Veterans in Counseling Programs: Military Service and the Counselor Training Process

Crystal D. Hahn
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Carl R. Price
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker
The University of Texas at San Antonio

Veterans in Counseling Programs: Military Service and the Counselor Training Process

Crystal D. Hahn, Carl R. Price, Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker   https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc04ecm1

The authors conducted a transcendental phenomenological study to acquire a deeper understanding of graduate student veterans' experiences in counselor training programs and explore how military background influences counselor development. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews with eight graduate student veterans enrolled in counseling programs across the United States. Four themes demonstrated how lived experiences impacted counselor training processes: (a) *military behaviors, values, and identity* (b) *military counseling cultural contrasts*, (c) *integrating military service into counselor training*, and (d) *veteran-friendly suggestions for counseling programs*. This study presented a range of experiences that graduate student veterans have in counselor training programs, along with a valuable cultural perspective that warrants independent consideration and representation in counselor training. We further discuss implications for counselor education and future research to better support this student population.

Graduate student veterans (GSVs), defined as any graduate "student who is a current or former member of the active-duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use" (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17), are increasingly present in higher education. With the establishment of more comprehensive educational benefits for veterans through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Post-9/11 Educational Assistance, 2008), the number of veterans and service members in graduate school nearly doubled from 145,000 to more than 241,000 between 2008 and 2016 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, 2020). Furthermore, the Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 came into law in 2020, which led to a government classification of mental health counselors within the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs Veterans Health Administration ([VA]; Lee, 2020). The intent of this act is to address issues of access to mental health care within the VA by increasing the presence of mental health counselors (Lee, 2020). The introduction of this bill and GSVs' observed calling as mental health providers (Findley & Strong, 2019; Schermer, 2014) indicate a possible increase of GSVs entering counseling training programs.

With the growing body of GSVs among the ranks of their students, counselor educators and supervisors may benefit from an immersed understanding of military culture and how GSVs' military experiences inform counselor identity and development (Findley & Strong, 2019; Gregg et al., 2016; Halvorson, 2010; Lee, 2020; Phillips, 2016; Schermer, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2011, 2020). Differences between military and academic culture noted in the literature (i.e., individual versus collectivistic) heighten the need to explore GSVs' experiences in higher education (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Cox, 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Lim et al., 2018).Yet little is known about graduate student veterans in counseling programs. Counseling emphasizes multiculturalism in training and practice (Ratts et al., 2016), which makes an examination of military cultural influence on student veteran experiences in counselor training pertinent.

Crystal D. Hahn, Carl R. Price, Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker, The University of Texas at San Antonio. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Crystal D. Hahn, crystal.hahn@my.utsa.edu

Military-Counseling Cultural Comparison

GSVs in counselor training programs may find commonalities and contrasts between academia, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics, and their previous military core values (ACA, 2014; Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Cox, 2019; Department of Defense [DOD], 2009; Lim et al., 2018). All aforementioned institutions are similarly founded on fidelity, trust, loyalty, honor, and integrity (ACA, 2014; DOD, 2009). Both the DOD and the ACA esteem interpersonal relationships. The military vows to never leave a fallen comrade behind (Halvorson, 2010), while counselors actively protect client welfare (ACA, 2014). Though sharing similar missions, the organizational values that guide their behaviors differ significantly. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), professional counselors must recognize clients' unique identity, foster self-worth, and respect individual sovereignty. In contrast, the DOD (2009) values organizational identity, focusing on mission success over the individual. As part of academia, counselor training programs require other significant cultural adjustments. For example, the military is a highly structured, team-based environment, whereas academia traditionally values independent functioning, creativity, and competition (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Vacchi, 2012). As Lim et al. (2018) described, definitions of self-sufficiency, leadership, and accountability varied significantly between student veterans and faculty, illuminating institutional cultural differences that created additional hurdles for this student population.

Interiano-Shiverdecker et al. (2019) found that due to differences between academic and military contexts, most student veterans in higher education felt pressured to adopt cultural norms embedded in the context of higher education while attempting to maintain military identity. Furthermore, cultural disconnects may impact the ability to create social connections when transitioning into a higher education. Student veterans are less likely to view themselves as part of the campus community and often experience social disconnection with traditional college students at the undergraduate level (Barry et al., 2021; Yeager & Rennie, 2021).

Fernandez and colleagues (2019) identified that student veterans who feel valued by professors and student peers within the classroom environment are less likely to seriously contemplate leaving a university. Yeager and Rennie (2021) found that making connections with student veteran peers is also significant in transitioning into university settings. Particularly, student veterans' interactions within a campus veteran center provided opportunities for interactions that enhance veterans' perceptions of personal competence (Yeager & Rennie, 2021). Therefore, an exploration of cultural context within GSVs' training seems pertinent.

