

MATHWIG, AMBER M., M.A. "It's Just Different for Women": Exploring the Post-military Development of Female Veterans Attending a 4-year University (2018)  
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This research study was intended to understand how the Post 9/11 enlisted female veteran population understands their gender in the context of their active duty military experience and transition into a post-military life while engaging in higher education. Propelled into higher education via their military service and improved educational benefits via the Post 9/11 GI Bill, female veterans are accessing their education benefits at the highest rate ever. After decades of a lack of scholarship regarding this student population, there is a growing body of knowledge in the area of Post 9/11 era student veterans, how campuses should be providing support services, and the effect their service has on them during their post-military life and education. Using basic qualitative research methods and a feminist lens, the researcher found that female veterans embodied their military identity and navigated conflict while on active duty and in their post-military lives, they experience disjunction and embody their female veteran identity. Implications are listed for Student Affairs and military transition services practitioners.

"IT'S JUST DIFFERENT FOR WOMEN": EXPLORING THE POST-MILITARY  
DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE VETERANS ATTENDING  
A 4-YEAR UNIVERSITY

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Our history is etched into the creaks and cricks of our bones, often aged before their time from long treks and sleepless months and pushing our bodies to succeed when it would prefer that we stop. Our history flows with every hot tear that has and will run down our faces when the challenges had us at a breaking point and we still strode on despite them.

Our history did not ever really “begin” as if there was a time when we were not there. But our history continues each day as our sisters wake up and lace their boots, put on their stoic faces, and continue on in their mission to be part of something more than just one’s self. - (Mathwig, 2017)

In late January of 2012, I was twenty-nine years old and just beginning my first on campus college experience. While I had transferred into this private, four-year institution as a junior, I had previously only attended courses online or on military bases for the past ten years. I had attended a handful of community college courses before joining the military, courses I could barely recall the subject of if it were not for the help of my college transcripts. I was excited for college. I was excited to be leaving the military. I purposefully wore sweatpants and tie-dyed arm warmers most of the first month of classes – simply because I could. I was less excited for some of the classes I was being asked to take, in particular, an arts course that was taught with a feminist theory framework. Feminism!? Who needs that crap? (Spoiler alert, I did).

I, like many recently transitioned veterans, had a specific and narrow plan to fast track my way to graduation and that meant sticking to the outline I had been given by an academic advisor when I enrolled in my first classes. To me, this plan was rigid and deadline driven. So despite desperately trying to find another class that met the same requirements as this feminist theory class and fit into my schedule, I ended up sticking it out (and getting an A- in the course). Thankfully, by the end of the semester, something started to click for me as I watched films depicting women's experiences throughout the twentieth-century. These films ranged significantly in their content, and included *The Women*, *The Color Purple*, *My Life in Pink*, and *The Joy Luck Club*. As I learned to discuss the implications of representation in our society through a feminist framework, I started to learn something important about myself.

I had always felt something off throughout my ten years in the military. A lack of something, a desperation for belonging, unease in the pre-dominantly male environments that I was in. I had thrived – according to my own expectations and those of many of my male peers - I was indeed the “exception” for most of them, and “alright for a girl”. But my brain started muddling during the last three years I was on active duty, as I watched multiple sexual harassment and sexual assault cases unfold at my command and listened to the comments made about the female victims of these cases. I began to wonder about the root causes of the discrimination and harassment I had experienced throughout my ten-year career. My brain was awakening and the feminist theory and family

violence courses I took within one year of leaving the military provided the jolt to fully wake me up. I have never not thought about my gender as I transitioned out of the military.

As I have moved from undergraduate student veteran to graduate student veteran to student veterans assistance coordinator over the past six years, I have had the privilege of being able to share in my transition experience with other women veterans. As we laugh, sometimes so hard it hurts, about the experiences that only another female veteran could understand (“my dirty, dirty vagina” will never not be funny to me because of the extreme and misinformed ideas that male – and some female – servicemembers have about vaginal cleanliness and how a uterus impacts a person’s ability to do a job task), I also reflect upon the impact my gendered military experience had on shaping how I understand my military experience and how I now navigate through the world as a feminist, anti-war, socialist, cisgendered, heteronormative white woman veteran.

I’m forever grateful for being "forced" into my first feminist theory class with Dr. Sally Shedd, a brilliant, accomplished, and no bullshit woman and educator. At the time, I had no idea what was in store for my future – either personally or for my education or career future. I thought I had it all figured out. I know today that all veterans will experience a transitional period when they leave service. Many, like myself, will find it difficult and completely not what they expected. Women may experience a secondary shock as they enter back into a

world that is no longer predominately male and encounter civilian expectations for them to adhere to different standards based upon their perceived or actual gender identity. The veteran label may be a useful form of social capital to aid veterans in post-military education and careers, but it is important to note that veteran privilege is most available to those who perform gender in a way that is closer to societal perceptions of the ideal service member, i.e. the heterosexual white male combat veteran (Downs, 2017).

Colleges and universities should be able to provide post-military transition aid to veterans as one many of the support services that are needed for a non-traditional student population. After many years of embodying military norms, practices, and creating a personal identity that fits within the cultural framework, veterans face challenges to transition into a post-military life and into educational spaces that were not designed with them in mind. Anthropologist Ellen Moore found that no veterans they had interviewed were treated poorly by civilian students, faculty, and staff on campuses but that veterans' struggles to connect socially and emotionally to their college peers were rooted in a culture of denial about the war its effects on those who fight by providing services to help veterans feel comfortable with their post-military transition and in discussing their experiences from a critical perspective, we open up opportunities for civilian students to do the same and hopefully, just maybe start to bridge the civilian-military divide.

## **How Did We Get Here?**

Veterans of the United States military are currently attending college at the highest rates since the post-World War II era. They have been propelled into higher education via their military service and improved educational benefits via the Post 9/11 GI Bill. After decades of a lack of scholarship regarding this student population, there is a growing body of knowledge in the area of Post 9/11 era student veterans, how campuses should be providing support services, and the effect their service has on them during their post-military life and education. The veterans who served after September 11, 2001 have access to not only increased financial support for their education, but also significant changes in policies at university, state, and federal levels to aide in their pursuit of education while a non-traditional student, increasing the amount of veterans who are now accessing four-year degrees and beyond.

Of particular interest, female veterans are accessing their education benefits at the highest rate ever. While the female population in the military averages 16% (*2014 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*, 2014) they make up 27% of those who utilize education benefits (Institute of Veterans and Military Families, 2015). There is currently a dearth in scholarship around the specific needs of female veterans pursuing education and the often gendered transition challenges they face in their post-military life, even though several researchers have indicated the importance of understanding the gender development that women veterans experienced in the military needs further

research. There is currently a dearth in scholarship around the specific needs of female veterans and the often gendered transition challenges they face in their post-military life, even though several researchers have indicated the importance of understanding the gender development that women veterans experienced in the military needs further research (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Culver, 2013; Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, & Anderson, 2016).

This research study was designed to explore the issues and needs of a specific sub-population of student veterans, those who served in an enlisted capacity as females, and what they experience during their post-military transition while engaged in higher education. The transition to post-military life will be encountered by all service members at some point and the pursuit of higher education offers unique experiences and challenges as they develop beyond the military. A consideration of gender is crucial to producing relevant and accurate information on veterans' experiences and military-to-civilian transitions (Eichler, 2017). This exploratory research will fill a significant gap in knowledge regarding the experiences of female student veterans throughout their military service and its effects on their post-military identity formation. It will create a foundational understanding of the post-military transitional challenges that are specific to the marginalized female veteran population, and address female veteran success and engagement on campus. Further, this research will provide a strong foundation for building support services for student veterans to

purposefully engage them in critically thinking through their post-military transition challenges.

This is a basic qualitative research project in that I will be constructing the needed knowledge through interviews and participant feedback to inform future research that is supportive of female veterans in their process of transitioning out of the military. A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct the reality in interaction with their social worlds (Merriam, 2009). I conducted interviews with female veterans who meet the criteria listed in Chapter III, Methodology. These participant led interviews were meant to gather data rich stories, which were then analyzed for themes. By locating common themes within their different stories, this project will provide future researchers a thicker description of the intersecting identity markers of “female” or “woman” and “veteran”, as well as the effects of race, sexuality, and class upon their experiences.

From Creswell, we know that “qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” and that this can be difficult because of, “a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell, 2013)”. The meaning that individuals create from their military experience can not stand alone. Without knowing the impact of their other identities or life experiences on how they came to interpret their military experience, we can not truly understand their own interpretation of their



experience. Hancock tells us, “Difference is the home, the ontological reality from which all experiences and, more importantly, their aftermaths are dealt with in a way that does not rely on the eradication of categories (Hancock, 2016).” It is for this reason, that I provided the opportunity to research participants to read their transcripts after their interviews were completed, provide additional commentary on any topics they discussed, and shared with them my final draft to ensure I accurately interpreted their experience as they feel it applies to them.

### **Rationale for Study**

The navigation of gender, race, and sexuality in a predominately white and hypermasculine culture that values the heteronormative, white, male (combat-experienced) service member significantly shapes the experiences and development of those who were viewed and/or read as female by the United States military (the institution) and its agents (the people within the institution) during their time in service. These experiences and development carry with them into their post-military life and effect how they choose to navigate and be engaged within higher education. Universities and colleges should be prepared to provide post-military service development and transition care that acknowledges intersecting identities in the veteran population, assists students in navigating transitional challenges that include a reassessment of one’s personal needs and identities outside of the institution, and acknowledges the importance of the non-traditional student experience.

While research on gender norms often takes into account the privileging of masculinities over femininities and subordinate masculinities, a more explicit understanding of gender as a power relation leads to new questions for gender research on veterans. It is worth asking not only what role gender norms play in veterans' post-deployment and post-service lives, but also how veterans policies and programs themselves may contribute to gender inequalities (Eichler, 2017). Veteran service providers at institutions of higher education should be cognizant of and acknowledge the impact of adult development through the military, and particularly how one reads and enacts their gendered self through their military experience.

### **Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be in use:

Veteran(s): An individual, or group of individuals, who served greater than 24 months on active duty after September 11, 2001 and has no further obligations to Active Duty or Reserve military units or National Guard

Service member: An individual, or group of individuals, who are currently on Active Duty or part of reservist or National Guard units

Military-affiliated students: Terminology used to refer to all military students, regardless of veteran status

Female: An individual who was identified by the military as such for the purpose of enlisting personnel on a male/female sex-binary, viewed and/or read as female

by the military and its agents during their time of service, and subject to feminine/gendered expectations in appearance and ability.

Women/Woman: Cisgendered women, or those who were assigned female at birth and identify as a woman

Student: An individual who is attending a traditional, 4-year university degree awarding program and attends greater than half-time on a college campus

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Most university or college websites can be found to proudly proclaim, "Military Friendly School" and boast of their support for "heroes who sacrificed for our country" with little information to provide context for what their support consists of or how a hero – often imagined to be a larger than life character – can fit in to their campus community. The popular narratives of who is a veteran are often presumptive that a singular identity marker of “veteran” can be homogenously applied to all veterans and their needs while pursuing education in their post-military life. There is also a presumption that their motivations to join the military were generated solely by patriotism, their experiences were wholly positive, consisted primarily of combat, and that their life after service will resemble that of their military career. This blanket identity is also often associated with that of the stereotyped heteronormative, white, male, (combat) veteran that is engrained in our American (United States) culture.

The scholarship created in the wake of efforts to fill a void of information on the Post 9/11 generation of veterans pursuing education after service is often focused on mental health concerns in student veterans. Contributing to the gap in this current scholarship on women veterans is the failure to acknowledge that United States women have served valiantly and with distinction since the

Revolutionary War. While men's experiences have been set as the model and stereotyped as complimentary to their sex role in our society, women's experiences have been erased or de-valued. As long as this continues in not only the research but in the societal view of valuable military service, females in the military will be forced to view their service as asynchronous to their gender instead of complimentary. Trying to navigate an environment where one is constantly challenged on their right to exist in it creates a dissonance that will also have an impact on their self-concept both in and out of that environment.

### **Study Population**

The United States military enlists people utilizing a binary system based upon biological markers of external sex organs to determine whether one is enlisted as "male" or "female". Until June 2016, the military did not recognize transgender persons and actively discharged anyone that might identify as such with gender dysphoria or other mental health diagnosis ("Department of Defense Transgender Policy," 2016). Changes to this policy were made on January 1, 2018 and transgender people have been allowed to enlist in the military but numbers of recruits or military members who identify as transgender are not yet reported. Due to this sex-binary policy, neither the term "female" nor "woman" may fully encompass the population to be studied. The population of veterans in this study are those who were identified as female by the military for the purpose of enlisting personnel on a male/female sex binary, viewed and/or read as such by the military and its agents during their time of service. This is meant to limit

the study to those who experienced the military through the gendered lens of enacting “woman” or “womanhood” and having an experience informed by this marginalization. They were therefore beholden to specifically gendered expectations of physical capabilities, mental capacity for war-fighting, and predominately male/masculine cultural experiences. Military personnel are held to standards of their physical strength and appearance that are based upon a gender binary strictly associated with traditionally recognized and conflated gender/sex roles that are often constitutive of whiteness, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity. An easier way to understand this idea regarding a specifically gendered experience is to know that there is no female experience in the military that is devoid of the effects of men or masculinity but that military men may have experiences without women or femininity. Challenging the dominant accounts, those that start with the experiences of men and attempt to find difference, and developing new questions for research that are attune to the power dynamics that structure women's lives are at the forefront of feminist research (Downs, 2017).

Females are a significant minority population in the military. Women endure numerous kinds of “tests” (for example, sabotage, constant scrutiny, and indirect threats) that men do not necessarily experience to prove they are capable of serving in the military (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). Despite popular belief that the role of females in the military is growing, there was only a .2% growth of enlisted females on active duty between 2001 and 2014. Active

duty enlisted females averaged 14.8% across the four military services in 2014 (*2014 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*, 2014). The Marine Corps had the smallest percentage of females at 7.7%, Army at 13.2%, Navy at 18%, and Air Force at 18.7%. Table 1.1 shows the percentage of female enlisted persons and their total number in each service branch from 2000 and 2014.

