etc.) | Having an outside person to help with benefits. Someone from the military or the VA. |
| Not Asking Questions | Moving through the system and not asking questions, even though they may have had questions. |
| Using HE Services of Any Kind | Taking advantage of any Veterans related services in HE |
| **Higher Ed Experience** | Anything that is related to their experience within HE |
| Adult Students | HE experiences as an adult student |
| As a veteran | HE experiences as a veteran |
| Barriers | Any barriers that the veterans identified as being problematic while in school |
| Culture | Anything that is identified or related to the culture of HE |
| Dealing with Traditional Students | Veterans experience dealing with traditional age students (no matter what their age was in HE) |
| Faculty Interaction | Comments/stories about faculty interaction |
| Feelings About School | |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Feelings expressed (both +/-) about being in school or about their school in particular |
| Future | Talking about HE in reference to their future (employment, HE etc) |
| Interaction w/ Other Vets | Interaction with veterans on campus (not within veterans' services) |
| Meaning Making | Any obvious meaning that they veterans made of their experience in HE |
| Military Skills | Using military skills (both soft skills and MOS skills) |
| Providing Services | Veterans services provided at the school that they were attending |
| **Important Not Themed** | Important quotes and info that does not fit into any themes but is important to remember |
| **Military Experience** | Anything that is identified as being part of the military experience |
| Culture | Anything that is identified or related to the culture of the military |
| Deployment | Any deployment related information |
| Discharge | Why they discharged out |
| Enlistment | Stories/Info related to their enlistment |
| Meaning Making | Any obvious meaning that they veterans made of their experience in the military |
| Medical Condition/ Treatment | Any comments made about medical condition or treatment of medical issues while in the military |
| Personal | Comments/stories that were personal related to their experience |
| Skills | Adapted/Learned skills from the military |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Transition Experience** | All transition related experiences |
| Burnout | Any comments made about being burned out during the transtion out of the military |
| Mental Health | Any comments related to mental health during the transition out of the military |
| Out of Military | Related to the transition out of the military |
| Real World | Comments about what they are doing/how they are doing now in the real world |
| To Higher Education | Transition to HE |
| To Home | Transition to Civilian Life/Home |
| Unemployment | Unemployment issues while transitioning |
| Using MOS Skills | Using MOS skills during their transition |
| **Trauma** | |
| Implicit/Unspoken | Talking "around" trauma during the conversation. Not coming right out and talking about it but referring to it with facial expression and broad language |
| Mental Health | Dealing with mental health issues |
| Survivors Guilt | Having survivor's guilt |