GSV Experiences in Mental Health Training Programs

This study on GSVs was informed by the multiple research studies examining student veterans' experiences in higher education (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Cox, 2019; Elliott et al., 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Kappell, 2017; Lim et al., 2018). Findings from these studies showed that although many student veterans are successful in higher education, their nontraditional student status, mental and physical disabilities, and cultural adjustment to the academic environment may affect their overall success (Elliott et al., 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018; Phillips, 2016). Student veterans typically differ from traditional students in the expectations, skills, and challenges they encounter in an academic setting (Gregg et al., 2016). However, most literature focuses on the undergraduate experience or does not separate undergraduate from graduate student veteran identities, often ignoring the GSV population altogether.

Several scholars (Phillips, 2016; Schermer, 2014; Seamone, 2017) emphasized how GSV identities are complex, and their firsthand accounts are necessary to understand their needs, strengths, and experiences. To date, only two studies explored GSVs' experiences in mental health training programs. Findley and Strong's (2019) study included GSVs who participated in a training program to develop social work competencies with veteran and military families. Schermer (2014) explored veterans' experiences as professionals and

students in counseling, social work, and psychology. Findings from these studies reported that GSVs often feel called to duty as mental health providers, finding solace in their service to others and a renewed sense of purpose (Findley & Strong, 2019; Schermer, 2014). Despite these findings' importance, scholars (Fitch et al., 2020) discuss notable differences within these professions and their training programs, such as length of training, the focus of course work, and mental health approaches. They explain that counseling utilizes a developmental model that attributes mental health issues to changes occurring throughout one's life cycle, while social work adheres to a systems model more focused on environmental and social causes (Fitch et al., 2020). Psychology aligns with a medical model that focuses on pathology and diagnosis (Fitch et al., 2020). Schermer (2014) identified that the inclusion of professionals and students from multiple mental health fields limited identifying field-specific experiences. Yet, despite the acknowledged impact of these cultural differences on GSV's transition within higher education, there is an absence of literature that solely focuses on GSVs in counseling programs. Therefore, GSVs' firsthand accounts solely in counseling are crucial to help graduate programs support their unique needs as counselors-in-training and their development as competent professionals.

In response, this study sought to acquire a deeper understanding of GSVs' experiences in counselor training programs and explore how military background influences counselor development. We implemented a phenomenological approach to explore the following research questions: (a) What are student veterans' experiences in a counseling master's program? and (b) How does service in the military impact graduate student veterans in counselor training programs?

Method

Research Paradigm and Design

After our review of the literature, we recognized our desire to approach this study from a critical theory research paradigm, where reality is subjective and may be influenced by oppressive experiences (ontology), researchers and participants coconstruct knowledge (epistemology), and researchers acknowledge social justice and promote change (axiology; Hays & Singh, 2012). Our decision was highly influenced by Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) introduction of Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) as an educational and research framework to understand student veteran experiences. VCT uses the student veteran's perspective to understand issues they may face, addresses the structures and systems in which the veteran inhabits, and analyzes structures through a critical lens. VCT tenets emphasize that veterans navigate multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems that often privilege civilians over veterans. VCT holds that veterans experience oppression and marginalization by being conceptualized within a deficit model (i.e., "assuming a broken or otherwise unable veteran"; p. 657) in higher education. As a result, VCT values veteran narratives and counternarratives, maintaining veterans as more appropriately positioned to inform veteran-related policy and practices. Mobley et al. (2019) used VCT to explore student veteran experiences in engineering and reevaluate their experiences in higher education. Scholars have also used VCT beyond the classroom to test the theory of intersectionality on alcohol misuse by veteran status and age, sex, and race (Albright et al., 2021) and to explore the veteran identity as a borderland between military and civilian cultures (Erwin, 2020).

Critical theories such as VCT believe that participants' voices are central to reporting findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore, for this study, we utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach allowing for the representation of the GSV's lifeworld (Hays & Singh, 2012). The lifeworld is what an individual considers their real and subjective world, where the individual's experience and the world are inseparable (Husserl, 1954/1970). The lifeworld allows for the identification of both the contextual nuances and general meaning within individual and common experiences, leading to an understanding of the essence of a phenomenon (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020). We followed the transcendental approach of conducting phenomenological research proposed by Moustakas

(1994) by focusing on the description of GSVs' experience through the bracketing of the authors' assumptions. Bracketing is a means by which researchers set aside already existing assumptions regarding a type of experience to "freshly perceive" the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). We recognized the need to structure and identify our biases and preconceived notions to allow GSV voices to emerge and therefore gain a new perspective on the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, inherent steps of transcendental phenomenology provided a framework for evaluating our positionality to the data.

Research Team Positionality

Hays and Singh (2012) indicated the essential nature of subjectivity statements in informing readers about the process and context of qualitative research findings. The authors included a doctoral student (first author), a master's student (second author), and a counselor educator (third author) in a CACREP-accredited program. The first author identifies as an Anishinaabe ciswoman who possesses extensive experience with the U.S. military as a child of a service member, military spouse, DOD civilian worker, and Veterans Health Administration intern. The second author identifies as an African American cismale, fourth-generation combat veteran with 10 years of active-duty military service. The third author identifies as a Honduran ciswoman with extended experience conducting qualitative research with student veterans. We acknowledged that our experiences with the U.S. military, service members, and veterans influenced our relationship with the data. Our biases included wanting to focus on GSVs' strengths rather than highlighting their deficiencies frequently discussed in previous research. VCT claims that programs that use civilian measures to assess student veteran retention and academic success may not accurately gauge student veteran success (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Our knowledge of VCT also influenced our focus on critically examining structural inequalities, identity and culture, and the context and support surrounding GSVs' training to understand their experiences in counseling programs. We assumed that these factors

would be important when determining GSVs' success in the program.

