A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF FEMALE VETERANS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR GENDER IDENTITY IN THE COLLEGIATE ENVIRONMENT

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by

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ABSTRACT

Women’s roles in the military transformed since the eighteenth century moving from support personnel into combat and other front line positions. Their military experiences are significant and influential in their lives (Giffey, 2012), both in and out of uniform.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how gender identity of female military veterans influences their college experience. Twelve female veteran students participated in this study, representing three institutions located in the Southwest, with differing Carnegie classification.

This study utilizes a qualitative research design under the interpretative system of inquiry; a qualitative framework is best suited for inquiry when the factors are less well known (Creswell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for gathering data, as a way to foster dialogue and build trust with subjects. The data was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) five step approach: epoché, horizontalization, clustering for meaning, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Each phase of data analysis scaffolds to the next layer of meaning to explore the essence of the central phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Key findings from this study include how the participants: a) credit the veteran centers within their respective institutions with helping them navigate the transitional experience more seamlessly b) felt isolated because they did not perceive themselves fitting in with other students on campus, c) felt a sense of invisibility influencing how
they viewed their gender identity on campus, and d) elaborated on the challenges of balancing the role of being a mother, a student and a veteran.

The study’s overarching conclusion is female veterans who managed their “femaleness” in a male-oriented setting may not understand their roles within a collegial context (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39) and use their academic pursuits as an opportunity to redefine themselves and shape their new roles.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Reflections from a Veteran’s Spouse

It is a privilege and an honor to be a professor to those who have served our country. Having veteran students among others within the classroom provides innumerable opportunities to harness the elements of experience and diversity. As a male Army veteran’s female spouse and community college faculty, my inquiry began as wonder. A conjecture about who my veteran students really are. More specifically, how do they see themselves beyond the classroom as a member of the larger institutional community?

Over the past eleven years of faculty experience in the classroom, there are more memories of male veteran students compared to female veteran students. It is precisely this reflective discrepancy which requires a pause. Did I simply have more male veteran students compared to female veteran students over the years? Alternatively, was it the very anonymity of my female veteran students I could not account for? From civilian’s admiration, it is difficult to understand why a veteran would not want recognition for service and sacrifice, even more so as a female veteran. This quandary positions my pursuit to explore the essence of who our female veterans are on campus.

Background to the Study

There is a long-standing connection between the military and higher education dating back to the 1862 Morrill Act, which established military-training programs at land-grant institutions (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 26). Alexander & Thelin (2013) describe the 1862 Morrill Act as:
“[T]he impetus to agriculture and technical education. The “M” in the “A&M” colleges founded with funds derived from 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act land and warrant sales provided needed education in mechanics, mining and military education, while the “A” provided the opportunity for scientific instruction in agriculture. Although this was a significant event for higher education, the foremost concern of the first Morrill Land-Grant was orderly sale and settlement of land.” (pp. 1-2).

Due to the “War on Terror,” a title used to cover military actions since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many students’ college careers have been disrupted. However, student veterans are more than likely to re-enroll or enter college following active duty (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 29). Currently, there are a little over two million living female veterans and within the next decade, this number expecting to increase. By 2025, 14% of the total living veterans will be female (Office of the Actuary, 2014). According to Wisner, Krugh, Ausbrooks, Russell, Chavkin, & Selber (2015) “The numbers of veterans in higher education have tripled on some campuses in the last three years and will continue to increase as veterans pursue new careers and look to transition into the civilian work world” (p. 129). Furthermore, the Pew Research Center reports an increase in Caucasian female college enrollment outpacing Caucasian male enrollment upwards of 10% between 1994 and 2012 (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014, para.2). Additionally, the GI Bill has evolved over time, making access to higher education more affordable and manageable for veterans (“Post 9/11 GI Bill Overview,” n.d.). The legacy of the GI Bill has its roots in the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 as a “shorthand call sign for a wide range of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education funding programs

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available to U.S. military veterans” (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013, p. 21). The initial GI Bill was influential for “an entire generation of veterans, it also changed the landscape of higher education” (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013, p. 21).

Although women serving in the military are not a new trend, their roles have shifted since the eighteenth century. Moving from support service positions, such as nurses and transcriptionists, to combat-ready and intensive positions, their military experiences have become significant and influential in their lives (Giffey, 2012). In 2013, the Pentagon lifted the ban preventing women from serving in combat roles in the military. By January 2016, all branches of the military developed an implementation plan for inclusion. Measures such as these are in response to the challenges faced in the military as how to adjust the traditional male-dominated structures in the military in order to fully integrate female soldiers. The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), established in 1951, and whose members are civilian women and men appointed by the Secretary of Defense “provide advice and recommendations on matters and policies relating to the recruitment and retention, treatment, employment, integration, and well-being of highly qualified professional women in the Armed Forces” (“DACOWITS History,” n.d., para. 1). DACOWITS has pushed for a gender-neutral military agenda citing “men’s and women’s traditional roles are entirely cultural constructs and a result of patriarchy” (Herman, 2013, para.7).

Categorized as a non-traditional student, veterans bring to their college and university a host of lived experiences often times promoting their independence and worldly knowledge. Non-traditional students have varying motivations and commitments for attending and completing their postsecondary education. “Non-traditional students
differ in life context, learning motivation, and learning goals from the population traditionally served by colleges and universities” (Matkin, 2012, p. 8). As more female veterans emerge onto the college and university campuses, having a better understanding of this subpopulation’s needs is increasingly valuable.

Understanding a female veteran’s story means recognizing her historical transformations, obstacles and accomplishments as well as their future aspirations, an evolution of sorts. This study speaks to the evolution of women in higher education and in the military, blending both contexts through a better appreciation of how these transitions and roles through history shape female veterans’ perceptions of themselves and how they value their own gender identity today. It is through appreciation of their history and lived stories that higher education administrators and personnel may come to know the female veteran students on their campus from a more personalized perspective than just as a categorical veteran student.

**Statement of the Problem**

Female veterans who have redefined and managed their “femaleness” in a male-dominated setting may not understand their roles within a collegial context (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39). Negative stereotyping of women in the military may also affect overt behavior, as well as call into question their sense of self (Matthews, Ender, Laurence, & Rohall, 2009). “Gender is something that we do, rather than simply something that we may be” (Herbert, 1998, p. 102). One could conclude the military poses pressure on females affecting their expression of gender. Female veterans may carry over this expression of gender or lack thereof into the college and university setting. Herbert (1998) discusses the work of Sheppard (1989) concerning the process of
managing gender in such women must learn how to “redefine and manage being female” (p. 82) in organizational settings, including the military.

As female veterans reintegrate back into civilian life, uncertainties exist as to how they should fulfill their role as a student, but also as a woman. Social norms often reinforce gender roles and encourage male characteristics in the military. Other settings may not necessarily accept these gender roles, posing a unique challenge to women (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40). The purpose of this study was to investigate how female veterans understand their gender identity in the context of the collegiate experience through the exploration of their lived experiences.

**Definitions**

*Collegiate experience:* The lived experiences of female veteran students enrolled in a college/university.

*College, university, and institution:* An institution of higher education and all of its divisions and programs (Pavela, 2000).