**Table 1.1.**

**Enlisted Female Service Members by Service for Years 2000 & 2014**

|              | <b>2000<br/>%</b> | <b>2000<br/>#</b> | <b>2014<br/>%</b> | <b>2014<br/>#</b> | <b>%<br/>Change</b> | <b>#<br/>Change</b> |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Marine Corps | 6.10%             | 9,499             | 7.70%             | 12,781            | 1.60%               | 3,282               |
| Army         | 15.50%            | 62,491            | 13.20%            | 53,859            | -2.30%              | -8,632              |
| Navy         | 13.60%            | 42,750            | 18%               | 48,079            | 4.40%               | 5,329               |
| Air Force    | 19.20%            | 54,344            | 18.70%            | 46,696            | -0.50%              | -7,648              |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>14.60%</b>     | <b>169,084</b>    | <b>14.80%</b>     | <b>161,415</b>    | <b>0.20%</b>        | <b>-7,669</b>       |

Research suggests that in the year proceeding October 2014, 15.66% of females in the Air Force experienced sex-based Military Equal Opportunity violations (Sexually hostile workplace, sexual quid pro quo, and gender discrimination) with increasing percentages in the Marine Corps (31.43%), Army (28.62%) and Navy (32.16%) (Rand Corporation, 2014). Those who experienced sexual assault, were 2.9% for Air Force, 4.69% Army, 6.48% Navy, and 7.86% of Marine women. This equates to about 41,919 females experiencing any sex-based MEO violation and 7,860 females experiencing an instance of sexual assault in one calendar year.

What we do not currently know about the female veteran population, particularly as it relates to the more gender balanced university setting, is how the experiences of being a female in the military continues to inform their concept of self and their choices as they navigate their post-military life. Enlisted females have often joined the military during their formative adult years, late teens to early 20's, and have experienced their adulthood as a marginalized population in a hypermasculine environment with limited agency in their professional or social pursuits. By saying limited agency, I am meaning to convey that the choices females in the military often need to make are done so within a very limited frame of understanding and options that exist within the male-dominated environment. The long-term effect of this may be seen in some mental health related research but has not been evaluated from the viewpoint of continued adult development or informed the practices of campuses and universities in their support services.

### **Military Culture/Gendered Socialization**

The military is a total institution that provides all needs an individual might have in order to survive. It provides food, shelter, clothing, and a familial structure with a defined sense of purpose, or mission, every day. The average age of enlistment is 19 years old, with service members serving an average of 6.7 years. This means that service members spend their formative adult-development years in the military and often for a significant amount of time. The secondary socialization and indoctrination processes occur at a time in one's life where our society both expects and requires formalization of an adult sex-role



identity (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978). The recruitment and training of men for military service has long depended on that boys will become men through aggressive conditioning model of the masculine-warrior (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978), a process that still exists today in Marine Corps recruit training, the last service to hold out on gender integrated basic boot camp training. In the literature I have reviewed, there does not seem to be a similar concept of what military training is supposed to do for females who join, in the context of finalizing their adult-sex role identity. There is no female masculine-warrior in U.S. culture, women's history in the military is barely taught to recruits beyond a handful of exceptional "firsts". There is no discussion on the impact of spending several years of one's life in a highly gendered environment. While feminist theory is often critical of naturalistic explanation of sex that assume the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology (Butler, 1988), in the military there are policies, regulations, and historical context to support that a specifically gendered experience exists for all members but particularly those who were enlisted as females.

Gender, while often applied as a descriptive category for research conducted on women veterans, is less understood to centrally shape veterans' experiences and involve both masculinities and femininities, relations of power and inequality, or the intersections of gender and other categories of social difference (e.g. sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, etc.) (Eichler, 2017).

Feminist historian Joan Scott distinguishes between three uses of gender in research as a "descriptive", "causal," and "analytical" category (Scott, 1986). Gender as a descriptive category adds women into research as subjects of study but does not explain the history and nature of unequal power relations between women and men. Gender as a causal category aims to explain how structures of inequality are linked to women's subordination. Finally, gender as an analytical category treats gender as a constitutive element of social relationships that is based on perceived differences between the sexes. In this latter approach, gender is understood in multiple ways: symbolic, normative, political, and in relation to individual identity (Eichler, 2017; Scott, 1986).

Research on the military life experiences of female veterans is usually conducted around three main areas that focus on descriptive or causal categories of analysis. This research will say that female veterans have not been allowed to serve in combat, that their military experience is largely informed by sexual assault/harassment or gender discrimination, and that they experience an identity crisis throughout their service and continuing in to post-military life. While these areas of focus are important and do speak of the significant impact of sex/gender-based discrimination that shapes the experiences of all service members, it often neglects the flip side of these issues in that that women have served in combat regardless of regulations and their careers were negatively affected by not being able to apply their roles to their resumes in the same manner as their male counterparts, that many women persist in the military for

many years or even an entire career despite sexual assault/harassment or gender discrimination because the socioeconomic benefits of remaining in service outweigh the costs of reporting or leaving, and that the identity crisis is likely related to the military's pseudo-attempts at erasing gender bias while simultaneously supporting a structure that allows all females to be treated as lesser capable persons than all males, regardless of their abilities and contribution to the team and mission.

Burkhart and Hogan, women veterans mental health researchers, utilized a seven stage grounded theory that processed the transition into and out of the military for women veterans and consistently found that while not all servicemen participated in harassment, verbal abuse, and sexual innuendoes, that this behavior was tolerated by all levels of the chain of command, leading to chronic stress (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015) of female service members.

There is also extensive research that female service members must navigate gender, being neither too masculine or too feminine, as an essential component of their military identity. The navigation of gender roles, along with the negative view of femininity in warrior archetypes, insists that female service members are often viewed and view themselves in complicated roles. Women, thus, must walk a precarious line between masculinity (being tough enough) and femininity (being a real woman) (Iverson et al., 2016).

Victoria Culver (2013) proposed a Gender Identity Development of Women in the Military theory to explain the discomfort of female military

members in navigating their gender. Adapted from the grounded theory of College Men's Gender Identity Development by Edwards and Jones, Culver identifies the four phases of women's identity development as, 1) Putting on a mask (Warrior Insecurity or Femininity insecurity), 2) Wearing the mask (covering aspects of their true selves that did not meet expectations), and 3) recognizing and experiencing the consequences of wearing the mask, and 4) Struggling to take off the mask (Culver, 2013).

Melissa Herbert's research on gender, sexuality, and women in the military was one of the first of its kind at the time of publication in 1998. She found that women in the military must do gender in such a way as to carefully negotiate terrain that often appears designed to make the venture as difficult as possible (Herbert, 1998). Herbert found that 2/3 of the women in her study answered affirmatively that women were penalized for perception that they were "too feminine" by being: ostracized or disapproved of by other women, viewed as a slut or sexually available, perceived as weak, perceived as incompetent or incapable, limited in career mobility and were not taken seriously. Herbert also identified an important aspect of the gendered culture in the military, in that women are also policed by other women for their behavior.

In 2011, Patricia Lewis and Ruth Simpson re-examined Rosabeth Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977), which analyzed the effects of gender and power in the corporate work environment. They demonstrated how hidden dimensions of power can be revealed. Kanter had named the 85 men, 15

women ratio as the “skewed” workplace ratio, which is also the average ratio in the military until 2016 (highest for Air Force, lowest for the Marine Corps). In the skewed group, the women were identified as a “token” within a peer group of men who are subject to control and determination by the majority male members of the group who enact a certain sensitivity to protect themselves. Because of this, women were left being challenged on three aspects:

- 1) Their heightened visibility means they are subject to performance pressures which require that they either overachieve or seek to reduce their exposure,
- 2) They became isolated while dominants emphasize their own commonality while highlighting the token’s difference,
- 3) Distortion of the social characteristics of ‘tokens’ according to the dominant’s own stereotypical beliefs set up a situation of ‘role entrapment’ whereby women are forced into a limited number of work positions (Lewis & Simpson, 2012)

Demers, who specifically studied women veterans who had served in Iraq post September 2001, found that while women veterans received the same indoctrination as male veterans into the military culture and increased their expectations of themselves and others, and inculcating strong team loyalty, it does not appear female veterans were afforded higher status, and they quickly learned that, although they perceived themselves as being equal to their male comrades, male soldiers neither viewed female soldiers as equals nor fully

exhibited loyalty and comradeship towards them (Demers, 2013). Her recommendations to aid in the transition of women veterans back into a civilian community were to 1) provide both formal and informal support groups, 2) military cultural competence training that informs practitioners on the unique needs of women veterans, and 3) transition groups for families, partners, and friends of veterans.

Downs (2017) has completed the most extensive research of women veterans reintegration and their relationship to military masculinity to date. Her research found that women veterans negotiated and performed gender, often masculinity, in a way that worked for them within the military environment but had to be renegotiated when they entered the civilian setting. In her interviews with 50 women identified military veterans, they did not identify any traits that make a good service member as specifically masculine or feminine, but did stress that a good female service member possesses the ability to "have thick skin, not be easily offended, be tough, and be able to take things with a grain of salt." Downs also noted that the ability for female agency to be amplified through the various power games that are played in a hierarchical and gendered military environment can result in a power female autonomy, by having a liberating effect and redefining what it means to be female or woman to the individual.

### **Student Development and Transition Theories**

Nancy Schlossberg's "4S Transition Theory" is a popular model in student veteran research. Schlossberg determined that the individual who has

experienced the event or non-event is the one who creates the meaning of the Self, Situation, Strategies, and Support that they may need or encounter (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Researchers have provided multiple implications for supporting student veterans through the use of Schlossberg's theory. Heitzman and Somers found that female student veterans access to and resilience in education was significantly influenced by their understanding of their benefits and the presence (or not) of dependents (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Diamond discovered four key themes related to the successful transition of veterans to higher education, 1) Appreciation of Military Service, 2) Environmental Acclimation, 3) Perceptions of Environment, and 4) Articulation of the Future (Diamond, 2012).

Vacchi argues though that Schlossberg's theory, while a good starting off point, fails to adequately address the transition into college and "ignores the many potential identity shifts veterans might take as they depart combat and military service (Vacchi & Berger, 2014)." Jenner is also critical of the use of Schlossberg's theory, stating that "Schlossberg's work is intended for both individual students and college counselors and tends to emphasize individual responsibility and individual action in relation to a transition...this individual level focus is a weakness of these types of studies, as it occludes many important institutional and group level factors (Jenner, 2017).

To expand on Jenner, I propose that using Schlossberg's theory to develop student support transition fails in two main ways. First, previous

researchers fail to acknowledge the development of an individual through the military as a total institution. Through military service, they enter adulthood in a “coordinated and controlled range of work, living, and emotional experiences” (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978) that are informed by the overarching mission of the military, which is seen as both a service that is protective of the nation and a service that participates in war. The individual service member, having been militarized as a subject of the state, comes to embody the military through their very being. It must be acknowledged that they were developed through tangible/visible (and often contradicting) ideas, qualities, or feelings that were represented by or representative of the military or the social status they were told/believed they held within the military and within our society at large. This is not a singular type of idea, quality, or feeling. Each individual veteran will have created their own meaning of military service, and their place within it and within our society from the specific experiences they had; and going forward they will continue to create meaning in their post-military life in individual ways.

Additionally, each individual brings a unique background and motivations for joining to their military service. *Missing Perspectives: Service members transition from service to civilian life* (Institute of Veterans and Military Families, 2015) found that the attainment of educational benefits was the primary reason (53% of respondents) for which people chose to enlist in the military, with desire to serve their country (52%) and pursuit of travel and adventure (49%) following close behind (Institute of Veterans and Military Families, 2015). Along with the



knowledge that 62% of Veterans Affairs Education Benefit (VAEB) users are first-generation college students (Engagement, 2013) it might be surmised that those who pursue military service largely come from working class backgrounds with limited financial access to obtain a college degree and have motivations for joining the military beyond patriotism. Senk found that demographics and life story experiences had a significant impact on female veterans choices to pursue the military as a means of accessing education (Senk, 2015). Senk also found that while her study subjects emphasized the role of their partners, parents, or military mentors in supporting them in their transition to the university, none mentioned relationship with college peers, friends, or with other female veterans (Senk, 2015).

Second, many researchers fail to acknowledge that the institution of the military does not provide a wholly good experience in most individuals who become part of it. *Missing perspectives* reports that loss of faith in military and/or political leadership was the top reason for people leaving military service (36%) (Institute of Veterans and Military Families, 2015). Many post-military transition theories discuss the loss of the mostly invisible supportive structures, military specific traumas from combat or sexual violence, and being unable to find comparative experiences with civilian peers. They fail to fully acknowledge the effects of gender discrimination on both male and female military members. This includes but is not limited to hypermasculinity, toxic hierarchical structures, high operational tempo resulting in strained relationships with loved ones or poor

health, or any other myriad of specifically militarized experiences. They also fail to acknowledge the lasting effects of participation in war, as an actor, agent or subject, and the actions or feelings that are often contradictory to civilian life or beliefs about one's participation in war, which is a topic that will likely be discussed in most college classrooms and students should be prepared for this as part of the transition into higher education.

### **Student Veteran Research**

Vacchi defines veterans as "any 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)." He also notes that this definition may not meet the legal definition of veteran as determined by the government but is an all-encompassing definition that will enable campus officials to meet the varying needs of the military-affiliated student population.

Due to the variance of definitions and available data to campus officials, the presence of veterans on college campuses is not fully known at the institutional level. Many campuses did not request military-affiliated personnel to self-identify on their college applications or in student profiles until recently. For those campuses that do, it remains a voluntary choice for the veteran. Most universities will count their Veterans Affairs Education Benefit (VAEB) users as their military population. This again is faulty. Assuming the university knows to differentiate between the use of VAEB by those who have served or are serving

and the use of VAEB eligible dependents of veterans or active duty personnel, it is still impossible to say that “X” amount of veterans are at the university. In addition to the presence of active duty personnel using various means of paying for their education, veterans may not be eligible for benefits, have already utilized all their benefits, are saving benefits for professional or graduate school, or have shared their benefits with eligible family members. This in turn means it is difficult to know the true numbers of veterans, especially female veterans, at any given university.

The best estimates to determine the presence of student veterans who identify as women comes from the Institute of Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University which suggests that 27% of Post 9/11 GI Bill users who served in the military are female (Institute of Veterans and Military Families, 2015) and the Student Veterans of America 2017 report that found 20% of Post 9/11 GI Bill users (who were not dependents) had been identified as female (Cate, Lyon, Scmeling, & Bouge, 2017). This suggests that female veterans are likely using their benefits at higher rates than their male counterparts.