Sampling and Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), we used convenience and purposeful sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012) to recruit counseling GSVs. The inclusion criteria included being (a) a veteran of any armed service or an active-duty member of the military, (b) currently a student in a CACREP-accredited master's-level counseling program in the United States, and (c) above the age of 18. Although research experts recommend that an appropriate sample for phenomenological studies ranges between 5 and 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016), Moustakas (1994) stressed data saturation as the most important indicator of sample size. Therefore, we conducted interviews until no new themes emerged. The final sample consisted of 8 participants (2 females, 6 males). Participants identified predominantly as white or Caucasian ($n = 5$), while 1 identified as Hispanic, and 2 as multiracial or other. All participants were active duty while in the service, holding enlisted ranks between E-3 and E-7, which represent rank insignia of the U.S. armed forces that extend from E-1 to E-9. Branches of service represented were Army ($n = 4$), Navy ($n = 1$), Air Force ($n = 2$), and Marines ($n = 1$). Participants' time in service ranged from 4 to 23 ($M = 8.34$, $SD = 6.29$) years. Most participants deployed while in service ($n = 7$). Within their respective programs, 5 participants were prepracticum, and 3 were in internship.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three phases. In phase one, we recruited students ($n = 1$) from an Introduction to Clinical Mental Health Counseling course at a south-central university with several GSVs enrolled. During the second phase, we recruited participants ($n = 4$) by distributing a flyer via email to all students within the same university's counseling department. In the final phase, we recruited participants ($n = 3$) nationally to increase the sample's geographical diversity by sending out a recruitment script twice on the CESNET listserv, 3 weeks apart. After reviewing

and agreeing to the informed consent, all participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The first and second authors interviewed all participants once using a 45- to 60-minute semi-structured interview with open-ended questions and transcribed interviews verbatim. Interviews occurred face-to-face ($n = 4$) and were then moved to online ($n = 2$) and on the phone ($n = 2$) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We noticed that when the data collection format changed, participants felt more at ease, leading to longer interviews. For data collection, we developed a 9-question interview protocol. While developing the interview protocol, we decided to begin with the following icebreaker to ease participants into the interview: "Please tell me a little about yourself." We followed with two questions that explored their educational experiences before their graduate program and their motivation to pursue a degree in clinical mental health counseling. These questions allowed us to understand more about their educational journey. Four questions inquiring about their experiences in a graduate counseling program followed. Sample questions included the following: "How has your experience in the counseling program been so far?" and "What, if any, aspects of military service do you think influence student veterans' experiences in counseling programs?" To focus on supportive strategies and strengths of GSVs, we added the questions "What was most helpful to you during your transition into the counseling program?" and "What strategies or means of support would you recommend for student veterans in counseling programs?" We ended the interview protocol with an open-ended question that allowed participants to share any additional information.

After two interviews, we realized that the question "What strategies or means of support would you recommend for student veterans in counseling programs?" led participants to repeat similar responses as other questions. Moreover, it was important for us to incorporate the structures and systems in which GSVs inhabit and analyze them through a critical lens based on our understanding of student veteran literature. Therefore, we edited this question to "What do you recommend for your counseling program or counseling programs in general to better support graduate student veterans?" We reached out to the first two participants to comment on this question and kept the final interview protocol through all data collection formats.

Data Analysis

The authors used Van Kaam's (Moustakas, 1994) method of phenomenological data analysis. The first and second authors initially considered statements in relation to the significance of the description to GSVs' experiences and recorded all relevant statements. The authors used triangulation (Hays & Singh, 2012) to enhance credibility, where the first and second authors engaged in independent line-by-line coding. During this process, the authors used NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, to improve coding consistency and transparency. All authors then engaged in horizontalization of meaning units (Hays & Singh, 2012) to code all nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements (meaning units). The authors then determined the invariant constituents through a process of reduction and elimination. Following this initial coding, all authors clustered invariant constituents into themes. The following step consisted of synthesizing themes into textural descriptions of GSVs' experiences, including verbatim quotes, to create a textural-structural description of meanings and essences of experience (Moustakas, 1994). All authors participated in weekly meetings for 8 months during the data collection, data analysis, and writing stages. During these meetings, authors extensively discussed participants, coding, and the meaning behind data. The third author served as a consultant throughout the study's data collection, analysis, and writing stages.