*Gender:* The sociocultural identity that includes knowledge, understanding, and activities associated with being male or female (Egan & Perry, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

*Military Sexual Trauma (MST):* “[I]nclude[s] any sexual activity where a Service member is involved against his or her will, such as insulting sexual comments, unwanted sexual advances or even sexual assault” (“Traumatic Stress in Female Veterans,” 2016, para. 3).
Veteran: “The term ‘‘veteran’’ means a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable.” (Veteran’s Benefits and the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how gender identity of 12 female military veterans influenced their respective college experiences at three different institutions in the Southwest. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context?
2. How does female veteran students’ perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting?
3. How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus?

**Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study**

This study was formulated with the phenomenological, and specifically, social phenomenological framework. Underlying the interpretative paradigm, Husserl’s work focused on the world experiences as lived by the individual and not separate from individual (Laverty, 2003). This results in a “life world by which” conscious experiences are not limited by “categorization or conceptualization” (Laverty, 2003 p. 4). The goal of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nature or meaning we prescribe to our lived experiences (Lukenchuk, 2013; Patton, 2015; Schütz, 1932). Most fundamental to epistemological view of phenomenology is the assumption
we can only know what we experience by attending to the meanings and perceptions we assign to our experiences in a conscious way (Patton, 2015). Therefore, reflection of lived experiences cannot occur while the individual is currently living those experiences. Instead, “phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9-10, cited in Patton, 2015, p. 116). The reflection of lived experiences of the female veteran students will be recollective in nature as they share stories from their past.

From an ethnomethodological perspective which interweaves Schütz’s (1932) social phenomenology and sociology, West and Zimmerman (1987) proposed “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’” (p. 126). Therefore, gender is managed within the context of normative perceptions of what is deemed appropriate for one’s sex category. Social interactions and contextual perceptions of settings in which one finds him or herself influence the expression of gender. For female veteran students, “doing gender” essentially depicts how women wrestle with the contradictions between perceived military cultures, their own sense as a woman, and the collegiate environment (Herbert, 1998). Depending on the social situation, individuals may choose to emphasize or mute certain social identities. Independent upon the social context, individuals remain accountable for their expression of gender. Consider within the social context of the military, “women are held accountable as women and as soldiers” (Herbert, 1998, p. 13). In the context of higher education, women are accountable as women and as students.

Complementing the notion of “doing gender,” Burke (1991) emphasizes how common meanings link identity and behavior. Understanding the meanings a person
associates with a particular identity will provide insight into the type of behavior a person exhibits. It is through the linked meanings a perpetual cycle of control emerges which make it challenging to perform a behavior, counter to the associated meanings. What it may mean to be female in the military connotes a specific message but within the context of a college setting, being female may not carry the same message. Social cognitive theory of gender development encapsulates the connection between the cognitive schemas female veterans assign to their experiences in relationship to their social environment. Capturing elements of psychology and social structure, social cognitive theory blends schemas, actions and meanings all within a social framework (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) making it salient for this study.

The patriarchal influence in the military must be deconstructed in order to understand how female veterans assign meaning to their own gender identity within their varied roles. War and defense continue to be associated with male-dominated assumptions (Bates et al., 2005). Diplomacy and political engagement are assumed to be controlled by men (Tickner, 2001), and if a woman does engage in the military or national security, the perception exists that she “follows patterns established by men” (Bates et al., 2005, p. 428). These perceptions may impact how she expresses her gender (Herbert, 1998, West & Zimmerman, 1987). Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship conceptualizes this study and is “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations.” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Answering questions about “Who am I?” and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” manifests in the interconnectedness of intrapersonal and interpersonal development which becomes evident as an individual cultivates their own self-authorship. At the very core of this
study is the drive to answer “Who are female veteran students” and “How is their gender identity shaped by their interpersonal experiences?” Baxter Magolda’s (2001) work affirms the complexity of identity development through a matured belief system guiding genuine relationships with others in social contexts and emphasizes the importance of meaning through a phenomenological methodology (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

**Significance of the Study**

This research is important for several reasons. The findings from this study enhance the current body of knowledge on female veterans in higher education, as most literature on female veteran students embodies transitional processes and may not focus on specific transitional factors such as gender identity experiences (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). This lack of research speaks to the general deficit of knowledge about women veterans on campus since many do not self-identify and may easily go unnoticed (Herbert, 1998; De Sawal, 2013). Secondly, gender identity of female veterans in the college context is not deeply investigated and understood (Demers, 2013; *Crisis of identity*, 2011).

A body of literature exists on women’s gender identity experiences in the military, as evidenced through numerous studies related to sexual abuse and trauma and military sexual assault (Middleton & Craig, 2012). However, current literature lacks research regarding the implications of gender identity development by female veterans in the collegiate setting. Third, much research on female veterans focuses on the debilitating and negative impact military service has on their well-being (Segal & Lane, 2016), whereas this study seeks to highlight the positive strategies and experiences female veterans use to create meaning in their lives and understand their own gender identity.
resulting from their military experiences. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, Women’s Bureau (2014), in 2013, 43.1 percent of female veterans completed some college or earned an Associate’s degree. The female veteran’s population is growing faster than any other segment of the veteran community. By 2020, an estimated 2.4 million veterans will be female, while the population of male veteran is expected to decrease from 20.1 million to 17.2 million by 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2014).

Finally, given the likelihood of female veterans increasingly entering college in the future after their military service, this study informs student affairs professionals and veteran affairs offices as to the specific needs and nuances of female veteran students.

As veteran-friendly institutions make concerted efforts to provide veterans support and services, this study may illuminate opportunities for these institutions to develop specialized support services to address the unique needs of female veterans (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). The term veteran-friendly, “is as diverse as today’s higher education community” according to American Council on Education (ACE) President Molly Corbett Broad. (“ACE Launches Online Toolkit,” 2012, para.3). This research provokes discussions within and across institutions on matters related to policy, process and professional development training of faculty, staff and student affairs professionals regarding the success and inclusion of female veteran students on campus.

Findings from this study will further the understanding of female veteran student’s evolution from servicemember to student while considering their gender identity experiences. The findings will fill critical gaps in the literature on female veteran students’ postsecondary education experiences; aid student affairs and veteran affairs professionals on college and university campus in developing programs supporting
female veteran students as well as ensuring institutions of higher education are veteran-friendly.

**Organization of the Study**

This phenomenological study consisted of interviewing 12 female veteran students from three institutions: a public, two-year Associate’s college, a public four-year Doctoral university, and a private for-profit four-year Doctoral university. Four students were interviewed from each institution. The researcher coded and analyzed the data giving meaning to the female veteran students’ voices. Analysis of the data from the participants lived experiences consisted of using Moustakas’ (1994) five-step design. This process includes epoché, horizontalization, clustering for meaning, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Since this process of data analysis is rigorous and aligned under the phenomenological framework, it is an idyllic choice for this study. After the data is gathered and analyzed I will give an in-depth description of the participating instructions profile along with the profile of each participant. I will also present my findings on each of the research questions and conclude with a summary of the key findings, recommendation for future study and a reflection on my journey.

**Chapter Summary**

Access, affordability, and measures of accountability have changed the landscape of higher education (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2011). Resulting in a need to see these changes “as integral and variable aspects of the process of growth rather than as discrete issues,” the population of non-traditional students, including female veteran students, is on the rise and pressuring higher education institutions to strategize more effective ways to support and educate them (Trow, 2010, as cited in Matkin, 2012, p. 8).
As the variety of postsecondary educations evolves and the culture of an institution becomes a competitive ecosystem of change, the landscape of higher education enmeshed with the changes in the military landscape provides rich contexts for capturing the essence of our female veteran students (Staley & Trinkle, 2011).