**Appendix C**

**Mind Map**
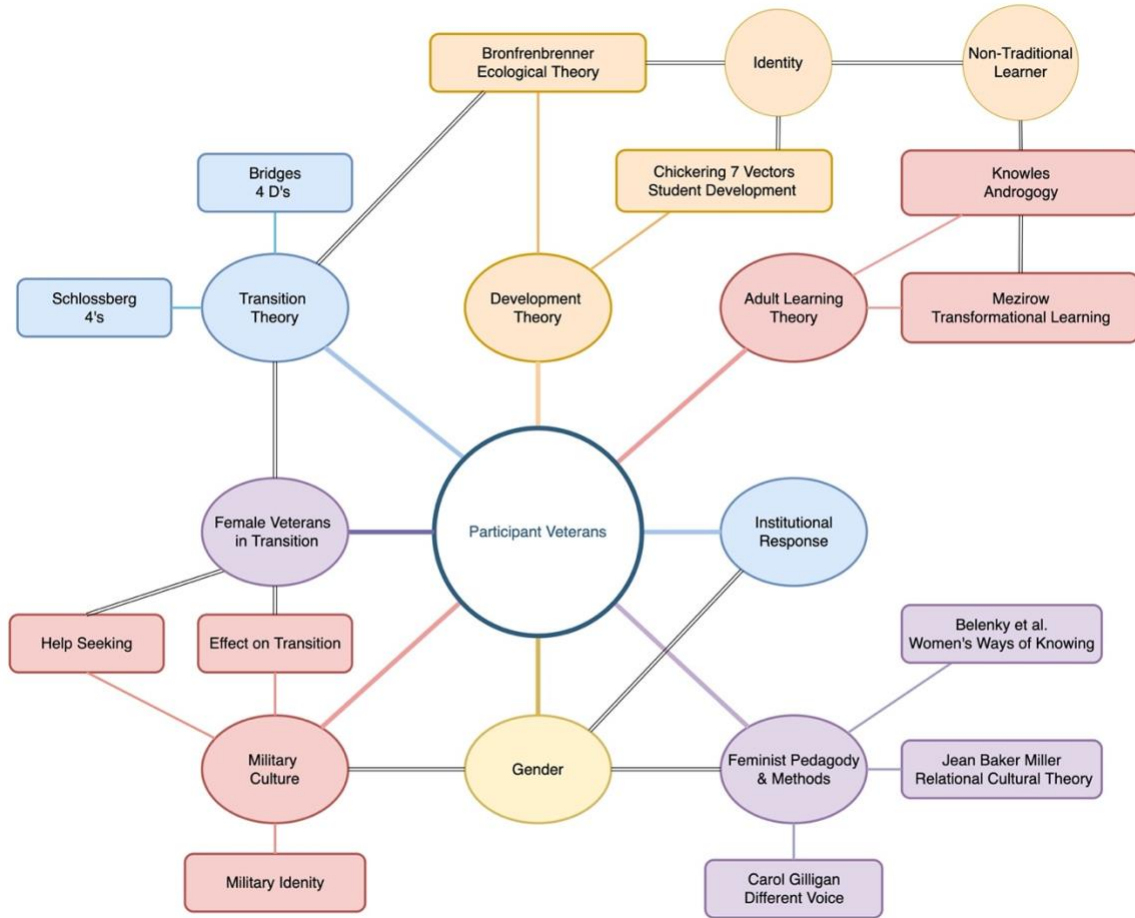
## Appendix D

### Mental Health Resources Available to Participants

#### *Federal Mental Health Resources*

- Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255.
- Veterans Crisis Line 1-800-273-8255.
- Federal Crisis Text Line
  Text "HELLO" to 741741
  The Crisis Text hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week throughout the U.S. The Crisis Text Line serves anyone, in any type of crisis, connecting them with a crisis counselor who can provide support and information.
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline (1-800-662-HELP (4357)

#### *State Mental Health Resources*

**Massachusetts**
- Emergency Services Program/Mobile Crisis Intervention available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.   1 (877) 382-1609.
- NAMI: 617-704-6264. Or 1-800-370-9085

**Oregon**
Mental health services by county

- **Multnomah County**
  503-988-4888
  800-716-9769
- **Clackamas County**
  503-655-8585
- **Washington County**
  503-291-9111
- **Clark County**
  360-696-9560
  1-800-686-8137

**Arizona**
Mental health services by county

- **Maricopa County served by Mercy Care**:
  1-800-631-1314 or 602-222-9444

- **Cochise, Graham, Greenlee, La Paz, Pima, Pinal, Santa Cruz and Yuma Counties served by Arizona Complete Health - Complete Care Plan**:
  1-866-495-6735
- **Apache, Coconino, Gila, Mohave, Navajo and Yavapai Counties served by Health Choice Arizona:**
  1-877-756-4090
- **Gila River and Ak-Chin Indian Communities**:
  1-800-259-3449
- Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community:
  1-855-331-6432
- Veterans Crisis Line:
  1-800-273-8255 (press 1)
- Be Connected:
  1-866-4AZ-VETS (429-8387)

## Texas

- 9-1-1
- Mental Health Support Line at 833-986-1919

## Missouri

- Interactive map of services by county can be found here: https://dmh.mo.gov/mental-illness/program-services/behavioral-health-crisis-hotline

## Pennsylvania

- PA Support and referral line: 1-855-284-2494
- Crisis Text Line: Text "PA" to 741-741
- Veteran Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255

## California

- 9-1-1
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK
- List of phone numbers by county:
  https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/individuals/Pages/MHPContactList.aspx

**Appendix E**

**Interview Guide**

**First Interview: Life History & Military Experience**

1) Tell me about your childhood and how you grew up

   a) What was your relationship like with your parents and siblings?

   b) What kind of community/neighborhood did you grow in?

2) Tell me about the experience of joining the military

   a) Tell me about when you started thinking about joining the military.

   b) Was there an event that caused you to start to think about joining?

   c) Did or does your family have a history with the military? Did that have an effect on your

   decision to join?

   d) Did you have any higher education experience before joining?

3) Tell me about the process of being recruited and enlisting

   a) How were you assigned your MOS, were you happy with it?

4) When you look back on yourself at this time how would you describe yourself?

**Exploring the details of the military experience**

1) Tell me about your experience in basic training

   a) How did being a woman effect this experience?

   b) Where you deployed? If so how many times and to where? Tell me about that
      experience.
   c) What was your rank? Was getting promoted reasonable?
   d) Do you feel you had a supportive chain of command?

2) How long were you in the military? Was that always your plan or did you plan to stay in

   longer?

3) Tell me about your higher education experience in the military.

4) Can you tell me about what you would consider high points/low points of your military

   career?

5) Tell me about the process of deciding to leave the military.
   a) At what point did you decide to leave the military?
   b) Was there a particular reason for leaving?
   c) What would you have liked to have known before you left the military?

6) Would you return to the Army? Why or Why not?

7) Tell me how going to school entered the picture for you

   a) Tell me about the process of choosing your school and finding funding for school

   b) Where are you now in the educational process?

8) Was there any veterans support at your school? Did that play a role in your choice?

   a) Did you meet other veterans on campus? If so, did you socialize with them? Why or why

      not.

9) Was there anything from your military experience that you use in your higher education

   experience?

10) Were there any barriers to completing your education that you faced as a veteran while

   enrolled at this school? What can you tell me about those barriers?

11) How would you characterize your overall experience at this school?

12) How would you describe yourself when you look back on this transition into higher

   education?

**Second Interview: Reflect on the meaning of the experience as a whole**

1) What do you think went well during the transition to college?

2) What connections if any do you see between your experience in the military and your

   experience in college?

3) Did your school offer any programming that was veteran-specific?

   a) Did you take advantage of it- why or why not?

   b) How did they affect your experience?

4) How would you describe yourself now versus when you started this transition?

5) What do you think it's important for me to know about your college experience?

6) When you look back on your college experience what would you consider high points and low points?

7) What do you think about your educational experience now that you have graduated?

   a) Is there anything in particular that you would have liked to have seen happen?

8) Is there anything else you would like me to know?

**Added Questions**

1) What advice do you have for female veterans thinking about going to school or back to school?
2) What would you like higher education administrators to know?