Trustworthiness

The authors engaged in multiple methods of trustworthiness, such as simultaneous data collection and analysis to increase credibility, authenticity, and sample adequacy (Hays & Singh, 2012). We maintained reflexive journals throughout the study process, where we recorded personal biases related to the population (i.e., military, service members, and GSVs), the data collection

and analysis process, and our findings. We discussed our thoughts and our journal entries during weekly meetings for 8 months. Researcher triangulation was a critical element throughout bracketing meetings, with member checking occurring in two rounds for dependability and confirmability. The first round consisted of sending interview transcripts to participants, while in the second round, participants received copies of the final themes for verification. No participant requested any changes. We also had an external auditor with extensive qualitative research experience with student veterans review our merged journal entries, data analysis file, and final themes. The external auditor confirmed the stability of the findings presented in the manuscript and stated that our decisions were reasonable and well-grounded in the given data and existing literature. The external auditor mentioned that after reviewing our merged journal entries, she noticed our interest in separating non-Texas cases from Texas cases and wondered if context made a difference in any of the themes. This conversation in the research team originated during data collection in our efforts to increase the sample's geographical diversity. However, data analysis did not support this interest, which we believe occurred because all participants came from densely populated military cities. Finally, the authors used thick description (Hays & Singh, 2012) when reporting the study findings to increase trustworthiness.

Findings

The authors categorized findings into four main themes: (a) military behaviors, values, and identity, (b) military and counseling cultural contrast, (c) integrating military service into counselor training, and (d) veteran-friendly suggestions for counseling programs.

Military Behaviors, Values, and Identity

All participants ($n = 8$) discussed military behaviors, values, and identities when speaking about their counseling program experiences. Within this theme, we organized data into two subthemes: *military culture* and *individual veteran identity*.

Military Culture

Eight participants described common behaviors and values that make up military culture. They repeatedly described the military as a "structured" high-stress environment where "you have to be on all the time." In her statement, Cathy encapsulated this by saying, "it was very structured and very rigid and just by the book," indicating she was "always on the clock." Participants further described the military as hierarchical, action-oriented, and goal-driven, with specific dynamics between higher and lower-ranking service members. Rebecca signified this by saying, "there's always someone telling you what to do, where to be, how to do it." James indicated that this impacted the communication style within the military, relating that when talking to a higher-ranking service member, "you respond to their questions, and you move on." He added that this communication style reflected the "action results-oriented" nature of the military, where you "do your job." Some participants referred to perseverance and resilience as the "suck it up" mentality of military culture, as coined by James. Many participants also described comradery, perseverance, and resilience as shared values among most military service members and veterans. Norm indicated that being in the military created a shared connection that eased the process of building relationships, saying, "every time I meet a veteran … It's like you skip those first five steps. It's like, oh? You're a vet? I was a vet. What service? Oh yeah? All right. Yeah. Cool. All right, I guess we're best friends." Rebecca attributed this connection to a "shared culture" between service members.

Individual Veteran Identity

At the same time, 6 participants highlighted individual differences as part of military culture. Rebecca mentioned unique aspects of service, such as branch, job, active duty versus reserve, and deployment status. Rick also commented on service members' individuality by saying, "they're in the same uniform, but they're still different." James discussed how these differences might impact veterans' perspective, saying that a service member who is "pushing paperwork as a human resources person" will have a perspective that differs from

"someone who's been crawling through the dirt." GSVs also related that veterans differed in their connection to the veteran identity. James elucidated this point, by saying,

> That's a big struggle for veterans depending on where they come from in the military … how strongly they hold to that veteran identity. Some people get out, and they're like, "screw the military," and they're just happy to be civilians again.

Military and Counseling Cultural Contrast

Most GSVs (*n* = 7) discussed varying aspects of military and counseling cultural contrast. Within this theme, we organized data within two subthemes: *structural and communication differences* and *social disconnection*.

Structural and Communication Differences

Five participants spoke to the difficulties of adapting to the structural differences between the military and counseling graduate programs. Brian indicated that the military was "structured and organized" while counseling programs are "very non-traditional." Rick related that though the military structure is beneficial to service members in some ways, "it un-prepares you." Bill related that learning in the program was more "self-directed," whereas he expected more critique and mentoring. GSVs also noted differences between the construct of counseling in the military versus the counseling profession. Both Cathy and Rick held leadership positions in the military and related that counseling done with service members in their command was "performance-based." Rick further explained the goal of military counseling is to "send he or she back out there," further stating that "we don't really learn to foster your nurturing feelings as much … we want to know if this person is going to be able [to] still do it."

GSVs also pointed toward communication differences. Communication in the military is more directive, focusing on producing results, not processing emotions. James indicated that his military communication style was not "acceptable" in his counseling program, pointing to the "mission first mentality" and its focus on "fixing things [and]

getting things done. Feelings are secondary." GSVs initially found the focus on processing feelings as "emotionally taxing." Cathy stated she had a "different mentality" that did not fit in with peers.