According to Baechtold and De Sawal (2009), the increasing number of women entering college subsequent to their military duties necessitates “campus professionals…to become aware of how issues associated with mental health, sexual assault, and gender identity may influence how women veterans make the transition into the higher education environment” (p. 36). Exploring the development of female veteran students entails drawing upon relationships between their military experiences and how those experiences may or may not influence how they make meaning of themselves, as college students (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Institutional Response to an Emerging Population of Veterans, 2011). It becomes imperative higher education professionals discover how this subpopulation of college student, female veterans, views their collegiate experiences and gender identity within this context.

Abes, Jones & McEwen (2007) provide a framework for understanding the contextual influences on female veterans. Finding society’s expectations of military experiences are comparatively different from those expectations placed within higher education, there is a need to broaden the knowledge of female veteran students’ meaning-making. Few civilian women can relate to the experience of military service; thus, female veteran students may not view themselves or interpret how others view them congruent with traditional gender identity models (Abes et al., 2007; Baechtold &-De Sawal, 2009).
The continual transformations of the military and higher education provide an opportunity to explore the evolution of female veteran students’ meaning-making of their gender identity experiences on campus. Informing higher education administrators, including the Board, of the unique experiences of female veteran students may expand the current conversations about veteran students and renew veteran-friendly institution’s support services. These enhancements may permeate throughout the institutional culture, while adding value to the existing but limited literature on women veterans’ postsecondary experiences.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Higher education has evolved since its roots in colonial times. From curriculum designed to educate males into clergy, law or politics, today’s undergraduates are often enmeshed into a career by which an education maintains or provides additional opportunities for growth and development. Postsecondary education has transformed from an elitist privilege to an essential career resource (Kaufman, 2016, para. 1). Thelin (2007) summarizes the movement in higher education as, “our attitude toward the growth and expansion of colleges and universities usually has been one of “Great Expectations.” (p. 60). Students now have expectations a college education provides the diversification of knowledge, diversity and accessibility to those who seek it (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2011).

Considered one of the landmark cases in American higher education, Dartmouth v Woodward (1819) demonstrated the federal government would protect institutions from state interference, which facilitated a growth of postsecondary institutions in the nation (Thelin, 2007; Altbach et al., 2011). The “growing national demand for trained teachers due to the "common-school movement" prompted the rise of educational opportunities for women in the 1830s (Thelin, Edwards, Moyen, Berger, & Calkins, 2016, para. 14). The composition of the ‘university’ gained further attention due to its innovation which became a thematic representation of higher education throughout its history. As a result, small liberal arts colleges such as women’s schools bloomed during the mid to late nineteenth century (Thelin et al., 2016).
Between 1941 and 1950 American higher education institutions formalized the relationship between postsecondary institutions and the military, furthering access and diversification. In response to soldiers returning from war, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944), popularly known as the "G.I. Bill” distributing aid to universities and colleges to support the unprecedented number of veterans, including women, to access a college education (Thelin et al., 2016). Though the original GI Bill was criticized “for primarily benefiting white men while perpetuating racial and gender discrimination” the new Post 9/11 GI Bill shows promise for a more robust benefits package for veterans (Redden, 2009, para. 1). Kaufman (2016) argues that the GI Bill has “permanently linked higher education to the American Dream” (para. 13) resulting in the federal government’s commitment to educational opportunities for military veterans. The GI Bill has reduced the cost of college for veterans accessing a postsecondary education while diversifying the student body (Kaufman, 2016).

There is a large body of research regarding transition from military to civilian life. However, much of this literature uses an all-inclusive term such as “military veterans” or “veteran students” and may not specifically address the unique transition experiences of males and females. This chapter will review the literature of post 9/11 female military veteran students and the facets shaping their higher educational experiences as well as the effects on women veteran student’s access to higher education using the GI Bill. A review of the literature explores the history of women in higher education, history of the women in the military, female veteran transition from military life to student life, and gender development theories followed by a summary of the chapter.
History of Women in Higher Education

The nineteenth century brought significant changes in status and access to education for women (Graham, 1978). Formal education was thought to make women “dangerous and unsettling to the performance of domestic duties” (Bates et al., 2005, p. 315). Who should be educated and by what curriculum were contentious debates, influenced primarily by the gender-typed perceptions of women’s roles in the household and their struggle for equal access to knowledge and academic curriculum. Even during times of advocacy for equal curriculum, a concern for women receiving recognition for their education achievements persisted. The perceptions of women’s contributions to society and to the academy evolved, fostering the creation of women’s colleges, followed by the integration of women into coeducational institutions. Expansion and access to higher education for women occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century (Bates et al., 2005).

Nineteenth Century Women’s Colleges Movement: Influential and Resilient

According to Harwarth (1999), a women’s college is as an institution where the mission is to serve the needs of women and has a predominantly female student body. Women’s colleges remained true to their mission and vision; thus, they survived within the competition of coeducational institutions over time and influenced the advancement of women in higher education.

Providing women a collegiate experience similar to men, some women’s colleges upheld rigorous admissions requirements, while others remained relatively conservative in their curriculum offerings. Oberlin college, the first to admit women in 1833, offered a “Ladies Course” which emphasized the importance of motherhood, but paved the way for
greater opportunities to unfold (“Colleges for Women,” 2007). Comparatively, in 1861, Vassar College opened its doors to women and offered a quality curriculum corresponding to men’s academic experiences. Only available to the most elite women, Vassar College represented a standard of academic achievement women could aspire (“Colleges for Women,” 2007).

Women’s colleges marked an important turning point in the history of women in higher education. By transforming the curriculum, which originally created society’s portrait of a woman to providing rigorous instruction in math and science, enrollment in women’s colleges persists. Despite the number of women’s college decreasing between 1960 and 1998, many have reaffirmed their mission to educating women into the twenty-first century (Harwarth, 1999). According to the Women’s College Coalition (2014), applications to women’s colleges are up nearly 53 percent from 2004 to 2012. Though a declining enrollment “is a national trend faced by all institutions,” women’s colleges are 1 percent higher compared to private, co-educational institutions for admitted female, full-time students in 2012 (Women’s College Coalition, 2014, p. 7). As the evolution of coeducational institutions surfaced, women began to experience different challenges and continued resistance to their pursuit of knowledge.

**Integrating Women into Coeducational Institutions**

Spanning eight decades, the creation of coeducation institutions was fraught with perceptions of inferior female intellect, as well as vast differences in emotional maturity (“Co-Education,” 2007). Since gender biases flourished in higher education institutions, advisors often counseled female students into traditional, gender-segregated pathways precipitating many women to accept a downgraded educational plan or to drop out (Bates
et al., 2005). Radcliffe College began as the “Harvard Annex” in 1879 and started offering coeducational courses in 1943. However, it was not until 1963 when Harvard conferred degrees to women, 327 years after its inception (“Co-Education,” 2007, para.6). Through the leadership of Mary Ingraham Bunting, Radcliffe College President from 1960-1972, the diploma was dissolved and Radcliffe female students began receiving Harvard degrees (“It’s Complicated,” 2016, para. 6).

The idea of coeducation posed a serious threat to the way of thinking during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Though institutions considered themselves coeducational, women did not participate in extracurricular activities and were, in some instances allowed in the library only when male students were not present. In 1960, President John F. Kennedy initiated a new State Commission on the Status of Women tracking patterns of institutional discrimination. In 1972, Title IX and the affirmative action policies significantly shifted the educational opportunities for women in higher education and encouraged the women’s movement for equity (Bates et al., 2005, p. 318). The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 1960, 350,000 females enrolled in college; by 1998, 938,000 female students were enrolled (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). The current frontier of women’s educational opportunities represents progress and historical significance to the barriers women overcame.