The reasons for the significant differences in female military representation versus educational benefit users have not yet been fully explored in the literature and is out of the scope of this investigation as the purpose of this investigation is to provide a framework for supporting women in their transition out of service and less in their motivating factors to attend school after service. It could be surmised that more female veterans are seen because women are

attending college in higher numbers overall, women may be more compelled to seek socioeconomic status change through military service, or that because of the social norms of the military as an institution, that service is *not enough* to advance socioeconomic status for women without additional education.

Many researchers address the help-seeking abilities, or lack thereof, that are exhibited by military veterans. Vacchi states, “Veterans come from a demanding environment, and veterans generally desire to meet or exceed expectations...a side effect of this culture is that few military members, ergo veterans, want to be the weak link on the team and may seek to avoid negative stigmas (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014)”.

When females become the focus of student veteran research, the research often starts with a presumption that the material needs, such as understanding the GI Bill and navigating university bureaucracy are either the primary needs or that somehow these concrete needs of all students may be a gendered experience that differs from their male counterparts. When researchers find that the material needs are not different, they have concluded women veterans experiences in the university do not differ from male veterans (Iverson et al., 2016). It is the intention of this thesis to make women’s concrete experiences - not their needs – the “point of entry” for research and scholarship, exposing the rich array of new knowledge contained within women’s experiences that will begin to fill in the gaps on the subject of women in many disciplines (Brooks, 2007). Through identifying their experiences as it relates to their

gendered sense of self in conjunction with their veteran identity, we will be able to more holistically support not only female veterans, but all veterans in their transition needs.

Due to female veterans experiencing a double consciousness of their experiences as both a female and a veteran, the data and theories derived from their stories can provide us with a broader foundation on which we can build support programs that will assist all veterans in their post-military transition. Further, by retelling the history of their participation in military service and of their post-service experiences from their perspective (Scott, 1986) one can begin to address the often gendered divide throughout the veteran community and within the sociocultural practices of our society's failure to recognize women-identifying and non-gender conforming people as veterans. Addressing this gendered divide may lead to a healing or therapeutic process for veterans.

Student Affairs professionals should be knowledgeable of the varying aspects of veteran identity and the importance of having a working understanding of intersecting identities when working with this complex and often inappropriately homogenized group of individuals. Heitzman and Somers address identity development as a goal of their study, but do not appear to have asked the right questions to generate a response to this and their results were limited, again, to marginalizing the female experience to concrete needs of all veterans (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to identify the marginalized and oppressed

experiences of black women through race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). Since that time, feminists have used this term to analyze how gender, race, class, ability, and other identity markers may overlap and create multiple oppressions on an individual and/or larger groups of people who hold similar intersectional identities. While women in the military as a group experience discrimination and oppression based upon the markers of "female" and "woman", women of color in the military experience further marginalization due to racialized and gendered stereotypes of hypersexualization and aggressive behavior.

Student veteran research has many opportunities to explore the impact of military service on the development of one's understanding of race, class, gender expression, and sexuality and its implications after service. Military members are often asked to compartmentalize their personal lives as well as various aspects of their identity in favor of bigger purpose and the mission of the military. Veterans researchers need to interrogate the military as an institution and ask tougher questions about military specific experiences or traumas, how young adults are developed into adulthood through military service, and the long term effects of participation in a hypermasculine institution. Student Affairs professionals have further opportunities to challenge some of the assumptions of working with non-traditional student populations by exploring the needs of marginalized veteran communities beyond concrete needs.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Challenging dominant accounts and developing new questions for research that are attune to the power dynamics that structure women's lives are at the forefront of feminist research. - (Downs, 2017)

This is a basic qualitative research project in that I will be constructing the needed knowledge through interviews and participant feedback to inform future research projects that are supportive of female veterans in their transition process. I conducted interviews with female veterans who met the criteria listed in the next section. These participant led interviews are meant to gather data rich stories, which can be analyzed for themes. Locating common themes within their different stories will provide future researchers a thicker description of the intersecting identity markers of “female” or “woman” and “veteran”.<sup>1</sup>

From Creswell, we know that “qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” and that this can be difficult because of, “a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell, 2013)”. The meaning that individuals create from their military experience can not stand alone. Without knowing the impact of their other

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<sup>1</sup> This research was also intended to explore race, sexuality, and class but the data did not yield substantial results for analysis. This is likely due to the limited population size of which 4 out of 5 participants identified as white and all identified as cisgendered, heterosexual women..

identities or life experiences on how they came to interpret their military experience, we can not truly understand their own interpretation of their experience. Hancock tells us, "Difference is the home, the ontological reality from which all experiences and, more importantly, their aftermaths are dealt with in a way that does not rely on the eradication of categories (Hancock, 2016)." It is for this reason, that I will provide the opportunity to research participants to read their transcripts after their interviews are completed, provide additional commentary on any topics they discussed, as well as share with them my final draft to ensure I am accurately interpreting their experience as they feel it applies to them.

The navigation of gender, race, and sexuality in a predominately white and hypermasculine culture that values the heteronormative, white, male (combat-experienced) service member significantly shapes the experiences and development of those who were viewed and/or read as female by the United States military (the institution) and its agents (the people within the institution) during their time in service. These experiences and development carry with them into their post-military life and will effect how they choose to navigate and be engaged within higher education and other organizations in their post-military life. Universities and colleges should be prepared to provide post-military service development and transition care that acknowledges intersecting veteran identities, assists students in navigating transitional challenges that include a reassessment of one's personal needs and identities, and acknowledges the



value of the non-traditional student experience. Veteran service providers at institutions of higher education should be cognizant of and acknowledge the impact of adult development through the military, and particularly how one reads and enacts their gendered self through their military experience.

To accomplish this participant centered qualitative research, I also utilized Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, which is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to 1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and 2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change (Brooks, 2007) that must be located, and analyzed, within broader relations of ruling or social structures (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Smith, 1987), particularly in the context of the military. In feminist research approaches, the goals are to establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative (Creswell, 2013). With this in mind, throughout the research process I have had to recognize my own positionality in this research and how it impacts my interpretation of my participant's stories. I also think it is also important to note that I do not think any of my interview participants would agree with the use of the word "oppressed" to describe their social status in the military. This will be examined further in the analysis.

## **Positionality**

As part of the research process, I needed to recognize my own positionality. My role as a researcher is informed through my own social, cultural, and historical experiences. It is because of these experiences that I am driven to research military and veteran culture through the lens of feminist theory, with a particular focus on those who served as females in the military.

I am a white, heteronormative, cisgendered woman. I was raised in a conservative Christian and predominately white farming community of less than 2,000 souls in the Midwest. I would classify our socioeconomic status as lower-middle class, in that we did not lack for basic necessities and owned the home we lived in throughout my childhood; but we did not easily access extra or expensive possessions or vacations. My parents were working class individuals who were also extremely active and well-known for community service in and beyond our community. My mother received a Registered Nursing degree prior to the requirement of a 4-year education and has worked in some aspect of healthcare her entire life. My father joined the Marine Corps immediately after high school but was dismissed for health-related reasons before he was able to complete boot camp. He worked service jobs, owned a restaurant for 18 years, and then again worked in both labor and managerial positions in a manufacturing company until his death. I have two older brothers, one who has a 2-year technical college degree and works in engineering design and the other who has

worked in manufacturing and service industry. Both of my brothers are disabled due to a genetic blood disorder.

Since I existed in the time before the internet, I accessed the world outside of my community through a voracious reading habit and our family's regular hosting of foreign exchange students in our home. While a mediocre student, my intelligence was above average and was well complemented with the "Protestant work ethic" and a general philosophy in our family to always do the best we can at any job, regardless of the skill or educational level required. I started working at our family restaurant when I was very young and had over a dozen, mostly long-term jobs in the service industry and farming prior to joining the United States military at the age of 20.

Most significant to this research project, I am a woman veteran and I currently work in higher education assisting veterans in transitioning to the university. Having scored high on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, I had received regular calls from recruiters during high school and beyond but never seriously considered the military as a place for me. Propelled by the ethnocentric nationalist narrative following the events of September 11, 2001, I enlisted in the Navy one month after my twentieth birthday in May of 2002 and served until February of 2012. Not only did I serve in a branch of the military comprising only of approximately 14% females at the time of my enlistment, but my specific job in the Navy was as a Master-at-Arms, or more commonly known as a Military Police Officer. This was, and remains, a predominately male job. I

can even recall derogatory statements being made against the inclusion of females on previously all-male watch sections (which consisted anywhere from 30-40 people at the time) at my very first command. There are other jobs in the military, which have much larger populations of women, generally correlating with traditionally feminine jobs in the civilian world, such as healthcare or administrative positions.

While I initially struggled at some of the physical aspects of the military, I excelled quickly by showcasing my quick grasp of military policies and regulations, adhering to and navigating the hierarchical systems, and an understanding of the complexities and challenges of police and force protection work. I came to love the physical aspects of the military, such as firearms marksmanship, strength training, and self-defense tactics and dedicated myself to always showing my abilities to be more than what my peers assumed they could be.

I experienced a significant amount of sexual harassment all throughout my service, though it dissipated some as I advanced in rank and seniority. Additionally, I was sexually assaulted by acquaintances, fellow Naval personnel, in 2007. Through my own internalization of rape myths and the victim blaming that is prevalent throughout the military, I did not process this at the time of the assault. I have processed it, and the associated victim blaming and rape-culture of the military, heavily in my post-military life.

I experienced gender discrimination at almost every point of my career. I was denied dynamic job opportunities, pigeonholed into administrative work, labeled and processed as an alcoholic, often encountered the presumption that I was either unable or unwilling to complete a requirement, and barely seemed to have escaped presumptions that I advanced quickly by providing sexual favors to senior male leaders (at least to my knowledge, very few people made this presumption). While some instances stand out more clearly than others, it happened so frequently that I also internalized and participated in the discrimination against fellow female sailors. I became frustrated with the structural aspects of the Navy and started to become more aware that it was this extreme gender discrimination that was a root cause of much of what I was experiencing and witnessing at my last command. In particular, reports made by junior female sailors of sexual harassment or assault were often dismissed or mishandled, with the blame placed heavily on the young sailors. This toxic command environment, a severe depression following my father's death, and what I would later learn was a fairly serious thyroid issue led to my decision to leave the Navy after an almost 10 year career, despite advancing quickly and being recognized by most as an intelligent and driven Sailor and a fair leader. I was tired of having to prove myself all the time – not just as capable, but as *more* capable than my male counterparts. Or as one of my research participants, Paula, put it, I was not able to ever be in “that nice little safe spot, that boys are

almost always in, men are almost always in unless they are like, straight shit bags.”

I had partially utilized the military as an escape from a community in which I felt I did not belong. While I felt as if I had a role and purpose in the military and had a secondary family on whom I could depend and have many incredible memories, I also largely felt as if I was the single point of failure in the end, the reason I could not remain in the environment. My military experience was significantly different from the experiences that I was told mattered simply because of the biological sex and gendered identity that I was and am today. I struggled to name and discuss my experiences until I encountered gender studies in my post-military transition and education.

My experiences in the military had also helped me to realize the importance and value of a college education. Oddly enough, both the start of my associate’s degree and my bachelor’s degree were as an alternative to the high amount of partying I was doing at the time. It was the achievement of my associate’s degree in Criminal Justice that enabled me to advance early and become more proficient in police work. It was the courses I had already completed towards a bachelor’s degree through an online school that gave me the opportunity to enter in to a traditional university with junior status while I was still on terminal leave with the military in 2012. Despite my initial hesitation against feminist theory (understatement of the year right there), I quickly became intrigued with feminist studies and understanding structural violence. I decided to

pursue a master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies to further understand Military Sexual Trauma (MST), which led me to more broadly explore the gendered military culture and its implications on those who have served in the military. It is also important to note that while I struggled in my undergraduate studies from not realizing that I was woefully behind in my knowledge of how the institution of higher education and academia worked, it was not until I actually moved for graduate school, fifteen months after I left active duty, that I experienced the whole brutal experience of a post-military transition.

During my time as a student veterans service provider – twelve months as a graduate assistant and currently finishing my third year as a professional in Student Affairs, I have continued to see this theme of “the women veterans transition experience is different” play out in my students and even spoken directly to by several female/woman identified students. They want to name their experience and discuss why it matters to them now. They want to not be ignored, dismissed, or thought less of by either their male veteran peers or from the faculty and administrators of the university. My drive for this project is heavily situated in providing validation and support for my fellow female/women veterans in ways that I did not know how to do when I was in service.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity addresses two central questions that concern feminist researchers – what can we know and how can we know it (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012)? In asking if my sex/gender matters in undertaking this research to

advance the understanding of the female experience during and after the military, it absolutely does. Code states, "The fact of being male or being female seems to be fundamental to one's way of being a person in such a way that it could have a strong influence upon one's way of knowing. The question is, then, whether there is knowledge which is, quite simply beyond the range of the cognitive capacity of one or the other half of the human race; whether there are kinds of knowledge which only men, or only women, can acquire (Code, 1981)". I have heard even the kindest, seemingly most aware male veterans dismiss specifically gendered experiences of females as valid of the military experience or even as something normative to the female military experience.

I am reminded fairly regularly in my professional and personal life that what I know as a woman veteran is often seen as invaluable, or worse, non-existent, in the eyes of those who do not hold these two identities in tandem. Throughout the years, my voice has been silenced as a holder of knowledge in our community in favor of a male's voice, my physical presence as a veteran erased in the company of men, and my subjectivity to be able to serve all veterans questioned. These experiences have influenced my research project deeply in the time that I have been slowly working through it. I do not want to silence other women veterans voices in favor of my own, I do not want their presence erased in the company of men (or relate their existence as only an extension of men's), nor do I want their ability to understand the military experience at large be questioned due to their specifically gendered experienced.



## **Research Questions**

To be able to create meaning from women's experiences in the military as a gendered subject that can be used in supporting servicemembers in post-military transition, we must first create baseline knowledge of how they interpret their roles in the military environment or when navigating post-military life as a veteran. The research questions were meant to broadly define women's experiences.

Research Question 1: In what ways does military service shape how one understands their gender as a military member and veteran?

Research Question 2: In what ways do women/females who served in the military navigate being a female veteran?