Social Disconnection

Due to these differences, some participants (*n* = 5) endorsed having issues connecting with peers and sharing personal information in class. Three GSVs related that they felt "secluded" or like an "outcast" due to their status as veterans. Cathy indicated that she initially felt "nervous" and did not talk to people in her class, opting out of some in-class activities. James stated that he was "very cautious about what I was sharing and how much I was sharing … making sure I don't come off as insensitive." Norm related how other students sometimes "like to poke" at him to share, causing him to feel agitated. He stated, "I almost cussed one or two of them out because they don't understand the s*it I'm holding onto … it has to do with really f*cked up s*it that I barely talk to counselors about." Three veterans did not want to "associate" with being veterans or were not "vocal" about their status, indicating a stigma associated with veteran status. Cathy explained, "people might think, 'oh, I have PTSD or something's wrong with me.'" Norm related that he could make connections with other students but that it was not the same as connecting with other veterans, saying "nowhere near like [I] bonded with people I served within the military …. It definitely can be more lonely."

Integrating Military Service Into Counselor Training

Despite the contrasts that GSVs noted in the prior theme, some military service aspects integrated fluidly into developing counseling identities. All participants (*n* = 8) indicated various military experiences that positively impacted their success in the program, divided into two subthemes: *punctuality, perseverance, and leadership* and *self-challenging and advocacy*.

Punctuality, Perseverance, and Leadership

All GSVs indicated that military expectations of punctuality and perseverance were beneficial to them within their graduate programs. Bill stated,

"my ability to learn on my own came a lot from the requirement in the military to just kind of step up my level of training." Rudy further substantiated this by saying, "I developed more focus to finish a task or to finish assignments, and I didn't have that focus going in [to the military]." James related, "I think in terms of coping with the workload of graduate school … I think that puts them usually in a more advantageous position." When GSVs experienced challenges, their determination helped them push through. Rick explained, "that's another military asset that we have: we find a way." Many of them shared Rick's mentality of "you get into something, and you just do it."

Other participants highlighted leadership positions, particularly in developing "interpersonal skills." Cathy stated, "I think what helps is that when you're a sergeant … you have to counsel your soldiers." Rebecca related how the diversity in the military was also helpful: "one of the biggest strengths I think I got from the military was, you're kind of thrown into command where you have people from all different backgrounds, different ages."

Self-Challenging and Advocacy

When aspects of military culture did not integrate well with counseling culture, all 8 GSVs engaged in multiple coping strategies to navigate the disconnection. Participants stated that they "challenged" themselves to embrace aspects of counseling. Brian referenced this process as "growing pains." He stated, "I'm being challenged into a new way of thinking." Ben indicated that he chose to take a positive perspective when encountering new forms of learning in the program, stating, "instead of looking at it negatively, I looked at it like, well, why? Just try." Three participants also focused on the personal benefits they experienced from joining the counseling program. Rick stated, "if you're gonna be in counseling, try to open your mind to the possibility that what you're doing will maybe churn some things inside of you." Cathy discussed gaining insight in class: "it kind of helped me snap out like I can't be doing this …. I let myself free … participate more." GSVs then indicated that opening up and connecting with

students was beneficial. Rebecca discussed her classmates and stated, "they get it, they're going through the same thing." Cathy had a similar experience relating, "sure enough, everybody was kind of going through the same thing with different life experiences." Rick echoed this statement, saying: "it's helpful to know that I'm not the only person who's at the beginning of something."

Lastly, participants indicated that advocacy was a crucial coping mechanism while navigating the counseling program. Veteran advocacy took the form of encouraging GSVs to self-advocate and educate faculty members about military populations. Brian discussed the importance of "empowering students" and saying, "I think there's not actual representation of that population …. I think that there's room for improvement and positive change." James added, "there's a big push for diversity and inclusion, and I said I can offer this in terms of this population. … so now next month, I'm going to a social justice meeting with the faculty." Bill highlighted that GSVs could also self-advocate by "talking about themselves or their experience in relation to what they might need from classes or instructors."

Veteran-Friendly Suggestions for Counseling Programs

Overall, all participants (n = 8) described their counseling programs in a positive light, citing multiple positive experiences. GSVs spoke to the "quality of education" and being "impressed" with their professors. Four participants indicated that the faculty was "helpful." Cathy spoke about the support she received from professors saying, "they're there for us," and Norm related that a faculty member was "one of the reasons why I kept going." Participants also highlighted professors' flexibility. For Brian, this focused on diversity in the style of assignments, while others felt that professors were considerate of students' circumstances.

However, when discussing GSVs' experiences in counselor education, all participants ($n = 8$) also noted varying aspects that their programs lacked and provided several veteran-friendly suggestions to best support this student population. Data within

this theme coalesced into multiple areas, which we organized into two subthemes: *counselor training with military populations* and *increased veteran representation and support.*

Counselor Training With Military Populations

Most participants ($n = 7$) indicated a desire to work with veteran populations but emphasized a deficit of information on counseling veterans. Bill stated, "there hasn't been any kind of technique or anything like that, that is taught in class … that could be helpful to veterans specifically." He added how he wished there was "an elective or something like that that has to do specifically with PTSD or veteran counseling for families or something … there's nothing like that." James inquired with multiple programs asking, "What do you provide for students in terms of military veteran education or classes?" and received a response stating, "Oh, well, we touch on that in a lecture." Ben offered numerous suggestions to offer specialized training on military populations. He stated, "If there was a military-centered, veteran-centered program in counseling, I think that would be super beneficial." He suggested "a military and veteran counseling certificate" or a "bachelors' program in military and veteran counseling." After learning about the school's on-site clinic, he also believed that having a clinic "where military veterans are counseling and can be counseled" could be helpful.