During this period, many women became leaders and served as advocates for future generations of female student due to the advances in both access and quality of higher education. Capturing women’s impact in professional career pathways signifies a major turning point in history.
Women in Professions Emerge

The Progressive Era of American history characterizes a rapid expansion of urbanization and industrialization between the 1890s and 1920s (“Introduction to Women,” n.d.). Although society was still largely focused on male contributions, women began assuming more roles outside of the domesticated household. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were seen as the “moral guardians” of the home; however, during the Progressive Era they expanded their moral influence into social spheres such as education, healthcare, and political reformation (“Introduction to Women,” n.d.). Though many women did not work outside the home, more employment opportunities opened for women and career paths emerged such as department store clerks, or clerical workers. With more middle- and upper class women graduating from college and entering white-collar professions, the concept of the “New Woman” was born (“The Status of Women,” n.d., para. 3).

As more women in the United States achieve education and professional credentials, disproportionately fewer rewards and less professional acceptance remains a reality for these career-driven women. According to Valian (1998), beyond the overt historic discrimination against women, men and women acquire through childhood experiences implicit statements about sex differences inform their gendered expectations about roles in society and appraisal of their professional abilities. Through these cognitive and social forces, small disparities in the treatment and belonging of women and men in society result in pronounced “gender differences in salary, rank, promotion and prestige” (Bates et al., 2005, p. 322) in professional atmospheres. With both the desire to achieve and financial means below men, the GI Bill levels the playing field by
creating opportunities for women to serve in professional roles, as well as obtain a postsecondary education.

**Financial Influence of the GI Bill on Female Veteran Students**

“Beginning with the 1944 G.I. Bill, offering to pay educational expenses for returning World War II veterans, millions of students, including a small number of ex-service women sought admissions to institutions of higher learning” (Bates et al., 2005, p. 317). The GI Bill represents an inexorable linkage between the military and women’s education. Exploring women’s advancement in higher education and professional pathways means understanding the important historical role of women’s colleges.

The latest version of the Post-9/11 GI Bill enacted in August 2009 offers more generous and expanded benefits for veterans to attend college/university. These benefits more fully cover the cost of tuition as well as provide stipends for living expenses, textbooks and course required resources (Rumann, Rivera & Hernandez, 2011, p. 51). According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most comprehensive education benefit package since the original GI Bill of Rights was signed into law in 1944 (2016). Despite the evolution of the GI Bill over the years, the significance of such changes has made it increasing more complex and stressful for veterans to utilize these benefits without the proper assistance from advisors or veteran assistants on campus (Cole, 2013). There is a growing concern about the billions of dollars in educational benefits released to veterans and their beneficiaries and the completion rate of postsecondary education with credentials (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). In 2011, the Veterans Benefit Administration reported 555,329 beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 GI Bill compared to 790,507 in 2015 showing significant growth and success in
making higher education more accessible to military veterans (U.S Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016, p.8).

To appreciate how influential the Post-9/11 GI Bill is on educational opportunities for military veterans, and specifically female student veterans, it is important to trace its history and advancement. Because of the original GI Bill, an unprecedented number of World War II (WWII) veterans had the opportunity to take advantage of higher education through its education and training provisions. The initial GI bill was “instrumental in that it not only changed the lives of an entire generation, of veterans, but it also changed the landscape of higher education” (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013, p. 21). GI Bill education benefits helped broaden higher education access to an estimated 20 percent of the 2.2 million veterans who used this benefit to enter college (Serow, 2004, p. 485).

Since the GI Bill’s inception in 1944, data collected by Veterans Affairs about the students it served and their training and educational choices varied with each iteration of the bill (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). Over the years following WWII, there were different iterations of the GI Bill, including the Korean War GI Bill (1952), Vietnam War GI Bill (1966), and Montgomery GI Bill (1985). In the legislation update to the Montgomery GI Bill, it “covered approximately 73% of the total cost of tuition, fees, room and board at a public four-year college” (McBain, 2008, p. 4). As the trend for higher education costs became a larger portion of a family budget, there was a strong incentive to keep the costs manageable despite the increased demand for a high-technology driven economic workforce (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

The September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks on the U.S. became the stimulus sparking another significant shift in the military and in the higher education landscape. With the
end of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2011 and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2014, many servicemembers transitioned out of the military with more anticipated in the coming years. Approximately five million servicemembers who served after 9/11 expect to be out of the military by 2020, becoming veterans (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013). As a result, Congress passed a revision to the GI Bill as robust and impactful as the WWII GI Bill; the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, is also known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This bill is the most financially generous education benefit package throughout its history and is significantly impact the educational opportunities of current and future military veterans (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

The Post-9/11 Veterans Profile, provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015), indicated the percentage of post 9/11 women veterans attending college for the following age groups are 41.6 percent for 17-24 years, 33.7 percent for 25-34 years, 22.5 percent for 35-44 years, 15.3 percent for 45-54 years, and 11.8 percent for 55 years and up (p. 9). A majority of female military veterans will utilize the Post-9/11 GI Bill to cover the costs of tuition and fees at school, a monthly housing allowance while attending college, and receive up to $1,000 a year towards books and supplies (“Post-9/11 GI Bill Overview,” 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, a higher percentage of female veterans age 35 or older, compared to females of similar age with without military experience, have earned a Bachelors or an advanced degree (2013, p.24). Furthermore, although post 9/11 female veterans had higher educational attainment, they were poorer and living in a household receiving food stamps as compared with male veterans in 2013.
Examining the role and participation of women in the military throughout the United States history illuminates concerns about utilization and impact of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits as potential factors in the college experience.

**History of Women in the Military**

Women have informally contributed to U.S. military service since the Revolutionary War and their roles shifted to more support positions as the military became organized and prominent (Skaine, 1999). Although the number of women in uniform is relatively low as compared to their proportion of the overall population, many changes in policy and removal of restrictions opened the doors for women to enlist, engage in combat functions and take on leadership positions. “Despite their increased presence in the military… there is evidence that social attitudes towards women serving in expanding military roles continue to reflect historical biases and stereotypes” (Matthews et al., 2009, p. 242). To take a deeper look at women in the military, the next section discusses a review of female military participation in WWI and II and female military participation in post 9/11.

**Female Military Participation in World War I and World War II**

Between the Civil War and World War I, many women stepped into nontraditional duties including enlisting in the Army as spies and smugglers. Their ability to adapt to changing environments and provide humanitarian aid increased their prominence in the military (“Women in the Army,” n.d. para. 3). It is reported “over 400 [still] served as secret Soldiers in the Civil War” despite being forbidden to official enter the military. (“Women in the Army,” n.d., para. 4). World War I hallmarked a significant
shift in women’s participation in the military prompting the passage of the 19th Amendment, women’s right to vote. Filling factory vacancies left by the men who fought in the war, as well as typically male dominated positions such as statisticians, accountants, journalists and architects paved the way for women to align themselves beyond the traditional support service duties and help fight in the war and on the home front ("Women in the Army,” n.d.). Other military branches also saw the impact of women’s contributions, such as the United States Navy and Marine Corps. In March 1917, the Navy announced it would enlist women to fill a variety of jobs such as interpreters, couriers and translators. The Marine Corps enlisted over three hundred women with limited rank who often served in Washington D.C. as stenographers or paymasters ("Answering the Call,” 2016, para. 3). Notably, the engagement and participation of women in the military grew beyond the traditional stereotypical roles of nurses as the United States became more dependent upon the cohesion of all its citizens to persevere through times of war and unrest.