## **Participant and Site Selection**

Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit female veterans, who had served at least twenty-four months on active duty as an enlisted female after September 11, 2001, had been separated from military service for greater than twelve months at the time of our interview, and was currently pursuing or had graduated from a four-year university after completion of their service. Participant recruitment was initially attempted through mass e-mailings to an identified list of female student veterans at my educational institution (Appendix I). While several females responded with interest, they did not meet the study criteria. I identified additional female student veterans at my place of employment that met the study criteria and direct e-mailed several students with whom I had previously

established working relationships. All students who were direct emailed chose to participate in the study. I have experienced the importance of this method of contact in supporting the student veteran population, finding a significantly higher response rate to program attendance or assessment completion when the participants are directly emailed and a personal connection is identified.

This study was limited to those who were identified by the military as female, having experienced the military by being subjected to the gendered standards of “woman”. This study does not address the experiences of transwomen or non-gender conforming assigned male at birth persons (those who were enlisted into the military as males despite/in spite of their identification as woman or non-binary). This study is also limited to females who joined the military as an enlisted person in order to highlight those who did not have access to or success in higher education prior to their military service. This study does not include females who were enlisted in to the United States Coast Guard (USCG). While they are able to receive similar education benefits from the Veterans Affairs Administration, the USCG is considered a Department of Homeland Security, not Department of Defense. The small numbers of female enlisted members in the Coast Guard does not suggest a significant impact on the research results.

This thesis and its broad application are specifically for those who have completely separated from the military. This is of particular importance when considering reflection on one’s military service, identity development, removal of

the “invisible safety net” that is provided, commitment of one’s physical self to the military and distancing of oneself from the cultural aspects of the military community. While parts of the research and subsequent theory development may be applicable or helpful to the active duty, reservist, or National Guard community, this project is not meant to substitute for the lack of research in supporting women-identified student veterans who currently identify as active duty, reservist, or National Guard member.

Additionally this study was limited to those who completed or were pursuing completion of their 4-year degree after they separated from military service. Their access to or motivation for education prior to service may also be an important component in considering a student veterans use of university resource or support services.

### **Introduction to Participants**

The participants are all current or former students of a highly competitive, Carnegie Research 1 (R-1), primarily white, liberal arts institution located in the southeastern United States. This is also the institution for which I am employed, meaning my familiarity with each interview participant goes beyond the context of our interview.

The participants were contacted via email, which explained the purpose of the study and what they would be asked to do if they chose to participate (Appendix II). They would be asked to participate in an oral interview, complete a short survey online after completion of the interview, and to provide feedback on

their transcribed interview and further analysis. The interviews were transcribed to include all speech patterns whenever possible. The participants were offered \$10 Starbucks gift cards in exchange for their time. Each interview participant is utilizing a pseudonym of their choosing. Some transcriptions used in this thesis have been lightly edited for clarity and ease of reading.

The participants met with me in my office during the workday for their initial interviews. We spent several minutes catching up on what had happened in their lives since we last met and discussing the extraordinarily hot weather that our area had been experiencing. The casual conversation was intentional to put the participants at ease and to remind them that they were sharing their experiences with another woman veteran. Structured interview questions were used to help guide the conversation (Appendix III) In reflection, I have asked myself what power differential existed in this setting, given that four of the five participants were still students of the university and users of the services I provide for student veterans. Additionally, they all had a general awareness of my research interests in feminism, military culture, and women veterans and may have been hesitant to share deeply from concerns around saying something I would disagree with or challenge. As a researcher and educator, I recognize the challenges in wanting to find a balance between letting the participants interrogate their experiences with the information they have available and wanting to provide them with everything I know to give them a deeper and richer understanding.

After the initial transcriptions and content analysis were completed, in consultation with my advisor, I decided to pursue holding a focus group with my interview participants as well as well. I updated the Internal Review Board approval accordingly. An underlying reason for the focus group was for the women to contextualize their own experience by having another woman veteran's to compare it to that was not mine. As a woman veteran, I have participated in focus groups before and felt it was very cathartic to hear other women's stories, making it easier to tell my own. Additionally, I wanted to share my themes with the women in a manner which would allow us to have a more in-depth conversation than e-mail exchange might have provided for these extremely busy students. The women were emailed and asked to respond to a Doodle poll if they were interested in participating further with a focus group (Appendix IV). The women would be provided a meal worth approximately \$12.00 in exchange for their time.

All five women met in the conference room at my place of employment during the regular work/school day. We did introductions while eating and talked about everyone's degrees plans and Paula's new job. Four of the women were familiar with each other, with 2 of them being close friends. One woman did not know anyone. There was quite a bit of discussion around nursing programs as three of the women had or were interested in pursuing a nursing degree. The women were very open with each other right from the very beginning of the focus group and shared many stories and a lot of laughter with each other.

**Paula.** A white woman in her mid-30's, Paula joined the United States military in 2002 and served for almost 9 years in the Marine Corps as an Airframe Mechanic. During her time in service, she deployed to Iraq three times. Paula identifies as a white cisgendered, heterosexual woman. At the time of our interview, Paula had been in a long-term relationship with a cisgendered man and retired Marine for several years (they have since married). She has 1 adult stepchild and 1 step grandchild. She graduated with a degree in Biology and recently graduated from a different R-1 university with a degree in Nursing. She had been separated from the military for 6 years at the time of our interview. Paula was also involved in the early stages of conceptualizing my research when she often met with me shortly after my hire at the university to discuss her experiences as a student and woman veteran.

**Mandy.** A white woman in her early 30's, Mandy joined the United States military in 2003 and served for 9 years in the Army in the communications field and psychological operations. Mandy deployed several times to the Middle East and was also one of the first women to be attached to Ranger units in Afghanistan as part of Female Engagement Teams. Mandy identifies as a caucasian, cisgendered, heterosexual woman. She is married to a cisgendered man and Army veteran for 2 years at the time of our interview. She does not have any children. She is currently pursuing a degree in Exercise and Sports Science and is a licensed massage therapist. She had been separated from the military for 5 years at the time of our interview.

**Sadie.** A white woman in her mid-20's, Sadie, joined the United States military in 2011 and served for 4 years in the Air Force as a Geospatial Intelligence analyst. Sadie identifies as a white, cisgendered, heterosexual woman. In the time I've known her, she has only maintained romantic relationships with cisgendered men who are or were in the military and is currently in a long-term relationship with a cisgendered man who is on Active Duty in the Air Force. She does not have any children. She graduated from the university with a degree in linguistics and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Speech Pathology at the same institution. She had been separated from the military for 2 years at the time of our interview.

**Liz.** A white woman in her mid-20's, Liz joined the United States military in 2011 and served for 4 years in the Navy as an Aviation Ordnanceman on an aircraft carrier, that deployed 1 time. Liz identifies as a white, cisgendered, heterosexual woman. She has been married for 3 years to a cisgendered man who is on Active Duty in the Navy. She has one young child. She is currently pursuing a degree in Nursing. She had been separated from the military for 2 years at the time of our interview.

**Cassandra.** A hispanic woman in her early 30's, Cassandra joined the United States military in 2008 and served 7 Years in the Air Force as an Aerospace propulsion specialist. Cassandra identifies as a hispanic, cisgendered, heterosexual woman. She is engaged to a cisgendered man who is on Active Duty in the Air Force. She does not have any children but was

pregnant at the time of the focus group. She is currently pursuing a degree in biology. She had been separated from the military for 2 years at the time of our interview.

While unintentional, it was not surprising to have interviewed women who were all involved in long-term relationships with military-affiliated men.

Anecdotally, based on 16 years of conversations with fellow servicewomen about heterosexual dating and marriage in the military, women may share more kinship with men who also served in the military, have likely experienced discrimination or fetishization in dating civilian men who are intimidated by their service, or find that the disproportional amount of men to women in the military expands the dating/marriage pool wider than the normal workplace setting.

The 2015 DOD Demographics report states that 20.3% of active duty women (to include officers) are in a dual military marriage, compared to just 3.9% of active duty men (*2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*, 2015). This report does not differentiate between same sex and binaried sex couples. It is relevant to note that women are more likely to be in a dual-military affiliated relationship because it impacts their perception of their veteran-ness, as some of the participants indicated in their interviews. As some of their comments from the interview may also suggest, they may have benefitted from the social support of being in a relationship with a military-affiliated member at the time of their exit from the military by being with a partner who had also experienced the



post-military transition process or by being able to maintain some of the social and financial support systems that an active duty member would still be receiving. This may be a topic for future research.

### **Additional Data Collection Procedures**

After each participant's initial interview, they were sent an electronic survey in which they were asked to identify their pseudonym of choice and to list their race/ethnicity identification and their gender and sexuality identification before and during service and at the time of the interview. This information was gathered after the interview to allow for the participant to identify, without prompting, if their race/ethnicity and sexuality identification mattered to their experience as a woman in the military.

The women were each provided a copy of their interview transcript and encouraged to provide feedback or further commentary on what was discussed. Most of the women wrote one email to clarify something they had said but did not communicate further. Two of the women discussed some of the interview with me in passing conversations when I saw them in person.

### **Data Transformation and Representation**

Following Merriam's guidance, I first listened to and read through my interview transcripts multiple times. By doing this, I was able to start hearing cues for identifying segments in the data sets that were responsive to my research questions (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data (Merriam, 2009). This allowed me to start identifying properties, or

categories, as I read through each interview and made notations, a process called open coding. Next, the open codes were analyzed for meaning as I understood them but also in how I interpreted the participant's understanding. Axial codes, or grouping the codes by themes, were then assigned based on this understanding.

A challenge in assigning axial codes was in recognizing the depth of difference between my understanding of the gendered military environment and that of most of my interview participants. I could tell from the hesitation to answer some of the questions that they had not thought of having served in the military as a gendered subject despite all voicing frustrations with being thought less of as a female military member, experiencing harassment related to being female, and expressing relief in being able to wear more feminine clothing in their post-military lives.

## CHAPTER IV

### UNDERSTANDING GENDER

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of the patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.

– (Butler, 1988)

#### **Introduction**

This research study was intended to gain insight into how the enlisted female veteran population understands their gender in the context of their active duty military experience and transition into a post-military life while engaging in higher education. Chapter IV will cover the themes found for research question one, which asked: “In what ways does military service shape how one understands their gender as a military member and veteran?” Chapter V will cover the themes found for research question two, which asked: “In what ways do women who served in the military navigate being a female veteran?” Several themes with multiple properties for each were found in the individual participant interviews through the process of axial coding, which is the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These themes were then shared and discussed with

the interview participants in a focus group and given the opportunity to provide feedback on the theme or discuss which themes resonated more with them and why.

Research question 1 asked “In what ways does military service shape how one understands their gender as a military woman and veteran?” The data from the interviews elicited 2 themes, each with two subthemes:

- 1) Embodying the military identity
  - a. Navigating gendered role expectations
  - b. Women veterans have moxie
- 2) Navigating conflict
  - a. Conflict with other military-affiliated men
  - b. Conflict with other military-affiliated women

When asked to describe what it was like to be a woman in the military or to be a woman veteran, the participants did not necessarily say what made them a woman in the military or a woman veteran. Instead, they were more likely to describe what made them, or other military females, *not* men or to be perceived as *not* a warrior. This observation of their experiences correlates with Downs’ research (2017) whose subject led interviews did not name traits for a good service member as specifically masculine or feminine but did name traits that female service members specifically needed to have in order to assimilate to the military environment, such as having thick skin, not being easily offended, and “being able to take things with a grain of salt”.

The women have constructed an understanding of their performance of gender in the military, based in part on their backgrounds and the career fields that they were in, that enabled them to navigate being both servicemember and woman – roles that are viewed by society to be incongruent with each other. They did not see their roles in the military as something that they were not capable or unwilling to do. However, they did recognize understanding that females – which they seem to have understood as both a biological sex category and an expression of femininity that is usually innate to that sex categorization – were seen as problematic in the military. Additionally, they voiced that some females/women used “femininity” negatively, and through their stories I interpreted that often the use of femininity resulted in benevolently sexist behavior on the part of the male military members (a paternalistic type of behavior that believes women are less capable and therefore need protection from men). Throughout most of the interviews and focus group, they talked about masculinity and femininity, or male and female, as descriptive categories – describing gendered differences between male and female service members as if they were innate - and had a limited analysis and understanding of the power relations that take place in a gender binary. When asked specifically about what it was like being a woman veteran, Liz shared she had not thought about it at all, while Paula stated she very clearly saw that she was purposefully very masculine in the military and now prefers to be more feminine, to include her profession of choice, stating, “Male Paula was a mechanic, and female Paula is a nurse.”

Paula has continued to inscribe expectations of gender roles to her career choices.

As I will explore in the following two themes, women in the military are constantly navigating gendered role expectations and experiencing conflict – some conflict which exists due to the institutional and hierarchical structures of the military, but also conflict that is created by the gendered role expectations.

### **Theme I: Embodying the Military Identity**

The women have created a visible identity of the contradictions that often come from performing multiple gendered roles in military service by navigating gendered role expectations and having moxie. Often the environment and context in which they are performing gendered expectations is varied. The participants had experiences that ranged from working in air-conditioned office buildings and large hangar bays stateside to being deployed to Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan in roles that had them working on flight lines or engaging with the local national population in combat operations. Additionally, Liz deployed on a United States naval carrier, which is large enough to hold a crew of 5,000 people and everything they need to conduct multiple operations at sea for several months at a time. Despite these vastly different experiences, the participants found commonalities to bond over during the focus group and through their pre-existing friendships with each other.

The two sub-themes for embodying the military identity are 1) navigating gendered role expectations, which includes performing masculinity, responding

to negativity about their occupation of male space, and dealing with harassment; and 2) Having moxie, which includes experiencing marginalization and being resilient/perseverant.

**Sub-theme I: Navigation of gendered role expectations** The women must navigate multiple gender roles in the military and understand the appropriate times to be feminine or masculine or to strike a balance between the two. If they were perceived as too feminine, they would be read as incapable of doing their job because of being a woman. If they were read as too masculine, they may be read as a “dyke” and therefore not sexually available to the majority male population, reducing opportunities for the men to prove their sexual prowess and perform manhood - an essential component to the performance of military masculinity. When women perform masculinity, it must be used at the appropriate times to assert their right to exist in the previously all-male spaces. The women also provided many examples of times in which they had to deal with harassment or discrimination due to their gender.