Increased Veteran Representation and Support

All GSVs also highlighted the need for more veteran representation and support. For example, all participants noticed a lack of faculty with military background or interests. Students "struggled" because of the lack of veteran faculty that could provide firsthand information about working with their population of interest. Bill lamented the lack of network connection, saying he had "not run into an instructor who's told [him] that they're a veteran or who is working in the industry specifically with veterans." Rudy suggested recruiting more veteran instructors. Brian framed this absence as a "challenge where I needed assistance" and that he desired "access to some type of counselor that has military experience." James also related that faculty with a military background or knowledge of

military culture would help combat his sense of isolation because it would "show a sense of acceptance."

Additionally, participants noted limited numbers of GSVs within their programs. Unlike his undergraduate program, Rudy noted that he was "normally" the only veteran in his graduate courses. James explained that moving up in higher education, the number of student veterans "just falls off." Some participants indicated they would like to observe an increase of GSVs within their programs. Three students expressed a desire to create GSV groups. Ben explained how a veterans' group could "lessen the challenges" and "creates that connection." Cathy emphasized that as GSVs, "we know what we've gone through … we can push each other …. I think maybe [that] would help others with similar situations going through graduate school."

Some students also emphasized the need for counseling programs to increase connections with the VA and provide opportunities to work with military service members and veterans. Rick discussed his interest in interning at the VA but indicated that "I'm a little apprehensive about the internships because … I don't know if we could link up with the VA hospital." Brian further related difficulties connecting with the VA by saying, "I think it is too early for me to say, but from what I've heard, it's really difficult to get into the VA system."

Discussion

This study sought to explore GSVs' experiences in counselor training programs and how military background influenced their transition process. As an answer to the main research question (i.e., What are student veterans' experiences in a counseling master's program?), this study presented a range of experiences GSVs have in counselor training programs, concluding that GSVs provide a unique and valuable cultural perspective that warrants independent consideration and representation in counselor training programs. Experiences of adjustment were difficult for GSVs in general but became more arduous when feeling marginalized or isolated. GSVs perceived a stigma related to their

veteran status, such as the belief that all veterans experience PTSD or that their communication style was insensitive. Concerns about peer and faculty responses generated an initial reluctance for personal sharing, despite heavy encouragement in counselor training programs through reflection papers and classroom discussions. Schermer (2014) reported similar study findings, where GSVs indicated feeling like outsiders or distant from civilian student peers. Furthermore, our participants' hesitancy to disclose veteran status led to GSVs' limited visibility within counseling programs, which negatively impacted their ability to connect with their peers and other GSVs. These findings support veterans' experiences of oppression and marginalization, including microaggressions, highlighted within Phillips and Lincoln's (2017) VCT.

Findley and Strong (2019), in their study of student veterans in social work, noted that student veterans were highly motivated to work with other veterans and suggested increasing their opportunities to work with veteran student peers and veterans in the community. GSVs within this study also suggested the development of GSV groups within counseling departments. Student veteran groups may provide a space for student veterans to connect socially on campus and increase feelings of personal competency (Yeager & Rennie, 2021). The creation of a GSV group could also help increase veteran visibility within a counseling program and support the GSV transition process.

Additionally, GSV responses align with studies among undergraduate student veterans that indicate the importance of veterans feeling valued by faculty and student peers (Barry et al., 2021; Fernandez et al., 2019; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Schermer, 2014; Yeager & Rennie, 2021). GSVs endorsed multiple positive experiences with faculty, indicating that they were generally knowledgeable, supportive, understanding, and flexible. Participants emphasized how competent and empathetic responses from counseling faculty aided their transition, with one participant specifically noting that faculty understanding denotes "acceptance." However, our findings along with Schermer's (2014) contrasts Killam and Degges-White's (2018)

findings that undergraduate student veterans have difficulty connecting with faculty. Differences between undergraduate students' and GSVs' connection with faculty may indicate GSVs' developed ability to relate with faculty, academic cultural integration as a result of their undergraduate studies, or a reflection of university and departmental cultural contexts. Considering our findings, in context with the literature (Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Schermer, 2014), faculty relationships with GSVs appear to play a prominent role in GSV program integration.

GSVs also demonstrated a desire for more significant veteran consideration within their programs and curriculum. Similar to Seamone's (2017) findings among GSVs in law programs, participants indicated that graduate counseling programs lack military representation and may be less than adequately prepared to support GSVs' interests. Participants highlighted a lack of counseling theory and interventions pertaining to veteran culture and issues. Counseling theory related to military populations is increasingly relevant in counselor education as recent federal government legislation recognizes counselors as mental health providers and seeks to increase counselor representation within the VA system (Lee, 2020). Considering VCT's emphasis on veterans as more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice, the relevance of veteran representation among counseling students and faculty becomes crucial in the implementation of culturally competent education of GSVs in counselor training. Efforts to increase representation can also help enhance the integration of multicultural and counseling theory and strategies in developing civilian counselor competency with military and veteran populations.