During World War II, the Army recognized women as permanent members through the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corp. In 1948, the Women’s Armed Service Integration Act formalized women’s involvement in the military, allowing women to serve but not to hold combat positions (Skaine, 1999). Though women’s roles in the military did not significantly change at that time, the government legitimized their participation through recognition of service. Allowing women to enroll in military academies and equaling enlistment ages for men and women highlighted the 1976 advancements in the U.S. military.
Female Military Participation During and Post 9/11

A pivotal turning point integrating women in the military occurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on United States soil. The “Global War on Terror” spanned Iraq and Afghanistan battlefields and provided new positions women could fill through the rapid expansion of jobs and opportunities. This marked a pivotal shift for the future of women’s career in the military. Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester was awarded the Silver Star in June 2005 for her heroic actions during a firefight in Baghdad (“Women in the Army,” n.d.), marking the first ever award of its kind to a female soldier for direct combat engagements.

Though the combat exclusion policy restricted women’s participation in the military, the reality depicted females as increasingly involved in combat positions. Specifically, women have served as pilots on combat aircrafts, patrolled the streets as military police and commanded units to highlight a few roles (Matthew et al., 2009). Despite these changes, barriers still exist for women regarding attainment of high-ranking officer positions. In 2013, the Department of Defense announced the repeal of the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, promoting a more gender-neutral military agenda. By January 2016, the Department of Defense charged all military branches with creating performance standards for all positions and making official requests delineating any exceptions to these policy changes (Lyle, 2015). The goal is to expand military eligibility and provide opportunities for anyone to serve in capacities for which they are both able and qualified. According to Juliet Beyler, the Defense Department’s director of officer and enlisted personnel management, this change in
policy will “remove those old gender-based barriers to service that no longer made sense” (Lyle, 2015, para. 4).

Since 2013, approximately 71,000 positions have become available to women servicemembers. With over 280,000 females deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11, the landscape of the U.S. military is significantly shifting (Lyle, 2015). The historical context of women in the military is also changing as the U.S military appropriately recognizes more women for their combat service and leadership abilities. However, Arthur Herman, a columnist for the National Review, refers to the Panetta and Dempsey order requiring the services review and revise performance standards to fit both men and women, as an ideological perception that including women in combat would equate to the lowering of performance measures (2013, para. 16). The debate continues to evolve on how the changing roles of women in the military perpetuates gender roles and stereotypes and how it will impact the traditional view and patriarchal structure most often associated with the United States service branches. Therefore, understanding female veteran’s military history informs future directions in policy, improves their well-being, and delineates directions for successful transition from the military to collegiate environments.

**Female Veteran Transition from Military Life to College Life**

Veterans often face many of the same challenges of non-traditional students but their transition into the college or university setting is not always equal. “We’re proud of our service but we don’t need to come into class and say, “I’m a veteran. You should be proud of me!” (Giffey, 2012, p. 14). Veterans bring a wide spectrum of experiences and moving from a traditionally structured, directive, hierarchical environment into college,
where the ‘rules of the game’ shift to autonomy and self-directedness, poses transitional challenges and concerns about inclusion (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015, p. 124). Since transition is a time of great change for the female veteran, it is helpful to think about starting at the end of her military service and working forward into new opportunities and challenges (Bridges, 2004). Bridges defines endings and discusses the four D’s—disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation as a model to help understand what experiences and emotions a female veteran may go through as she transitions from the military to civilian life, and then to college environments (Bridges, 2004). This model, or the use of others such as Schlossberg’s (1984) Transition Framework, recognizes the importance of adjustment during this period and its impact on the successful integration of the veteran into the collegiate setting.

The scope of transition literature is vast and often includes males and females as one population of veterans. Burkhart and Hogan (2015) investigated female veterans’ coping with transition through a grounded theory approach. Their findings suggest coping with transition emerged as the most fundamental psychosocial process used by female veterans to adjust to civilian life. Specifically, coping with transitions was compromised of seven categories: choosing the military, adapting to the military, being in the military, being a female in the military, departing the military, experiencing stressors of being a civilian, and making meaning of being a veteran-civilian (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015, p. 113). Of particular interest is the category associated with “being female in the military” as this is identified independent from “being in the military” and may provide insight into this study as it unfolds.
Multiple factors identified for managing transition including the nature of the transition itself, the type of transition, the context of the transition, and the resources available to the individual transitioning (Ackerman et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Referring to Schlossberg’s (1984) theory of transition, these “4 S’s” are more commonly identified as situation, self, support and strategies. Using this theory, Griffin and Gilbert’s (2015) qualitative study identified three major themes within the data: 1) veterans valued the importance of offices, services, and professionals that understand their unique needs and concerns, 2) specific campus policies and procedures must provide these services more seamlessly, and 3) veterans believed strongly in the representation of veteran-specific groups and services as part of the student body at large, an opportunity to build social and cultural support (p. 80). Despite data identifying areas of strength, significant institutional barriers created more struggles and challenges than anticipated. As the size of the veteran population continues to increase in colleges and universities, there is great concern how to apply knowledge about military veteran transition in practical and supportive ways

Pellegrino & Hoggan (2015) conducted a case study of two female veterans’ transitional experiences from the military into the community college setting using Schlossberg’s (1984) transition model. According to Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015), “Despite the growing interest in veterans’ issues… few empirical studies examine the experience of veterans as they transition into community college.” (p. 125). The experience of transition as a gain and a loss depends upon the interpretation of the experience and its related factors (Bridge, 2004). Findings from Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) highlight the uniqueness of each female veteran’s military experiences despite
both being eager and excited to go to college, with similar “self” attributes of being highly motivated with high levels of self-efficacy and confidence. Both women in this study reported strong supportive roles from their husbands but childcare was a major hurdle to their transition into college. Because of their military training, both women in the Pellegrino & Hoggan (2015) study identified time management and organizational skills as assets in the female veteran’s pursuit of academic achievement. Furthermore, this study signified male and female veterans may not experience transition identically as well as provides evidence to consider even women veterans may have unique needs or transitional challenges speaking to the individuation of how the community college context supports and engages veteran students. Only recently has the government recognized both the services required of female veterans and the issues they “face as they return to civilian life are different from those of male veterans.” (Furey, 1999, pp. 87-88) Institutions of higher education are becoming equally responsible for understanding these differences, as well.

In relationship to transitional experiences in the collegiate setting, understanding the impact of broader themed variables such as combat specific experiences and Veteran Affairs administrative policies is necessary for the fullest picture of our veteran’s movement from the combat zone to the classroom. A major challenge Ackerman et al. (2009) emphasized was how transitioning veteran students manage the Veteran Administration which handles educational and medical benefits. “…[T]hat not all campuses have functioning programs in place to assist veterans who have become students. Then, there were the challenges of fitting in, of just being a student” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 8), resonating the fundamental struggles of the veteran. The continued
emphasis for institutions to have veteran service offices not just available to students, but integrated into the overall operations, was a central finding from this study.