The participant’s interpretation of gender roles were informed through both their knowledge of gender roles prior to joining the military and their experiences they had once joining. Three of the women expressed that they were less concerned about being a female in male space because they had either grown up with all males for siblings and/or without a mother. Three of the women also referred to themselves as “tomboys”, meaning that prior to joining the military they exhibited traits they commonly associated with male children, such as

playing sports, shooting guns, or regularly using rough talk. Paula, at one point in the focus group, said she was able to fit into her shop's culture faster than the two other women that arrived at the command around the same time because she had brothers and understood that she had to treat her co-workers like her brothers and "be just as gross about lady things as they are about guy things". Paula is referencing that she needs to talk openly about bodily fluids/smells and sex to be accepted by her colleagues.

***Performing masculinity.*** The women mentioned multiple ways in which they interpreted their actions as a performance of masculinity. For some this was in their physical fitness levels, regular swearing (which increased throughout the focus group conversation to the point we were laughing about "how the memories just bring the language back"), or in changing their emotional mindset in the military work environment, or as Cassandra described, having to become "harder":

The first year was a little hard, silently crying to myself...I could shit-talk back, but others would take it to the extent of it wasn't playful, it was just I am picking on you because I don't want you here. You're female, I don't want you here.

In our initial interview, Mandy made an exaggerated up-down motion with her right hand near her crotch after describing how she perceived males reacting to her:

Mandy: So, that was, that was really interesting because now you're a female working with, you know, special operations command guys who



extra don't like females because they're just like extra macho. Oh well, you can't do what I do that's what makes me great as a man. Obviously, I'm here so (exaggerated motion) yeh, that was another thing too.

Interviewer: What is that called?

Mandy: The jerk off motion.

Interviewer: I just need to put that in my notes

Mandy: and it's good for me because I don't have one [penis] so it makes it funny, I think

Interviewer: At what point in your Army career did you pick that up?

Mandy: Ah man, early.

Interviewer: Early?

Mandy: Yeh, when someone says something really stupid and you're like (insinuates jerk off motion) it's just kind of your way of saying F off, yeh, whatever. But, yeh I don't, I try to retire that because new life, new me, but not really, I'm still there.

Mandy has acknowledged that some of the adaptive behaviors she learned in the military in order to successfully navigate a hypermasculine environment may be maladaptive or inappropriate in civilian settings. More importantly, Mandy has acknowledged that while she may be conscious of those behaviors and not to use them in certain settings, they will always inform part of who she is. Mandy and Cassandra both adapted to their environment by picking up mannerisms that they felt were necessary to perform in the masculine environment.

***Responding to negativity about their occupation of male space.***

Mandy relayed a story about how she had to stand up for herself in the initial

days after arriving at a Ranger unit in Afghanistan. She first shared how hostile the environment felt upon her arrival at the unit:

When we first came, because we were the very, the pilot program, the test, the trial run. So we showed up there and immediately, immediate hostility. It's like half the dudes were just 'we hate your face because you're a woman and have a uterus. Oh my god, you're like in my space. The other half is like, 'hmm, maybe this could work.

In addition to feeling looked down upon during her briefings and "Get in the kitchen" type memes being posted throughout the building they lived and worked out of, a penis was drawn on Mandy's laundry bag (like all personal items in the military, the laundry bag was labeled with her last name). Mandy demonstrated moxie and deployed a performance of masculinity by how she chose to assert herself in this hostile and hypermasculine dominated space:

Mandy: I was like, hey, Tex, his last name, I was like, hey, funny story, somebody drew a dick on my laundry bag. I purposefully was speaking loud because the commander sat like three feet away from him. He was like "what?", he heard me talking and he was like "what happened?" I was like "oh, no big deal, you know (laughs) he just drew this little guy on bag, on my laundry bag " and then you could tell he wanted to laugh, but he was trying to hold it in, and was like "alright, well, we'll take care of this". I was like "alright, sir, no big deal" (laughs) and I'm like "I'm going to need to get a hand writing sample from everyone, I need all of you to draw dicks so I know whose this is. And, like, that got some laughs. And then I was like, on a side note I'm sorry for whoever drew that because clearly all you had to go was off your own, so I'm sorry it was so small. I just really joke sick. They kind of left me alone after that. With the stupid little picture of whatever laying around. That was, uh, yeah, that was my like "welcome to deployment". That was within my like first 2 or 3 days, so.

Interviewer: Oh, wow, so do you think it got better then?

Mandy: It did, but because those guys rotate out every, like, three months and I was there for eight, I worked with all three, so it kind of sucked

because the first group of guys left and the second ones came in, so it was like starting from scratch.

While Mandy had succeeded in occupying the male space despite the initial gender discrimination, she had to continue doing this each time she encountered a new group of men. A similar sentiment was relayed by Paula, Marine Corps veteran, in the early development of this thesis. She shared that while she had volunteered to go to Iraq with another unit, her command chose a lesser qualified and less motivated male instead:

No, why would you give a female? It's basically what that was, thrown at me like, we wouldn't want you to have to, he said, we wouldn't want you to have to get used to whole 'nother group of guys. Thanks (sarcastically), that was really great, courteous of you to consider.

In both examples, the onus of responsibility for integrating to the group was upon the woman – essentially meaning that she had to adopt the group norms instead of the group evaluating her for the contribution she provided to the unit. It is likely that the feelings and associated behaviors that women have in having to defend their right to be in predominately male spaces continues into their post-military lives and informs how they choose to be involved in veterans activities or programs.

***Dealing with harassment.*** Dealing with harassment in the military is defined as experiencing a Military Equal Opportunity violations (Sexually hostile workplace, sexual quid pro quo, and gender discrimination) and understanding the consequences that it has on individual female servicemembers. The most

common experiences that the women shared were being subjected to environments in which conversations were heavy in sexualized language or being told, overtly or covertly, that they did not belong in the military because they were females.

When the themes were shared with the focus group there was some pushback on the use of language that suggested all men as perpetrators of the harassment and discrimination that females experience in the military. The women shared that men could be their biggest supporters, particularly those who worked directly with them. They felt they had been able to show their "worth" to the team/mission and within their small teams or shops they were valued but that could change when they were in their larger units or divisions.

Social location for women in the military is largely determined by a villain/victim dichotomy. Women are always already victims because they are presumed to be weaker, less capable, and detrimental to the overall military purpose of fighting in a war (Mathwig, 2013). Women can overcome some of this division by appropriately navigating the time and spaces they chose to speak out against discrimination or inappropriately sexual conversations. Sadie shared that one of the ways of dealing with inappropriate workplace conversations was pretending when uncomfortable situations were not happening.

Sadie: Those are like really light examples but most of the jokes were sexual to be honest

Interviewer: Did you feel uncomfortable with all of that?

Sadie: Sometimes, but to get through, to make it though, you have to pretend it's not happening. Or just kind of let it roll, roll it off your shoulder, you know? Just like, eh, whatever. Boys will be boys.

While all of the women were able to identify experiences that happened to them specifically because they were women, they did not seem to connect these experiences to the gendered roles women in the military are expected to fulfill or to their performance of masculinity or femininity. When asked specifically about what it was like being a woman veteran, only Paula had seemed to consider what it meant to be both a woman and a veteran.

Because in the military, it was very like "I'm masculine" I had that mentality of like "I'm just gonna be a guy, I'm gonna dress in clothes that don't show my figure, and I'm gonna be the dude, I'm gonna talk like a dude." And then when I got out, I was like "cool! I can wear clothes like a dress! Or skirts!" I mean I did those things, too, in the military, but it was like you could do it more freely, you didn't have to think about spaghetti strap tank tops or your flipflops...It took um, [five years] letting it be ok to be feminine, um, 'cause I did see some of it, like, how badly it was looked upon being feminine in the military.

Paula had associated that expressing being feminine or wearing the prescribed military uniform in a manner which accented feminine figures would result in being targeted for discrimination or harassment. Paula took intentional steps to make herself look less conventionally attractive, as a means to create a barrier against harassment while in military service. This had a long term effect, up to five years, on Paula after her service as she attempted to redefine herself as a feminine person outside the military.

**Sub-theme II: Women veterans have moxie** I have chosen to use the google dictionary definition of moxie, which is to have a "force of character, determination, or nerve" to describe the participant's experience with navigating the military as a member of a minority group. Moxie was deployed when they experienced being marginalized or had to navigate gendered role expectations in the military. During the focus group, all of the participants strongly nodded or voiced their agreement with this term and its definition as an appropriate description of their assessment of self in their military experience. While some may have had a semblance of moxie in them before the military, the military brought forth significant challenges, which strengthened it. Mandy came in to the military with moxie, knowing she was not going to be allowed to pursue the job that wanted – combat infantry – due to sex restrictions at the time of her enlistment, so she asked to be placed into a job that would get her the closest to it.

***Marginalization.*** Marginalization is defined as the experience that the women have due to the small numbers of women in the military and in most military units, that they are viewed as less capable by their male counterparts and perceived that they had to work significantly harder than their male peers to receive the same recognition. The women talked about exclusion or being seen as socially unacceptable in varying ways, from their presence being ignored in their work spaces to not being able to socialize with their male peers because of expectations or perceptions about their sexual availability or romantic interest in

their male peers. Often just one of a handful of women in a largely male group, the women were seen as tokens, or symbolic representations of inclusion and equity in military service only.

So, I would get a little frustrated not only because of the jokes but because a lot of people were just kind of unmotivated, just sort of sitting there not doing their jobs and I just felt like, I don't know, since I wasn't like in with the bros or in with this workout crew, you know, or this network that they had I was just kind of like, singled out sometimes. – Sadie, Air Force Veteran

Being the token meant not just experiencing marginalization but also that there was heightened visibility on their performance which required that they either overachieve or reduce their exposure. The women in this study all felt they had worked harder because of their marginalized status, giving more meaning to their contributions to their units and were proud of their achievements.

**Minority status.** Minority status is defined as the quantitatively determined low representation of women in the military and in most military jobs/units. As stated earlier in this thesis, females are a significant minority population in the military with representation of females in the enlisted ranks just reaching 14.8% in 2014. Given that four out of the five women interviewed for this research project were also in fields that have even smaller numbers of females than their representation in service over all, it was not surprising to hear them say that they were often one of a handful of females in their workplace. Their minority status was emphasized when they were either entering a work place as the first female, when they were excluded from the more social aspects

of their unit or when they felt they were invisible as women to the dominant male group.

Um, yea I would say it was probably like 30/70 or 40/60. Um, so at least I always had females around, but I did find myself in many situations where I'm like oh, I'm looking around and I'm the only girl here right now. You know, (laughs). Well I think, just and, this isn't just military base this is just any situation you're the only girl and in any situation in civilian life, military life whatever. I feel like, the guys just pretend that you're not there and they just go on making their guy jokes. And they think, and they just assume like you're alright with that. - Sadie, Air Force Veteran

Despite being a minority in their units, the women continued to have moxie, "force of character, determination, or nerve" as they dealt with both the challenges of military service but also the challenges of being a woman in a hypermasculine culture. The women all seemed to have continued to push for excellence and high expectations for themselves during and after their active duty military service time.

***Viewed as "less capable"***. The participants shared that as women in the military, they had to always prove themselves to be capable before they could be accepted by the group, something they did not perceive their male peers to have to do to. During the focus group, Mandy shared about having to prove herself to the Army Ranger unit she was assigned to, and the relief that came once she knew they trusted her to be on missions "after weeks of integration and busting my ass". Cassandra replied stating,

It's like once you prove that you knew your stuff...but isn't it disappointing that if you were guy, there wouldn't be a question of whether you knew



your stuff? But as a female it's like, question of “do you even know how to use these things?”

Comments like this were prevalent throughout the interviews, as the women shared that they often experienced supervisors thinking they couldn't do as much as male military members and that being able to prove them wrong came with pride, self-satisfaction, and respect from male military members who recognized their value. An exception to that respect from male military members could be determinant upon the group size, as some women also pointed out that in small groups such as work divisions or on deployment they felt accepted, but as the social group would grow larger, they were not seen as favorably.

***Perseverance and resilience.*** Perseverance and resilience is defined as overcoming adversity in the face of difficult experiences and feeling a sense of accomplishment because of it. Women veterans persevered and were resilient in spite of the many challenges that came from being considered not a member of the primary in group. Many of the challenges the women faced were due to the perceptions their co-workers had of all female military members, regardless of whether they had previously worked with females in the military or not. Mandy had an experience where she was one of the first women to work with an all-male unit, and some members of that unit expressed a dislike for women just as much as men in units who had been integrated for several years. Cassandra expressed satisfaction of proving military peers, mostly men, wrong was empowering for her. She took pride in doing work that was challenging.

What I did find that I dealt with was proving to be worthy of being in the career field because you being a woman, you know, it comes with stereotypes and false beliefs about using femininity to get away with things or to not have to work as hard or to get as dirty and comments like that did come with the job...especially in the situation where they have had a previous female come work and did not create a good image of herself and so that was passed on to anybody else who kind of worked in that area. But it was very satisfying later on to prove them wrong, you know, because I think I got to earn their respect even more because of that. - Cassandra, Air Force Veteran

The women shared different stories related to how they navigated their social exclusion in order to reassert their own sense of belonging, and combined with their other military experiences, believed that this made them more resilient in other challenges after they left the military, particularly while pursuing education.

It is also important to note that in the military context, perseverance and resilience is often defined as “pain”. In military training exercises, physical training, or even the challenges of long work days followed by late night watch (when you are assigned to a certain place for security, observation, or monitoring purposes) it is normal to hear phrases of “suck it up” or “no pain, no gain”. Military members also witness people consuming multiple forms of stimulants or bragging how many hours they have been awake. The perceived ability to overcome the physical constraints of the human body is to be applauded in a military setting. This likely has a strong effect on the mental constraints that military members experience as well.

## **Theme II: Navigating Conflict**

Conflict in the military is defined as the conflict that takes place on the interpersonal level amongst members of a unit. Military members must navigate these personal and professional relationships on a multitude of levels. There is a very strict hierarchy that is expected to be obeyed, regardless of the order or direction being given. There is also workplace conflict that would take place in any environment, but in the military may be exasperated by the amount of time that military members spend together – often living, working, and socializing together with each other from days to months on end with little reprieve. Additionally, there is conflict that comes from outside sources as well, such as family members and friends who are not military but have significant influence over their military member's choices and actions.

The two sub-themes found for managing conflict were 1) Conflict with other military-affiliated men and 2) Conflict with other military-affiliated women.

**Conflict with other military-affiliated men.** Managing conflict with others is being defined as the way women chose to respond to issues that arose in the military environment related to disagreement or dissatisfaction with others. All of the women spoke about needing to do this and in feeling as if their response to conflict was often criticized for being overly emotional.