To answer our second question (i.e., How does service in the military impact graduate student veterans in counselor training programs?), GSV study participants related that military culture impacted their adjustment and experiences in their counselor training programs. Collectively, participants described military culture as built within a structured, hierarchical, and mission-oriented environment that influences the

communication style, expectations, and social connections of service members. Participants highlighted the importance of comradery, their development of personal perseverance, and resilience while in the service. For many veterans, military culture remained a relevant part of their identity that they referenced as they integrated into their counselor training programs. These findings suggest that service members' level of identification with military culture may determine GSVs' behaviors, values, and sense of self post–military service and may impact their higher education experiences. Within this study, failure to consider the impact of GSVs' military service on counselor identity and training, as indicated by Phillips and Lincoln (2017), could have fostered a misunderstanding of GSVs as deficient instead of culturally different. Similar to previous investigations (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018; Vacchi, 2012), GSVs endorsed the distinctive culture within the U.S. armed forces, comparing and contrasting its aspects to those in counselor education. These findings highlight instances where student veterans navigate multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Schermer (2014) noted that GSVs feeling like outsiders in classroom settings may point to incongruencies between military and academic culture. More specifically, our findings indicated that GSVs encountered military-counseling cultural conflict such as expectations to share experiences and address emotions openly in the classroom, noting that counseling programs favored a process-oriented emotionally expressive style over a goal-oriented direct style. To succeed in their programs, GSVs described engaging in several coping mechanisms to adjust and reconcile these cultural differences.

Implications for Counselor Educators, Supervisors, and Students

This study provides several important implications for counselor educators, supervisors, and GSVs. First, this study's findings show that military culture may influence GSVs' behaviors, values, and identity, and that for some, this may become an integral part of their counselor identity.

Therefore, counselor educators, supervisors, and GSVs may benefit from recognizing that certain behaviors, like the need for "black or white answers" (which are not helpful in counseling), are sometimes a product of GSVs' military background and may require additional assistance during training. The study findings may also serve to normalize GSVs' transition process into counseling programs. By exploring their uncommon but shared experience, they can understand and communicate their struggles, needs, and personal-professional identity. Better communication between GSVs and faculty can improve faculty's role as advocates for this population. Counseling programs could aid faculty development through specialized training to become knowledgeable of this student population. Counselor educators and supervisors can also host group discussions with GSVs to understand their specific needs and integrate their military identity while continually providing one-on-one conversations and recognizing that, like other populations, there are critical within-group differences. Furthermore, to empower GSVs, counselor educators and supervisors can provide opportunities such as workshops and panels, inviting student veterans as guest speakers for their subject matter expertise. Training programs could also solicit GSV participation in the enriching experience of conducting specially designed research projects. Additionally, recruiting faculty with military background or counseling experience may increase the GSVs' perception of representation. Finally, courses that incorporate content specific to military and veteran populations, specialized certifications, and GSV support groups may increase the integration of counselor and military identities.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

It is essential to consider several limitations when reviewing the findings of this study. First, while the authors intentionally recruited interviewees from multiple locations, most respondents ($n = 5$) were from a university located in the Southwestern United States, in a densely populated military city. Additionally, we utilized multiple mediums to interview participants (i.e.,

face-to-face, phone, Zoom) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have impacted participants' responses. Future research should consider a broader population in areas not heavily influenced by the local military installations. Additionally, the majority of interviewees identified as male ($n = 6$), and white or Caucasian ($n = 5$). Future research could consider exploring the impact of intersectionality between military identity, counselor identity, and diversity traits (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) on counselor training. Finally, all interviewees ($n = 8$) identified as enlisted members (E3 to E7) and represented all military branches except for the Coast Guard. Members representing all military branches and commissioned officers (versus enlisted personnel), may express different experiences than those shared in this study. Notably, the Coast Guard is the only branch of the military that has both a law enforcement and border patrol mandate, as it falls under the Department of Homeland Security versus the Department of Defense. Additionally, different than the requirements for enlisted members, all commissioned officers must have a college degree before they earn their military ranking. These distinctions may affect an individual's cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives. Overall, future studies focused on GSVs in counseling training programs could report data related to military counseling theory incorporation in counselor training.

Conclusion

In closing, this study explored GSVs' experiences in counselor training programs and the impact of military background on the transition process into these programs. Utilizing a research paradigm of Veteran Critical Theory, we focused primarily on the cultural shifts between military and academic settings experienced by GSVs throughout their counselor training. GSVs expressed challenges while also highlighting their adaptability and resilience as they challenged themselves, took chances, and integrated into their programs. Despite reporting support throughout their training, participants also desired more military cultural awareness and representation that could support

their transition and professional development in counselor education programs.