Despite significant literature on supporting veteran students in transition, the stark reality is many student veterans still report the transition from military to civilian roles is a turbulent period. A Marine who served in Iraq summarized, “You just can’t relate unless you have been there. Those people have” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 11). The Disabled American Veterans (DAV) produced a comprehensive study entitled, Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home, citing several areas of reform (2014). “DoD, VA and local communities should work together to establish peer support networks for women veterans to ease transition, isolation and assist with readjustment problems.” according to the Disabled American Veterans (2014, p. 4). Though Schlossberg’s (1984) transition framework accounts for the “self” as an important variable in the transition process, how the “self” interacts within the collegiate environment is largely individualistic and certainly unique for males and females (Giffey, 2012; Kirchner, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This framework questions whether transition into the collegiate setting becomes a crisis of identity. How the female veteran student sees herself and her roles is a crucial bridge in the transition experience.

Continual transition is the hallmark of the shifting identity of the female veteran into the college student role. Navigating short or long-term change, interconnected factors as well as collegial structures means the veteran student may occupy two or sometimes more conflicting identities during this transitional period (Livingston & Bauman, 2013). Although commonality among the experiences in the military, as well as adjusting to civilian life exists, the true transitional impact may differ remarkably across
veterans and within gender roles. Through the lens of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition model, there are both personal and contextual factors influencing the interpretation of transition the military veteran, now civilian student, experiences (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). As veteran students’ enrollments increase in our colleges and universities, there is a greater calling to decrease transitional barriers and provide supportive services to develop comprehensive veteran-friendly institutions.

**Veteran-Friendly Institutions, Sanctuaries for Veteran Students.**

According to American Council on Education (ACE) President Molly Corbett Broad, “The definition of ‘veteran-friendly’ is as diverse as today’s higher education community.” (“ACE Launches Online Toolkit,” 2012, para.3). Imperative to the success of veteran students, institutions must define what it means to be veteran friendly, addressing both the institutional and the student needs. Furthermore, Minnis (2014) articulates, “Being a “veteran friendly” school means going beyond the “friendly” label and fostering an institutional culture which is supportive, appreciative, respectful, embracing, and inclusive of the veterans it educates.” (para. 4). Students use the term “veteran friendly” to refer to those institutions that have programs and people to assist veterans with their transition, as well as navigating the complex Veteran Affairs policies (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 10). Accordingly, Burnett and Segoria (2009) identified California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM) as a model higher education organization with institution-wide committees to help address veteran specific needs such as mental health, transition, career services, and understanding benefits. Serving veteran students often means creating a stronger sense of community and an atmosphere fostering belongingness and inclusion (Lokken et al., 2009). The coined term, veteran-friendly
refers to an institution making concerted efforts to “identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans” (Lokken et al., 2009, p. 45). Following an increased review of institutional goals, many college and universities are becoming veteran-friendly as the population of veterans increases on their campuses. One could say these institutions are seen as sanctuary for veteran students.

The Higher Education Initiative in Minnesota created staff teams to help with the reintegration of veterans into the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU) campuses that became a statewide model for developing such activities as well as playing an advocacy role for returning veterans on campus. Going Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, Minnesota spearheaded support in higher education for veterans, military members and their families (Lokken et al., 2009, pp. 46-47). Veteran-friendly institutions can have a major impact on the transition, reintegration and success of veterans in pursuing their higher education goals. With this level of investment, the need for institutions to explicitly address issues of mental health and well-being through information and training sessions for staff as well as veteran resource centers become factors related to the success of veteran-friendly institutions to positively impact student veterans on their campuses (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014).

Palmer (2011) refers to the important work at the University of Arizona and George Washington University to support veteran transition, making both institutions hallmarks as veteran-friendly institutions. Specifically, the University of Arizona has largely focused their veteran office support services to helping students understand and process their financial educational benefits. Furthermore, the University of Arizona has chosen to staff their veteran affairs office with students who have transitioned from the
military into the campus community, making the office more inviting and comfortable for all student veterans (Palmer, 2011). The need to create a supportive and familiar atmosphere is an emphasized theme across the transition literature as well as a hallmark of veteran-friendly institutions (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Mujica, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). George Washington University has taken a more holistic approach to being a veteran-friendly institution by creating collaboration across the campus to help address veteran issues (Palmer, 2011). George Washington University established an advisory board to centralize student veteran issues throughout the campus with the primary goal of “make[ing] sure everyone is on board with veterans’ issues and has the same goals in mind” (Palmer, 2011, p. 2). Some promising practices for addressing the unique needs of veteran students as more veteran-friendly institution emerged in the higher education landscape (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). It is not enough for an institution to call itself veteran-friendly; the school must operationalize what it means to serve veterans and facilitate their educational goals by streamlining processes and staying abreast of their unique and often unidentified prerequisites.

Notable veteran-friendly institutions such as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU), University of Arizona and George Washington University further the continuation of important work for other postsecondary institutions becoming more veteran-friendly. According to the study from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), about three-quarters of colleges and universities have dedicated personnel and resources specifically for student veterans, yet they lack the retention and completion data to measure the effectiveness of these services (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Furthermore, studies using the National Survey of Student Engagement
(NSSE) indicated veterans feel less supported by their institutions and are less likely to engage and interact with faculty members (NSSE, 2010), which may contribute to the student veteran’s feelings of isolation and invisibility (Livingston et al., 2011; Osborne, 2014; Palmer, 2011). Despite many institutions calling themselves, veteran-friendly, there appears to be a gap between the services provided and what the student veterans report needing.

Osborne (2014) conducted two focus groups and 14 interviews with student veterans from a four-year, public land-grant university using a constructivist framework to ascertain more effective ways the university can support its veterans on campus. Data analysis suggested major themes of counselor limited knowledge about the Post 9/11 GI Bill reinforced the challenges of navigating a very restrictive and cumbersome benefits program, as well as veterans feeling isolated from the larger student body due to work-life commitments and chronological age (Osborne, 2014, p. 253). More explicitly was the theme of “campus climate” and the political implications relating to the perception this particular university is “liberal” or “antimilitary,” which strengthened the feelings of isolation and vulnerability to stereotyping (Obsorne, 2014, p. 254). In one of her interviews with a young female veteran deployed to Iraq, Holmstedt (2009) reported that upon the student veteran’s return to the classroom, she felt her experiences were “invalidated” by the students and instructor, reinforcing her silence and disengagement with the campus and the larger student body (p. 193). Osborne (2014) recommends universities and colleges create Veteran Ally Training for staff and faculty to help bridge the gap between the veteran students and administrative offices. Furthermore, institutionalizing student panels to facilitate open forums for expression and
communication of experiences framed under the context of “telling their stories” may help disseminate feelings of separation from the military and break down perceptual barriers and stereotyping statements across the campus (Osborne, 2014, p. 255-256).

Creating a veteran-friendly institution requires knowledge about the student veterans it serves, institutional support which creates a culture and climate of openness, and a dedicated staff and faculty who are knowledgeable about unique student veteran issues and more importantly, the individual story each veteran tells through their journey of transition (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Lokken et al., 2009; Palmer, 2011).