While conflict occurred with all military members, the conflict that occurred with men military members resulted from either issues with orders being given by superiors or men obviously reacting to their perceptions of gendered behavior

that the women were exhibiting. Cassandra also mentioned that for her, it felt as if the men sometimes targeted her for being both a woman, emotional, and Hispanic, having a temper, that led men to dismiss her frustrations or questioning of poor orders being given. She also expressed that when she and her fiancé were working in the same unit, they were often frustrated about the same things but she would try to address them immediately, while he would only complain about the situation later on, which would not result in any change to the issue.

Senior leaders who were being hypocritical, either not setting an example for junior service members to follow or doing the opposite of what they were supposed to be doing, were significant areas for conflict. But there was also more nuanced conflict that took place in the daily interactions the women had with other service members and frustration with the limitations on how they could respond to it. The women also shared that they felt they had more leeway to be critical of leadership or others after they had proven themselves as capable in their respective jobs. They felt that addressing conflict was more productive and empowering than not addressing it.

**Conflict with other military-affiliated women.** Conflict with other women is defined as conflict between female-identified service members or women who had a peripheral relationship to the military based on their partnerships with military men. From how I interpreted the women's experiences, I observed that their perception of conflict with women was presumed to exist in a way that conflict with men was not. Conflict with women existed because "women

automatically have their guards up”, “don’t trust each other”, or because women were perceived to be deploying femininity – whether in a professional capacity or in their sexuality - in a way that could make other military women look bad. They did not provide specific explanations for why they felt women have their guards up or don’t trust each other, but the theme of how one woman’s actions reflect on all military women resonates throughout this research.

Each interview participant discussed at length in either/and interviews and the focus group about their conflicts that took place with other military-affiliated women. Sadie talked about an experience in which she was harassed by senior women in her technical school class for her hair being perceived to not be within grooming standards and later on for presumed sexual relationships with other men/women in the class. Sadie's harassment led to her being "washed back" (set back) in her training after the women, who were appointed as class leaders, claimed she failed an exam – for which they refused to let her see the exam, leading her to be in school for nine months longer than she was originally supposed to be. This set the tone for her relationships with female supervisors in her career, and as we will discuss in the analysis and conclusions, had an impact on her post-military educational experience as well. Paula spoke about witnessing her roommate pushing another woman against the wall by her throat shortly after her arrival at her first command. Mandy stated that "rolling out in a gun truck" while on a fifteen-month deployment in Iraq was less stressful than sharing a tent with dozens of women while on deployment. I asked the focus

group if they felt that the ability to be a woman in the military was a limited resource (i.e. only one or a few women can be seen as acceptable to the larger male population), and after some discussion around what this might mean, they agreed that they felt women had to compete with each other for acceptance into the male dominated space and social circles.

We literally put up walls like the deployment walls we built, I think we all avoided each other as much as possible at the sleep tent because we were just all deathly exhausted and come in with headphones on and that's it...I also think that some of that is because we all experience the same thing as women. At some point you kinda unintentionally turn on each other because we're all fighting at the end of the day for the same kind of recognition. – Mandy, Army veteran

All the women confirmed in the focus group that managing actual or perceived conflict with jealous wives of their male colleagues was also a regular occurrence for them. Paula and Cassandra both voiced conflicts they had with spouses of their male co-workers, which prevented or delayed them from establishing camaraderie with the men they were going to deploy with. Paula decided it would be safer to not socialize with the group right at the beginning of her tour with this unit and did not develop trusting relationships with them until trainings that were away from their home base or on deployment.

I remember when I was first going out with my shop, I was brand new to the unit, maybe 2 or 3 weeks, and my gunny pulls me out and says, "Hey, we need to go" and I'm like, "Ok" but I'm drunk, so I don't know why and the next day he says, "hey you gotta watch how you act around the wives and he was like, well, it looked like you put your hand on somebody's butt, and I was like, that's not what happened but ok. It was the small of their back, and I wasn't touching, 'cause you know, like I was aware of things,

but not aware of everyone else's perception of things...so I stopped going out with my shop, and I just stayed in my barracks room. - Paula, Marine Corps Veteran

All of the women identified at least one woman they felt they became very close with while on active duty, but this was usually after some hesitation or fighting had already taken place and that an isolated deployment was also usually involved in forming these bonds. Additionally, they all agreed that in their post-service life they felt their closest friendships were with other women veterans, who tended to understand them more than non-veteran women, even if it is often difficult to identify other women veterans. Veteran spaces on campus, such as student organizations or orientations, provided them all an opportunity to identify at least one other woman veteran they could initiate a friendship.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ON BEING A FEMALE VETERAN**

In this chapter, we will discuss the findings from research question two. Research question two was “In what ways do women who served in the military navigate being a female veteran?” elicited two themes, each with two subthemes.

- 1) Experiencing disjunction
  - a. Role Exit
  - b. Navigating womanhood as a veteran
- 2) Embodying woman veteran identity
  - a. (In)visibility
  - b. Transitional support needs

As previously stated in the introduction to Chapter IV, when asked to describe what it was like to be a woman veteran, the participants were more likely to describe what made them not a man veteran. The research participants perceived men veterans to more likely be recognized by society as veterans, as they are able to adopt a specific veteran look that could be identified by other military or civilians as such. Additionally, the women voiced that men veterans are more likely to engage in talking in-depth about their past military experiences, referred to as “dick-measuring contest” or a way to establish a hierarchy of



valuable military service. One of the women expressed that she felt this provided protective factor for women veterans in not experiencing or experiencing less discrimination on campus related to their veteran identity. As we will explore in the following themes, the participants expressed concerns with transitioning to a post-military life, being a student, expressing physical or emotional aspects of femininity, and aligning their veteran identity with that of their men-identified partners.

### **Theme I: Experiencing Disjunction**

All of the participants interviewed shared issues related to their exit from the military that highlighted they were experiencing disjunction in their lives, or a lack of consistency due to the military and their post-military lives being distinctly different from each other for many reasons. These differences can often be difficult to understand as a whole group concern, as opposed to an individual concern, because the structure and safety net that the military provides is often invisible, or something that the day-to-day importance of is not understood until you no longer have it.

Not exclusive to women veterans is that the circumstances under which one leaves the military are very important to being prepared for the experience. While some service members may have had their transition planned for some time, others may be experiencing it rather abruptly. Additionally, transition services for active duty personnel are often designed for the "lowest common denominator" and may not provide enough information or support services for

those pursuing education or vocational training, parents, women, LGBTQ-identifying, psychologically traumatized, and more. Some veterans may not even understand or are actively ignoring what the magnitude of their need for support or transition services is until they have left the safety net of the military.

As we will explore in the following two themes, women veterans experience the significant impact of role exit when they transition out of the military and learning to navigate womanhood as a veteran.

**Sub-theme I: Role exit.** Role exit is defined by Ebaugh as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self identity and the re-establishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role (Ebaugh, 1988).” As with any significant life change, the women veterans I interviewed experienced a sense of loss that went beyond material socioeconomic changes such as decreased income and loss of job title. They also experienced burnout at the end of their enlistment, differing range of support from senior leadership, personal turmoil, and losing the status of the role they filled in the military.

Role exit included the circumstances under which they left the military and experiencing a loss of structure that was important to them.

***Circumstances under which they left the military.*** Circumstances under which they left the military is being defined as the situation in which the women felt they left the military on good or bad terms. As discussed in Chapter II, Schlossberg's Transition theory often plays a role in helping to understand the

changes being experienced by student veterans. One of the 4-S's is Situation. The veteran's knowledge or understanding around why the role exit is happening, whose choice was it (individual or military), acknowledging that this is (most likely) a permanent change, and what other stressors might exist during this transition all impact how they experience it.

Often times the experiences relayed by the women veterans in answering research question one, "In what ways does military service shape how one understands their gender as a military member?" may be a contributing factor in their choice to have left the military as well, thus relating to their understanding of the situation they are in. Gendered experiences of military service and norms of masculinity have been linked to female veterans prematurely departing from the military (Eicher, 2017; Dichter & True, 2015).

So that was to me more frustrating and then you had to work even harder to get even less credit because you have all these special forces rejects running around thinking they're just super great, I'm like, oh god! So, that cemented my decision, this is for sure done, I'm getting out, I'm ETS'ing, I even started a club called Team ETS<sup>2</sup>. - Mandy, Army veteran

Mandy also received negative and classist connotations from her command that made light of the difficult experiences of many veterans, but particularly those of women veterans who are at increased risk for suicide, homelessness, and psychological traumas than their male peers, mostly linked to personal trauma experienced or exasperated by military service. This lack of

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<sup>2</sup> End of Time in Service

support, coupled with her other military-specific experiences, created an environment for a difficult transition out of the military.

I just felt really lost, to be honest. It took me a long time to, 'cause I had this idea of what I wanted and this plan of how to get there, but, in action, in the middle of it, I just felt unsure, extremely unsure, and is this going to work? Am I going to be successful at this? I actually went through a really, I think everyone does, rough like, loss of sense of self, they lost the sense of self...and I started drinking a lot. Like, every day. I actually broke my ankle because I drank so much I blacked out and I don't remember breaking it. That was a huge turning point. I don't drink like that anymore, um, and I definitely value having four limbs a lot more than I did...and having a functioning mind, to some degree, that's debatable (laughs). And applying myself more, so I guess, it was the, out of the negative situation, because of that I moved into a positive place. - Mandy, Army veteran

Mandy's experience was echoed by Paula, who also had a difficult transition, and Cassandra, who shared that at the end of her career she was just very tired from everything. Alternatively, Liz felt she had a very supportive command environment. Having been on her maternity tour<sup>3</sup> at the time she received acceptance to the university may have given her an advantage in her transition.

It was an easy transition. I was on shore duty at the time, I had just had my daughter. Um, the E-6 I had at the time, she was a career counselor so she was helpful in getting my paperwork right and transitioning out. It was also very supportive because I had already been accepted into [redacted], so to everyone it was a big deal and very excited for me...yeh, but if I was still on the ship, I think it would've been different, because a lot of them expected me to be a lifer. - Liz, Navy veteran

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<sup>3</sup> In the Navy, a maternity tour is when a female is reassigned to a command that is non-deployable and considered non-hazardous during their pregnancy and remains there until a certain amount of time after the pregnancy.

As well, Sadie did not report any issues with the circumstances under which she had left the Air Force. She had purposefully joined the military to help pay for her college education and only planned to do one enlistment. She did report difficulties with finances and loss of sense of importance as she returned to waiting tables in the six-month period between leaving service and starting at the university.

**Loss of structure.** Loss of structure is defined as no longer having the career and social routines that are part of military service. All the women shared that losing the structure of the military lifestyle for them was a significant concern and that there was a need to find balance in their post-military life. The identified lost structure presented itself in various ways, from how one's day was planned, to ensuring physical fitness continued to be part of their daily routine, to differences in dealing with separation from a deployed partner. The women found more time during their day that needed to be filled and ability to make more decisions about what they could do to fill that time, which was previously dictated by their military superiors and deployment/training schedules.

Um, like schedule for sure. I stay up later. Get to sleep in a little bit more (laughing). Um, giving up PT (physical fitness) for school. I'm used to having that part of my regular day...yeh, it makes me feel better about my self-image and self-esteem when going to the gym. But it also helps relieve some of the stress of everyday life, of school, of family...finding balance was a major barrier at first, because um, which I stress a lot because I wasn't balancing, like, time with my husband, time with my daughter, school. It was just school, school. Because I want to, because I was stressing, I got the grades I needed to apply to the nursing program.  
Liz, Navy veteran

Cassandra shared that processing her fiancé's recent deployment was different now that she was in school instead of on active duty. Although they had both deployed before while together as a couple, this was the first time he had deployed after she left active duty.

Study, study, study, great, go home, go to sleep, eat, go back, go to class, but when I was in [service], I could go to a job and I could talk to other people and hang out or go to lunch or something like that. It took your mind off of it.

The military provided consistency in not just having an important job in a larger mission, but also a social group. Even if some of the group experiences were negative, they still experienced a sense of camaraderie and support that they were not sure they could find elsewhere. As a total institution, the military provides for more than just physical needs, but also social and emotional, in ways that can not be replicated in non-institutional settings.

**Sub-theme II: Navigating womanhood as a veteran.** Navigating womanhood as a veteran is defined as the expression of physical and emotional characteristics that the women believed were more socially appropriate in civilian settings than what the military allowed. The ability to be “more feminine” was important for all of the participants. In addition to allowing themselves to be comfortable with a larger range of emotions than what they previously felt allowed, the women expressed a change in their physical presentation of self, specifically in their choices to wear dresses or feminine clothing. Paula shared that she felt free to wear dresses without restrictions on the width of the straps on

the dress or the type of associated shoes she chose. Mandy stated she wears yoga pants and t-shirts to class because she goes to the gym regularly on campus after classes and is also in a more physical degree plan. But she owns a lot of dresses and likes to wear them for comfort, particularly on the extremely hot summer day our interview took place.

I know this is going to sound silly, but clothes! I mean, what do I wear? (laughs) No, I didn't have that hard of a time with clothes, but it definitely felt different presenting myself as me, as a woman, as a person. Not in a uniform, not looking like a 12-year old boy (laughs) having to present myself as a female, or state my own first name. That was kind of hard to change.

When asked about adjustments she found herself making in her transition, Liz shared that she had difficulty, "Figuring out what I'm going to wear everyday because I don't have a set uniform (laughing)!" While she initially wore work-out clothes to class every day, her husband insisted he take her shopping. Liz stated he "is more into fashion than I am" and picks out many of her clothes but she tries them on and maintains the final decision of what she actually purchases.

Sadie, who had purposefully joined the military for education benefits and had a significant training set back due to harassment regarding her personal grooming (discussed in General Transition Challenges), was more excited about being able to have freedom in her post-military identity expression:

Yea, like I can paint my nails black. Grow my bangs out, seriously just all those stupid rules, and wear all my earrings and I have so many piercings and I was just so, ugghhh frustrated, and I could only wear one pair of spherical earrings. Yea, I was just so done with that.

While in the military, the women had to conform to a certain image that relied on the belief that wearing feminine clothing, painting nails black, or wearing flip-flops were the antithesis to presenting an exemplary military figure. They learned this through the explicit policies and regulations that they were to adhere to as lawful general orders, as well as the less codified policing of their presentation of self as a military member by fellow service members. Adherence to a hegemonic group image is important to the institutionalization, and for some women after service, they may experience a discomfort in going against it. This discomfort could result from either feeling as if they are going against their military based identity or in unfamiliarity with regularly wearing feminine clothing.