References

Albright, D. L., McDaniel, J., Suntai, Z., & Wallace, J. (2021). Alcohol misuse among older military veterans: An intersectionality theory perspective. *Journal of Addictive Diseases, 39*(4), 504–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/10550887.2021.1897201

American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics.* http://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

Barry, A. E., Jackson, Z. A., & Fullerton, A. B. (2021). An assessment of sense of belonging in higher education among student service members/veterans. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(3), 335–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1676249

Campbell, R., & Riggs, S. A. (2015). The role of psychological symptomatology and social support in the academic adjustment of previously deployed student veterans. *Journal of American College Health, 63*(7), 473–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2015.1040408

Cox, C. (2019). Military students' strengths and challenges based on their military experiences: An integrative review. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 58(7), 392–400. https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20190614-03

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches. SAGE.

Dahlberg, H., & Dahlberg, K. (2020). Open and reflective lifeworld research: A third way. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26(5), 458–464. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419836696

Department of Defense Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity. (2009, December). Military leadership diversity commission issue paper No. 6: Department of Defense Core Values. https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=716045

Elliott, B., Chargualaf, K., & Patterson, B. (2019). Committing to my mission: Faculty experiences with student veterans in baccalaureate nursing education. *Nursing Forum* (Hillsdale), *54*(4), 619–628. https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12386

Erwin, S. K. (2020). Haze gray but never again underway: The veteran borderlands. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development, 32*(3), 20–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20286

Fernandez, F., Merson, D., Ro, H. K., & Rankin, S. (2019). Do classroom interactions relate to considerations of institutional departure among student veterans and service members? *Innovative Higher Education, 44*(3), 233–245. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-019-9460-8

Findley, P., & Strong, J. (2019). Operation veterans to social workers: A military social work certificate program. *Social Work in Public Health*, *34*(7), 616–627. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2019.1635949

Fitch, T., Marshall, J., & Matise, M. (2020). *Introduction to counseling: A condensed text*. Routledge.

Gregg, B., Howell, D., & Shordike, A. (2016). Experiences of veterans transitioning to postsecondary education. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy: Official Publication of the American Occupational Therapy Association*, *70*(6), 7006250010p1–7006250010p8. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2016.021030

Halvorson, A. (2010). Understanding the military: The institution, the culture, and the people. *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.* https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/military_white_paper_final.pdf

Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in counseling and education*. The Guilford Press.

Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology.* (D. Carr, Trans). Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1954)

Interiano-Shiverdecker, C., Lim, J., Tkacik, P., & Dahlberg, J. (2019). From the barracks: A multi-dimensional model of student veteran's cultural transition. *Journal of Military and Government Counseling, 7*(3), 62–82.

Kappell, J. (2017). Student veterans' participation in high-impact practices: Veterans' experiences at three institutions of higher education in southeastern North Carolina. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 2*(1), 29–49. https://journal-veterans-studies.org/articles/abstract/10.21061/jvs.v2i1.27/

Killam, W. K., & Degges-White, S. (2018). Understanding the education-related needs of contemporary male veterans. *Adultspan Journal, 17*(2), 81–96. https://doi.org/10.1002/adsp.12062

Lee, K. (2020, October 23). *President Trump signs S.785 into law.* American Counseling Association. https://www.counseling.org/news/updates/by-year/2009/2020/10/23/president-trump-signs-s.785-into-law

Lim, J., Interiano, C., Nowell, C., Tkacik, P., & Dahlberg, J. (2018). Invisible cultural barriers: Contrasting perspectives on student veterans' transition. *Journal of College Student Development, 59*(3), 291–308. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0028

Mobley C., Brawner, C. E., Lord, S. M., Main, J. B., & Camacho, M. M. (2019) Digging deeper: Qualitative research methods for eliciting narratives and counter-narratives from student veterans. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(10), 1210–1228, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1659440

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE.

Phillips, G. A. (2016). The other, other students: Understanding the experiences of graduate student veterans. *Journal of Veteran Studies, 1,* 72–97. https://journal-veterans-studies.org/articles/abstract/10.21061/jvs.v1i1.39/

Phillips, G. A., & Lincoln, Y. (2017). Introducing veteran critical theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 30*(7), 656–668. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1309586

Post-9/11 Educational Assistance, 38 U.S.C. § 3301 (2008). https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title38/part3/chapter33&edition=prelim

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for the counseling profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44*(1), 28–48. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12035

Schermer, T. W. (2014). A phenomenological examination of veterans who become mental health professionals: Implications for the professorate. *Journal of Military and Government Counseling, 2*(1). http://mgcaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/JMGC-Vol-2-Is-1.pdf#page=19

Seamone, E. (2017). In the trenches of legal academia: Recognizing and responding to the mental health needs of law students who have served in the nation's armed forces. *Journal of Law & Education, 46*(3), 313–377.

U.S. Department of Education. (2011). Military service members and veterans: A profile of those enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education in 2007–08. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011163.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2020). Veterans' education benefits: A profile of military students who received federal veterans' education benefits in 2015–16. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020488rev.pdf

Vacchi, D. (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus, 17*(2), 15–21. https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21075

Yeager, J., & Rennie, M. (2021). Student veterans' experiences of a campus veterans center revealed through photovoice. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 69*(1), 46–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2020.1813483