**Transitional Challenges and Causal Factors**

As the female veteran population increases on the college campus, student affairs professionals must address additional challenges when interacting with veteran students. Therefore, it is important to understand these issues and recognize exhibited behavior may be due to the military experience of some veteran women. For example, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Military Sexual Trauma (MST), alcohol and substance abuse and risk of suicide as related to women should be topics of interest veteran service personnel, student affairs personnel and faculty in order to provide appropriate service and engage female veterans in the classroom need to prepare for when supporting these veteran women.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** Though attitudes towards others with disabilities is socially constructed, the “physical, psychological, and other challenges faced by people with disabilities are very real” (*Understanding campus complexity*, 2013, p. 53). Despite the American with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requiring colleges and universities to accommodate students with disabilities,
many student veterans “often hesitate to self-identify these and other disabilities acquired during their military service” (Shackelford, 2009, p. 36, as cited in Understanding Campus Complexity, 2013, p. 65). The Disabled American Veterans report notes in fiscal year (FY) 2012, women comprised 6.5 percent of Veteran Affairs (VA) patients and in FY 2013, the proportion of women increased to 6.8 percent. The number of women veterans has been growing faster than the number of men. Compared to men, women veterans are, on average, substantially younger: 42 percent of women and 13 percent of men are less than 45 years old (“Disabled American Veterans,” 2014, p. 10).

When working with combat veterans with disabilities, it is important to realize some may “have challenges only those who have served in combat can understand” (Madaus et al., 2009, p. 14, as cited in Understanding Campus Complexity, 2013, p. 66). Due to their culture, many veterans think about disabilities as a weakness resulting in unlikely behaviors to report and seek treatment (Kraus & Rattray, 2013). Particularly, this generation of veterans is experiencing a higher rate of disability or injury compared to previous generations, with an injury-to-casualty rate of three-to-one, and for veterans of Operational Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OED) with an injury-to-casualty rate of sixteen-to-one (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008, as reported in Kraus & Rattray, 2013, p. 117). Veteran disabilities can be both visible (amputations or homelessness) or invisible (mental health concerns), which makes working with veterans suffering from a disability a unique challenge.

The associations between sociodemographic and service characteristics and depression and PTSD diagnoses are under-researched in a growing population of female OEF/OIF veterans. Maguen, Ren, Bosch, Mamar, and Seal (2010 conducted a
quantitative study investigating gender differences in reported mental health diagnoses for OEF/OIF veterans seeking medical services through the VA between 2002 and 2008. A cross-sectional analysis of existing VA databases was used to extract the data. Maguen et al. (2010) found female veterans were more likely to be diagnosed with depression (Cohen $h = 0.15$). PTSD diagnoses for both men and women revealed significant interactions with age, marital status, component type, branch and rank such that women who were older than 30 years were at a greater risk for a PTSD diagnosis compared to men. These findings emphasize the importance of gender differences in mental health concerns and the need to be mindful not all veterans, or even all female veterans, experience trauma and stress in analogous ways (Freedy et al., 2010; Maguen et al., 2010). A study conducted by Schnurr and Lunney (2008) assessed the impact of PTSD on the quality of life for veterans examining particular gender differences between males and females. The research found men and women did not differ in the association between PTSD and the quality of life, except for minor differences in related to the re-experiencing of symptoms in surrounding domains (i.e. home, neighborhood and community) for women (Schnurr & Lunney, 2008, p. 389). The potential impact of PTSD related symptoms within the college context is particularly relevant for understanding our female veteran student.

Military sexual trauma (MST). As compared to their male counterparts, active-duty military women are significantly more likely to be the victims of sexual assault and sexual harassment (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009), which are contributing factors for PTSD once women discharge from the military (Middleton & Craig, 2012). According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, fiscal year (FY) 2008, 21 percent of women
screened positive for military sexual trauma (MST) (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). Women who experienced MST may have a greater risk of developing PTSD compared to women who do not experience MST (Grossman, 2013). The Pentagon reported a significant increase in the number of rapes and sexual assaults reported to the department in 2013 (Cooper, 2014). “In 2012, a confidential Pentagon survey estimated 26,000 men and women were sexually assaulted. Of those, 3,374 cases were reported. In contrast, 5,061 cases were reported last year” (Cooper, 2014, para.4). As trends of sexual assault and harassment increase in the military, it suggests a need to better recognize the implications of such traumatic experiences. The impact of mental health issues, including PTSD and MST is complex and interwoven across a female veteran’s understanding of herself as well as a systemic influence on her behavior, thoughts and emotional experiences collectively.

Middleton and Craig (2012) conducted a review of the literature on PTSD among female veterans between 1990 and 2010 and found female veterans experience higher rates of MST compared to male veterans and a majority of the research has related PTSD to MST experiences. However, less literature exists on the implications of PTSD on female soldiers. Street, Vogt, and Dutra (2009) reviewed the literature on PTSD and associated issues among female veterans and mental health. Street et al. (2009) focused on Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the issues males face in relation to combat exposure. Sexual assault and harassment, interpersonal stressor exposure, pre - and post- military interpersonal trauma, homecoming adjustment are major elements male veterans’ experience. Street et al. (2009) suggested the need for research geared towards the prevention of trauma and
challenges in mental health for both genders as there is difficulty in adapting models informed by male experiences of PTSD and MST to today’s OEF/OIF female veterans. It is clear from the literature “female veterans experience very real and at times very different issues than their male counterparts” and a true need exists for research to understand the multifaceted issues surrounding PTSD and female veterans (Middleton & Craig, 2012, p. 235).

Evaluating gender differences in lifetime traumatic events, PTSD, and depression among VA primary care patients, Freedy et al. (2010) and found for male participants, war zone experience was predictive of PTSD, whereas depression was associated with both war zone experience and interpersonal violence. Sexual victimization was a predictor of PTSD for women (Freedy et al., 2010; Middleton & Craig, 2012; Schnurr & Lunney, 2008). Freedy et al. (2010) suggest special attention should be given to gender issues impacting identification of PTSD related experiences as well as VA health care services for women veterans. This study’s findings may not be generalizable from a VA health care setting but noteworthy are the consistent findings aligning PTSD and sexual trauma for women veterans. PTSD and MST may impact women veteran’s mental well-being.

Alcohol and substance abuse. Using the conceptual framework of the life course model, Segal and Lane (2016) applied it to the study of military women’s experiences and the effect of those life events on their well-being. Although common stress models emphasize the negative effects of stressful events on well-being, this model emphasizes the predictable intersections military personnel and their family face through a concentric circular model. Comprehensive and complex by design, Segal and Lane (2016) report:
Characteristics of individuals and their social situations are important mediators and moderators of the effects. The effects of life course events on well-being are likely to vary as a function of individual characteristics and demographic variables, such as sex, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, education, socioeconomic status background, family size, marital status of parents, adoption, military family background, reason for entering the service, and childhood and life experiences. (p.14).

Exemplified through this model is the impact of military sexual assault and harassment on military women’s well-being. “The nature of the military culture creates additional problems for the victims…because of the hierarchical structure of the military” (Segal & Lane, 2016, p. 18) and represents additional disruptions in the well-being of the victim.

The five major principles of life course theory: “life-long development,” “human agency,” “location in time and place,” “timing,” and “linked lives” have an important impact on the transition and trajectory of the veteran’s life course. The quality of life of a female veteran is inordinately linked to multiple variables, making mental health related issues like PTSD, depression and substance use behaviors not easily understood by traditional models (Krauss & Rattray, 2013; Schnurr & Lunney, 2008; Segal & Lane, 2016).

Research studies often cite substance use as an outcome variable resulting from other mental health issues. Nunnink, Goldwaser, Heppner, Pittman, Nievergelt, and Baker (2010) studied PTSD and substance misuse among OEF/OIF women veterans, specifically differences in substance use in women veterans who identified as having PTSD and not having PTSD. The findings indicated 31% of the participants tested
positive for PTSD, 47% tested positive for high-risk drinking, and 6% tested positive for drug abuse (Nunnink et al., 2010). A positive correlation was found between alcohol misuse and PTSD status such that the higher the alcohol misuse score, the higher the probability of PTSD existence ($\beta = 0.48$, $t(34) = 3.22$, $p < 0.01$). A growing concern is the relationship between problematic drinking, substance misuse and PTSD.