### **Theme II: Embodying Female Veteran Identity**

Embodying female veteran identity is being defined as taking on those characteristics that society has placed on women veterans, being largely invisible and secondary to their male peers, and seeking the most basic of support needs in a post-military life. I am often left wondering if women choose to embody the invisibility of being a woman veteran by largely keeping their veteran identity to themselves and not seeking help for transition support. They recognize that the public lacks an understanding of their experience, and it can be tiring to try to explain it to others who view the military experience through a restricted lens on military service and who serves. Until recently, women's stories have largely been told to the public as only extensions of men's stories and often have focused on women as either mothers or victims. The women in this project are



much more complex than only these reductive identity markers, their stories rich with hope and resilience, yet they too often seemed reluctant to claim their military identity. As one participant stated, she was not interested in telling people about her military identity because her reasons for serving were personal and she felt they would be cheapened by using her veteran status as a primary identity marker. This project has also left me curious if perhaps some women experience wanting to move forward with a new identity because they lacked a full sense of belonging throughout their time in the military.

The two themes we will explore here are (in)visibility and transitional support needs.

**(In)visibility.** (In)visibility is being defined as the contradiction between women veterans being a highly visible population because of their perceived or actual difference from the hegemonic identity of cisgendered men veterans but simultaneously erased from veteran culture through macro- and micro-aggressions. The sub-themes for (in)visibility are understanding their a) lack of acknowledgement by society of being a veteran and b) relationship to their male veteran peers.

**Relationship to male veterans.** Relationships to male veterans is being defined as the analysis women veterans make regarding their recognition and understanding of their woman veteran status to what they perceive their male veteran partners and peers to be receiving.

The participants related their understanding of the female veteran experience to that of their male veteran counterparts, particularly their romantic partners. Paula's now husband retired out of the military soon after she separated and she saw a completely different way in how he was treated by their peers and the VA hospital they both utilized. She attributed some of this to his rank and full twenty years of service, but also that being a man had granted him a different experience in the military than hers. Whereas Liz's husband is still on active duty and she is able to be part of the "spouses" (wives) get together once a month for some social support, she stated it is "different," as military spouses experience a different version of the military filtered through their spouses', often men's, experience.

The women additionally voiced several traits that they specifically thought male veterans had or did, that female veterans did not. There was the physical look of a veteran, such as continuing to wear combat boots or carry military backpacks or the "tactical operator look" of wearing tactical khaki pants, polo shirt, and sunglasses with a ball cap, or growing a long beard. They also voiced that male veterans interact with other veterans differently, in that the women were most concerned about meeting other veterans and getting to know what they are doing in their lives now. But they voiced that male veterans often are concerned with establishing where someone served and what they did while in the military to include conversations based around continual jokes about someone's service branch or job. I often refer to this intentional inquiry and

ordering of groups of veterans as “levels of veteran-ness” in which combat/infantry are always at the top of the hierarchy, with the Air Force or administratively based jobs at the bottom. Sadie, an Air Force veteran, noted when this happens, she is always made to feel less than male veterans. Women serve in the highest numbers in the Air Force and in administrative or medical related jobs, almost always leaving them at the bottom of the hierarchy. This ordering is a performance of masculinity, establishing dominance by using a pre-existing understanding of power that re-establishes hypermasculine, male-dominated roles in the military as those which are most valid of claiming the veteran status.

Mandy is married to a male Army veteran and has experienced an assumed erasure of her service not only by the general public but also when they go to the Veterans Affairs hospital together.

Like, if we go to the VA together, they're like, 'oh, so you're the veteran' and they point at him or, you know, or if I call and ask if I need anything for myself at the VA or to ask about us, they ask if he's in right now, and I'm like, 'no, it's, it's me. - Mandy, Army veteran

As stated earlier, the women often discussed what made themselves or other military females not men or to be perceived as not a warrior. Sadie relayed a story about purchasing furniture and the salesman assumed she had a military credit union card was because she was a dependent of a military member. While annoyed at the experience, she also deflected the lack of someone's ability to perceive a young, small-framed woman as a veteran with jokes,

If I was like telling my friends that story about the guy with the couch I'd be like, doesn't he know that I'm a badass? [laughs] is it not obvious? Like with my big muscles and so I just kind of take like the joking and beard, yea, I take the joking route because, I guess in a way I can't blame them. I am a petite female, and I look like I'm still really young. - Sadie, Air Force veteran

The women have anonymity as veterans that provides them some relief from uncomfortable conversations, but also frustration when their status as a veteran – whether at the VA or when using a service that is only available to the veteran community – is questioned or presumed to be their male partner or family members. The women also seemed to be resigned to the stereotyped image of a male combat veteran being the representation of the veteran community. This may result from the frustration they experienced while on active duty, and now recognize they have a choice to defend their right to exist in the military/veteran community.

### **Theme III: Transitional Support Needs**

Transitional support needs are defined as those general needs that women veterans have after they have left the military as well as needs they may have that are specific to the university environment. These university specific needs can range from understanding how to apply to the university, gaining academic skills that are necessary for the classroom, and knowing how to use VAEB. Additionally, navigating the university's systems and policies in an environment that is usually predominately female or women identified may

present a huge change for women veterans (as well as men, another topic that needs exploration through research).

The two sub-themes are general transition challenges and needs from the university.

**General transition challenges.** General transition challenges is being defined as post-military challenges that women veterans are likely to have regardless of whether they attend a university or not. While some of the women shared that they believe they can blend in on campus and in the civilian society better because they do not fit the stereotypical image associated with men veterans, Paula experienced disjunction because of the lack of congruence between her identity and what she believes the public sees as the veteran identity.

Well, I didn't want to be a veteran because I didn't like that connotation of being anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, anti-, and so that was tough. So if I was ok with the veteran identity, it would have been easier. Because I wasn't ok with it, I was like, "I'm a fish out of water, I don't know what the frack is going on, there's too much happening (laughs). Like, I wanted to identify as a feminist, but I didn't know enough about feminism. I wanted to identify as a liberal, but there was something about liberals that I was like, "what?"

In identifying "in what ways do you feel being a woman veteran or a veteran in general impacts your college experience?" Sadie relayed that in comparison to the school she attended before her military service, because of harassment she experienced in her technical training school there is increased feeling of pressure when test taking, resulting in anxiety:

So I was pretty good at taking tests and things like that but the thing that happened with the whole retaking the test in tech school and having to get a 75 and with the pressure, that definitely carried over and changed how I performed. So I feel like that, I wish I could find better words than the ones I'm thinking in my head but sometimes I just, so obviously being a female veteran I wouldn't have had that experience in the military had I not been a female.

Conversely, while Sadie received accessibility accommodations due to her test anxiety, she refused to use them in the classes for her major, believing it would impact her faculty member's impression of her ability to complete graduate level work in the same department. This could be related to the stigma of help seeking in the military, which will label a person as incapable or “the weak link” if they ask for assistance for any physical, mental, or emotional needs.

Liz shared the following in an email after our first interview, discussing a mentality barrier she had perceived herself to have after first leaving active duty:

It's hard to think for oneself and make decisions when it's not affecting others, only yourself...even as supervisors we were still told what needed to be accomplished and we divided up how it would be completed. When I was used to certain structures and ways of doing things in the military, it was very difficult to be creative and think outside the box at first.

Liz makes note of the struggles of no longer having a group to rely upon for collective action and decision making, whether being a leader or follower in that group. The women together voiced frustrations with redefining themselves outside the stereotyped military identity, breaking maladaptive behaviors that they had, and translating their capabilities to individual versus group accomplishments.

**Needs from the university.** Needs from the university is being defined as those needs that are specific to women veterans pursuing education and trying to navigate not only their VA benefits but other concerns of non-traditional students.

The women all shared that it was important to them to attend or support women veterans only events on campus so that they could share in a sense of belonging of being part of an extremely small identity group on campus, and they felt it was important to get other women veterans to attend as well. Four out of five interview participants identified that an event that had been held on campus previously had been very important for them. At that event, we provided lunch to the women (to include invitations to graduate and professional students) in a central location on campus and a local woman veteran and published author spoke with them about the importance of telling their own military story. The success of that luncheon has led us to schedule one women's only event each semester. The second event saw the inclusion of women Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) students, who shared their excitement of being in a room full of accomplished women veterans as their programs were pre-dominately male, their leadership was all male, and they had only seen male military-affiliated speakers hosted during their time at the university.

Sadie shared an experience where she tried to connect with other veterans early on at the university and very quickly felt marginalized.

Oh, something veteran-related [the event], I'm going to go because we're going to have lunch and stuff. So, I show up and one of the other student veterans was just leaving when I was coming and kind of like stood there

for a minute and I was just looking around, you know, what's going on just trying to check out the event, showing up as a veteran and this other student veteran was like, oh, so what are you? He assumed I was just like any other student. Another situation where you know somebody doesn't think you're a veteran because you're female or whatever...that was my first experience at a veteran event with student veterans.

The women all expressed a strong interest in finding support on campus but not wanting to continue the experience of being marginalized or made invisible because they didn't meet the stereotypical image of who is a veteran. While they largely expressed needing to know the important things for all students – how will they pay for their education, what classes to take, how to increase their academic skills – they also made several comments alluding to finding a community of like-minded people, even if that community was very small. During the focus group, Cassandra and Sadie joked about watching basketball games together while doing homework at their home instead of trying to be at the arena or in a bar, alluding that their age made them less likely to want to do the latter. This was how they were able to balance social support with college work. They also stated that it seemed other women veterans just “got them” (understood them) better than non-veterans.



## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The primary goal of this research, a basic qualitative study, was to uncover and interpret the meanings that female veterans have associated with how meaning is constructed for them and how they made sense of their worlds (particularly the military) and their lives (Merriam, 2009) and its long term effect, particularly on women veterans pursuing higher education. By obtaining this foundational framework, we can bridge student affairs research with veterans research, and build services that improve the retention and graduation rates of female identified veterans. In the final chapter, we will examine the findings and implications for future research and building Student Affairs programming to support women veterans in their post-military transition process.

#### **Summary and Interpretation of Findings**

While the participants provided very rich data for furthering research and support services for women veterans pursuing higher education, I am left with many questions on how the women themselves interpret their gender and gendered experiences within the context of the military. Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" essay offers many great questions in which to further pursue this analysis in future research. One salient observation is that the

women seemed to understand that outward expressions of “woman” were largely rejected in the military. Reclaiming aspects of gender expression that they associate with womanhood, such as dresses and make-up, was an opportunity to define themselves outside of the limited options in the military environment. As non-men, there is no way to “do their gender right” (Butler, 1988) in the military setting and thus avoid punishment, which Herbert informed us plays out in multiple ways such as ostracization, perceived as incompetent, or limited in career mobility (Herbert, 1998). The military serves as a sex-role clarification for men, but not for women. If women are performing their gender through military service, but are proscribed and sanctioned (Butler, 1988) to adhere to a certain presentation, what nuances and individual ways of doing gender exist in both the military and post-military setting? It may be that while the women are already operating outside the bounds of a strictly defined gender binary, they do not yet see it because of the sanctions constantly imposed upon them.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, “In what ways does military service shape how one understands their gender as a military member and veteran?”

The interview participants identified behaviors and experiences that happened to them specifically because they were women, such as expectations that they were not as capable as men or experiencing harassment. They did not appear to connect that these experiences were due to the gendered roles women are expected to fulfill.

They did connect these experiences to strengthening their resilience and perseverance. Further research would illuminate linkages to gender within and between different sectors, enabling a comprehensive understanding of which gender norms help or hinder female veterans' transition from military to civilian life (Eichler, 2017). Outside of the scope of this research but important to think about is the seeming contradiction between women veterans who state their military experience has made them more resilient and the sub-population of women veterans who are experiencing psychological distress to the point of homelessness, the fastest growing homeless population in the United States at this time.

Because they often have to put in extra time and more effort than their male peers while in service, women veterans are used to delayed recognition for their work. While the women discussed conflict and speaking out when they felt they were being wronged or dismissed, they largely seem to have persevered through the challenges in silence or with very little support. It is possible they are more willing to quietly persist through the bullshit they experience at a university, similar to how they persevered through difficult situations in the military. This strength can be built upon for women veterans in their educational and career aspirations. University professionals should make sure that what is avoided is the social isolation they likely experienced in the military. If they do experience this, it may unintentionally continue their marginalized status from their men student

veteran peers (particularly as it relates to some women's reason to leave service) and prevent them from engaging in supportive programs.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “In what ways do women/females who served in the military navigate being a female veteran?”

The interview participants often focused on what they were not when answering questions about being a woman veteran. They viewed their university peers as the hegemonic identity for their environments, and that they had an alternative/secondary experience that did not fit. The women seemed to define their relationship with their university peers in similar terms as to their relationship with military men while on active duty, that this was the visible and acceptable identity and their experiences were very marginalized. Also similar to how they defined themselves against military men, the women felt their differences from their traditionally aged college peers was an advantage to them that helped them be more focused on their studies and future aspirations. The women do not want to deny that their life experiences, age, and different day-to-day concerns have an impact on their educational pursuits. They may be less willing to examine how they have been shaped by the negative aspects of their military experience.

Women veterans are a unique student population who may benefit from transition services focused on addressing validating their experiences as a woman military member, aid in their re-assessment of self and self-expression (gender expression). While they may need intentional outreach and programs

designed for their specific gendered experiences in the military, women veterans are resilient and persevere due to/in spite of their experiences in the military.

### **Possibilities for Future Research**

This research provides a foundational framework for future projects on supporting women veterans in post-military transition, particularly in higher education settings. First, this study needs to be taken further beyond the limited intersecting identities of the women who participated in it. By conducting this study at a community college, or with groups of women-identified veterans who are parents, people of color, or LGBTQ may find additional or more specific themes that present more foundational information for supporting transitional needs.

Second, conversations with the interview participants suggested that women were purposefully seeking opportunities to define themselves outside of the military setting, which may seem contradictory to the practices of many veterans service organizations or veterans centers. One suggestion for a future study would be to identify differences in new group assimilation between cisgendered men veterans and women and non-gender conforming veterans. It is possible that women and non-gender conforming veterans are more readily seeking out new groups/relationships than cis gendered men veterans due to lacking a strong sense of belonging throughout their military career. Further exploring this could provide opportunities to re-examine the purpose of veterans transition programs and aide in rebuilding them to be more holistic.

This research project may also lend to identifying points of interest to conduct a longitudinal study of a co-hort of women veterans who participate in a women veteran specific transition program centered on measuring their understanding of self through a gender analysis, their relationships with other women veterans, and to process their experiences with each other as a therapeutic process. As I complete this work, interview participant Mandy is taking her first gender studies course and we talk regularly about the difficulty of understanding gender in society and the areas of gender studies that are obvious given her military experiences. Mandy had been out of service for six years and continues to learn and understand more about her role as a woman, not just in the military but in our larger society.

### **Suggestions for Student Affairs Professionals in Practice of Supporting Women Veterans in Their Transitions**

I have listed five action items that I believe student affairs professionals can take to better support women veterans on campus. I have subdivided these action items in to two categories, easy and difficult. Easy action items are ones that should be able to be implemented immediately, with little financial investment or knowledge of marginalized identities or oppressions by the professional. The more difficult action items will require extensive investment of time, energy, and resources. I have used Merriam's three questions for conducting basic qualitative research – to interpret, construct, or to create meaning - to understand how someone makes sense of their experience. Much

of what could be done to support women veterans in transition is helping them and the environments they are navigating to reconstruct the narrative of military service, who is a veteran, and the importance of their military experience and background in both affect and impact.

I want to acknowledge the contributions I received from my fellow student affairs/veterans services providers. I presented this research-in-progress at the 2018 NASPA Symposium on Military-Connected Students in New Orleans and received affirmative feedback from many of the women veterans in attendance. Additionally, I queried the audience for what they felt we could do for women veterans given the background and themes I shared with them.

General input from the audience included:

- 1) The few male service providers in attendance (concerning given this profession is dominated by men at this time) felt it was difficult for women veterans to understand they truly wanted to be helpful
- 2) That understanding for the racialized and gendered experiences of women of color service members are often lacking entirely in transition services
- 3) Getting buy in from any students but particularly women veterans to be part of programming is hard
- 4) Veterans programming should shift to being identity conscious, the most vocal and visible veterans – often white males – have a way of belonging based upon their military service that can be alienating to

others who are not comfortable with this and also impacts campus programming efforts when non-white male veterans perceive the program participants will largely be white men

- 5) Veterans services offices must be conscious of hiring women as student employees and giving them positions of responsibility, and that reinforcing mutual respect and challenging certain behaviors that infantilize or disrespect women's presence or their service is very important to creating an inclusive community for all military members.

### **Easy Action Items**

The following easy actions items will enable women veterans to understand and convey to others their significance in being at veterans events, empowered them to construct a reality that reflects women veterans experiences and voices belong in veterans spaces and to create meaning of their military experience by sharing their knowledge with future military leaders.

- 1) Establish greeters at the door for all veteran's events.

Establish a greeter at all veteran's events and programs to welcome the students and provide them with nametags on which they can include their service branch/dates of service. This helps add a visual reminder of everyone's connection to the community. Additionally, whenever feasibly possible, short introductions should take place as a group. At a bare minimum, ask students to share their name, military connection, and degree plan.



Finally, encouraging students to also include their pro-nouns in introductions and on their nametags is a way to be fully inclusive and recognize that gender non-conforming and transgender veterans are also part of our community. In my professional experiences, I have not encountered any issues with asking veterans to state their pronouns at events or while participating in military cultural competency trainings but student affairs professionals should always be prepared to answer questions on why students are being asked to share their pronouns.

2) Hire women student veterans.

Women veterans should be encouraged to be centered in veterans support services, and empowered to speak out on their needs at the university, particularly when they may differ from men's needs. By providing this as a paid student position, it reinforces that their time and labor to the office is valued. Some universities may want to provide identity-specific veterans outreach positions in women's center or LGBTQ centers. This is a good practice, provided those student employees who remain in the central – and therefore most visible to others in the military-affiliated community - veterans space maintain diversity, and not just consist of white men.

3) Include ROTC women in programming

Women veterans can make sense of their career and feel as if their experiences mattered and will make a positive impact on future women veterans in the military if provided the opportunity to share with others. If ROTC is not an

option, explore mentorships or partnerships with STEM programs or other women-identified student groups who will also be entering male-dominated fields.

### **More Difficult Action Items**

The following more difficult action items will empower women veterans to make meaning of their gender identity and construct their own individualized professional image and style. Additionally, women veterans will be able to interpret their experience by sharing it with other military-affiliated people and civilians.

#### 1) Revisit what career development workshops do for women

Student affairs practitioners should consider utilizing career development workshops to support women veterans in establishing their own professional identity. While gendered aspects of uniform and personal grooming regulations in the military are different from those in civilian work environments, there is often still an expectation of conformity in order to determine whether someone is capable of their job. Because of this, transition services for women veterans often focus on prescribing another type of uniform, which may limit the women in becoming comfortable and confident with themselves in a new professional environment. Additionally, due to the high level of self- and group-policing that is placed on women service members throughout their service, alleviating some of that stress through promoting individual expression may be invaluable.

## 2) Have open discussion on identity changes in post-military life

Practitioners should utilize feminist theory to aide women veterans in interpreting their experience in the military and utilizing it to create meaning in their post-military life. This research supports that it may be beneficial for female veterans to be encouraged to interrogate their experience in the military through the lens of feminist theory. At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, I asked if anyone would be interested in learning more about gender and the military. I told my own story about being coerced into the feminist theory class so many years ago, and they all found that surprising given I am now “all about feminism and empowerment” as one of the participants stated. The women stated they were already intrigued by the idea of understanding gender more as some of them had taken or were currently taking African-American history courses, which had provided them the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding on how heteropatriarchal whiteness had shaped our society. Additionally, the Post 9/11 generation of women veterans are being inundated from many levels that their presence in the military and in society is both political and feminist, and it can only aide them to understand what this means to them on a personal level.

Assisting women veterans with story development and also listening to their stories is a critical part of exploration that is integral to reintegration assistance for the population (Downs, 2017). While this project did not have time to pursue what a women veteran’s transition and storytelling program might look

like when a feminist framework is utilized, I will be pursuing this in the near future.

### **Final Conclusion**

My interests in undertaking this project were in exposing a deeper truth of what it is like to be a woman in the military – that it is hard for reasons beyond that the military itself is an all-encompassing and exhausting institution driven by an inequity in power. It is hard because in it we become raw from the constant chaffing against our very being and existence, and punished in various ways as we push forward to goal posts that are constantly being moved. But being a woman veteran is also beautiful, as one might imagine the beauty of a bright morning sun against the still damp char of a midnight fire. There is a certain freedom within the panopticon, a freedom that comes from pushing against and past the boundaries of life as we understand them. But true to its intentional design, while we know the guards on our behavior, our very essence of being, are there, we never really see them, maybe never openly acknowledge their impact on our life. The discipline for stepping out of these boundaries becomes a responsibility of the group, the group to whom one also looks to for survival.

On the whole, therefore, one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social 'quarantine', to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism'. Not because the disciplinary modality of power has replaced all the others; but because it has infiltrated the others, sometimes undermining them, but serving as an intermediary between them, linking them together, extending them and above all making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements. It assures an infinitesimal distribution of the power relations. - Foucault, 1977

In this examination of understanding that I hold a position of power over my participants, in that I am unable to take their experience and interpretation of their experience merely at face value. I not only know what it is like inside the panopticon, to be watched, to watch others, but have also seen the guard's keys and the possibilities that exist for us beyond the prescribed boundaries. The challenge, of course, has been to not give them the map to redefine their own boundaries. Instead, I can encourage them to start seeking the loose bricks in their own walls.

The purpose of this feminist research project was to look beyond gender as a descriptive category or variable when analyzing women veteran's post-military transitional experience while engaged in higher education. Feminist research has become a well-used term for the work that feminists do when they take on either qualitative or quantitative research that is driven by, and aimed toward, a desire to challenge multiple hierarchies of inequalities within social life (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The focus on women veterans in research often tries to identify differences of experiences or outcomes according to sex but not on explaining the reasons for why these differences may exist (Eichler, 2017).

To reflect back on the three subjects areas that are normally found in women veteran's research and my findings in this feminist project:

- 1) That women have not served in combat – two of my research participants have been attached to male units in support of combat operations,

one a decade before women were “authorized” to be there, the other a first amongst the particular mission she undertook.

2) That their experience is most likely to have included sexual harassment or assault - None of the women spoke of sexual assault during our interviews or conversation, but they did name multiple instances of harassment or gender discrimination that had a very heavy impact on their career.

3) That they experience an identity crisis during and after service - The women did not express feelings of a crisis related to navigating their identity during and after service but did express lots of frustration with feeling as if they did not fit anywhere in their understandings of these environments.

The women’s reflections on understanding their experience in the military and in their social world as military veterans varied. But commonly found amongst all of them was that their experience in the military and as veterans is being defined by men. Their experience in educational settings is being defined by traditionally-aged students. Their experiences as women are being defined by a society that does not yet understand a spectrum of gendered behavior or admit to the ways in which our society seeks to punish those who break the masculine/feminine binary.

Through a feminist lens, I interpret the women’s experiences as oppression – in that they were treated unjustly on a personal and institutional level because of their marginalized status of being a female in the military. I do not believe any of the women I interviewed would agree with that term, as they

gave multiple examples of how these challenges made them more resilient and determined. They felt empowered through their successes, overcoming the challenges they experienced, and even speaking out or speaking back when an act of oppression was taking place. Finding a way to help reconcile that sense of empowerment with the systemic oppression may be an opportunity to encourage critical self-reflection in women student veterans.

Universities should know that when female/women veterans come to the university and ask for recognition or assistance, they are not asking for anything special. They are asking to be treated as if their experiences matter as much to others as it mattered to them, and for those experiences to be recognized from their positionality and understanding. Women veterans may have different aspirations, goals, and commitments while at the university than what is typically provided for in veterans' services.

It is important to note that gender analysis is not only about the experiences of female veterans but can improve our understanding of the transition experience of all veterans (Eichler, 2017). By starting with the lived experiences of women veterans or other historically marginalized veterans populations, we can create the infrastructure for a more welcoming and understanding environment for all veterans. Colleges and universities play an important role in the post-military life for many and it is of utmost importance they deeply examine why and how they support veterans services on their campus.

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## APPENDIX A

### RECRUITING ANNOUNCEMENT

Opportunity for participation in female student veteran research. This research is being conducted by Amber Mathwig, a Master's student in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as part of her thesis. This research project is IRB-approved through the university.

The purpose of this research study is to gather qualitative information for the purpose of assisting Student Affairs professionals in supporting female-identified veterans in their post-military development while on college campuses.

You may be eligible for this study if you served on active duty in the United States military for greater than 24 months after September 11, 2001; were identified as a female at the time of your service; and graduated from or are pursuing a degree at a 4-year, traditional university (you attend classes greater than part-time on campus) after you separated from the military. An additional requirement for this study is that you have been separated from the military greater than 12 months at the time of our interview.

If you choose to participate in this study, your participation would include an approximately 90-minute interview, completion of a short survey, and the potential for follow-up questions from the researcher via email. You will be provided a copy of your interview transcript and a final draft of the research project for your review. You will also be given a \$10 Starbucks gift card upon completion of the 90-minute interview.

If you are interested in learning more about this study or volunteering to participate as an interview subject, please contact Amber directly at [ammathwi@uncg.edu](mailto:ammathwi@uncg.edu).

## APPENDIX B

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO IDENTIFIED STUDENTS

Hi,

I hope you are having a strong finish to summer session 1! I know you are very busy this summer but I wanted to reach out and ask if you might be interested in being interviewed for my master's thesis project. I've detailed the project below, please let me know if you have any questions.

Opportunity for participation in female student veteran research. This research is being conducted by Amber Mathwig, a Master's student in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as part of her thesis. This research project is IRB-approved through the university.

The purpose of this research study is to establish a theoretical concept on the engagement and success of female-identified veterans on college campuses as it pertains to gendered identity and post-military transition.

You may be eligible for this study if you served on active duty in the United States military for greater than 24 months after September 11, 2001; were identified as a female at the time of your service; and graduated from or are pursuing a degree at a 4-year, traditional university (you attend classes greater than part-time on campus) after you separated from the military. An additional requirement for this study is that you have been separated from the military greater than 12 months at the time of our interview.

If you choose to participate in this study, your participation would include an approximately 90-minute interview, completion of a short survey, and the potential for follow-up questions from the researcher via email. You will be provided a copy of your interview transcript. **Each participant will be provided a \$10 Starbucks gift card upon completion of the 90-minute interview.**

## APPENDIX C

### THESIS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was it like being a woman in the military?
2. Thinking about what it meant for you to be a female/woman in the military, what was it like when you left the military?
3. What adjustments did you find yourself making your post-military life?
4. Did you feel there were barriers in your post-military transition process? If so, can you explain?
5. In what ways does being a female/woman veteran impact your college experience?
6. How have you navigated interactions with other persons in higher education, veterans or non-veterans?
7. How can the university assist you or other female/women veterans in your transition? What/why are the areas you identified important?
8. What do you think would be the most effective in helping women veterans on campus? (To transition, feel welcomed, thrive, be comfortable in post-military identity development)

## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUP RECRUITING ANNOUNCEMENT

Based on your previous participation as an interview subject for my research, you are being asked to participate in a focus group discussion to discuss the analysis of your interview with other research subjects.

If you choose to participate in this study further, you will be asked to participate in a 90-minute focus group discussion, scheduled via doodle poll. Each participant will be provided a meal worth approximately \$12 at the time of your participation. The researcher will present her findings and solicit feedback and ask subjects to discuss their experiences of being a woman veteran and transition further.

The purpose of this research study is to establish a theoretical concept on the engagement and success of female-identified veterans on college campuses as it pertains to gendered identity and post-military transition. You were determined to be eligible for this study if you served on active duty in the United States military for greater than 24 months after September 11, 2001; were identified as a female at the time of your service; and graduated from or are pursuing a degree at a 4-year, traditional university (you attend classes greater than part-time on campus) after you separated from the military. An additional requirement for this study is that you have been separated from the military greater than 12 months at the time of our interview.

This research is being conducted by Amber Mathwig, a Master's student in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as part of her thesis. This research project is IRB-approved through the university. If you have any questions, please contact Amber directly at [ammathwi@uncg.edu](mailto:ammathwi@uncg.edu).