Researching the associations among these primary mental health challenges of female veterans, Gobin et al., (2015) examined relationships between alcohol misuse, military-related characteristics, interpersonal violence exposure, and PTSD and depression symptom severity. Using a self-reporting survey design, 369 female veteran patients from the New England VA healthcare system responded. This study defined interpersonal violence exposure as sexual assault and/or harassment during military service, (MST), past childhood sexual abuse or intimate partner violence (IPV) (Gobin et al., 2015, p. 1766). Prominent findings suggest interpersonal alcohol-related concerns were associated with a history of MST and higher rates of adulthood physical assault and both interpersonal alcohol-related concerns and intrapersonal alcohol-related concerns were associated with greater PTSD symptom severity (Gobin et al., 2015). Study results suggest individuals who suffer from PTSD and depression may use alcohol consumption as an avoidant coping mechanism (Gobin et al., 2015). The assessment of mental health concerns is typically associated with risk and protective factors. Notably in the Gobin et al. (2015) study, common variables such as higher education, employment, marriage, and having children were not associated as protective factors against the misuse of alcohol. This unique pattern proposes risk and protective factors for alcohol use disorders may be
qualitatively different for women veterans than for other groups and future research should considered salient when exploring avenues for support and treatment.

**Risk of suicide.** The link between suicide and substance use with women veterans is an important element to consider. Lehavot et al. (2012) found female veterans report poorer health and greater incidences of risky behavior than their civilian counterparts. Chapman and Wu (2014) conducted a literature review studying the relationship among women veterans’ mental health, suicide, and substance use. A synthesis of the review identified nine of the research studies covered the topic of completed suicide among veterans and three studies on VA treated veterans and completed suicide without identifying substance use as a possible cause. The remaining studies resulted in five explorations focusing on VA treated veterans and the connection between substance use and both attempted or committed suicide.

Chapman and Wu (2014) conducted a review of nine studies examining suicide among veterans and found a greater proportion of veterans, including women, committed suicide when compared to nonveterans. There also was a connection between completed suicide, past trauma, age, and mental health disorders. In addition, mental illness diagnoses are more prevalent in women veterans, and those with a substance use disorder (SUD) were more likely to complete suicide. The probability may increase exponentially for women veterans with mental illness disorders (Chapman & Wu, 2014). More importantly, further research must illuminate the mechanisms by which suicide occurs and trends in suicide attempts and completions for military veterans.

McCarten et al. (2015) analyzed suicide rates by gender between 2001 and 2010 and found higher rates of suicide among male veterans when compared to rates of suicide
among female veterans. Suicide for women veterans increased 35 percent between the study period, and suicide for men increased 15 percent within the same period. Blosnich, Kopacz, McCarthen, and Bossarte (2015) found similar results in a sample of student military veterans. Student veterans were more likely to engage in self-harm than students without military experience, and the study recommended suicide prevention be included in support services targeting student veterans (Blosnich et al., 2015). Suicide, substance use and other risk-taking behaviors create a broad prism of our female veteran (Chapman & Wu, 2014; Lehavot et al., 2012). The additional role of student into the life course model only further complicates how veteran students engage and interact on the college campus (Blosnich et al., 2015; Segal & Lane, 2016).

Transitional challenges faced by female veterans when they return to civilian life and enter a collegial setting spark the inquiry into the emergent gender differences between females and males. The following section will review the social cognitive theory of gender development, identity control theory, and the interplay between gender and identity with respect to perceptions of women veterans.

**Gender and Identity Development Theories**

As the military evolves to a more gender-neutral agenda and women assume assignments beyond the traditionally viewed supportive roles, there is a contextual need to understand the important influence social and cognitive pressures play on both society’s perceptions of women in the military and how the women perceive themselves because of their military experiences. “Social expectations outside of the military play a major role in holding women back from military advancement, and while gender expectations are shifting throughout society, such change occurs slowly” (Clemmitt,
2009, p. 975). Social expectations impact how a female veteran sees herself as a woman and how she identifies herself within social contexts.

Furthermore, the military duties assigned to female soldiers, such as infantry detail or desk job duties, reflect inconsistencies between perceptions of women and the behaviors themselves. How women manage this concept of ‘doing gender’ in the collegiate context may be socially influenced by their previous experiences in the military, as well as their transformed identities over time. According to Burke (1991), the evaluation of self in relation to distress can lead to changes in identity. Considering military service as potentially distressful experiences for some women and exploring a women’s perception of her identity is salient to understanding how she may view herself within a postsecondary institution. This study will use the term “gender identity” to refer to “a sense of one’s own gender, including knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of being male or female” (Egan & Perry, 2001, p. 451) and will not include aspects of sexual orientation or transgendered experiences.

**Social Cognitive Theory of Gender**

Gender development is fundamental; societal expectations of gender prescribe some of the most important aspects of a person’s life. Specifically, gender differentiation and social paths often influence talents a person nurtures, self-perceptions and identity. It is through gender differentiation in society that males and females attribute certain values. Leading to stereotyping or social role expectations, these socially assigned attributes often dictate status, desirability, and access across multiple contexts (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).
Several major theoretical perspectives exist to explain gender development. These theories differ with respect to emphasis placed on psychological, biological, and socialstructural determinants, the nature of transmission of knowledge about gender, and the temporal scope of the theoretical analyses. Social cognitive theory integrates both psychological and socialstructural elements within the conceptual framework, postulating “gender conceptions and role behaviors are the products of a broad network of social influences operating both familial and in many society systems” and making this approach to gender development multifaceted and multidimensional (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 676). Many theories of gender development emphasize early life experiences as determinants for gender identity. Social cognitive theory assumes a lifespan perspective, suggesting gender identity development spans across an individual’s entire age of development - an appropriate model to consider for this study of adult female veteran students.

Social cognitive theory accounts for human attributes of gender development through the notion of symbolization, observational learning, and self-reflective capabilities of evaluation adequacy of one’s thinking and actions, also known as self-efficacy. Using a triad reciprocal approach, cognitive, affective and biological events, these personal factors interact with each other and influence each other bidirectionally. Gender development is complex and intertwined with motivational, affective, and environmental elements. Taken together, these factors provide a broader context of understanding beyond the cognitive factors (gender schemas and stereotypical knowledge) influencing gender identity development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 685).
Influences of modeling on gender development. Modeling through observational learning is one of the most influential and powerful tools for an individual to assume values, beliefs systems, and attitudes (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). Despite the opinion that modeling is simply a mimicking of someone else’s behaviors or belief, modeling requires a level of attention presumably intentional and rule-governed. More so, social cognitive theory supposes gender identity can be characterized by learning from exemplars as models superseding the idea of pure imitation, through the observation of patterns of differential performances (behavioral or cognitive) of male and female models.

Additionally, the effect of modeling gender typical behavior requires a level of retention or cognitive representation in memory of the model itself. The rehearsal of modeled behaviors “not only enhances acquisition of competencies but they raise perceived self-efficacy to execute the activities successfully” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 687). Consider the example of a young adult male who observed his Battalion Commander reprimand subordinates in the past. This male, recently promoted, reprimands his subordinates as a means to show authority. This modeled behavior has confirmed for the young adult male not only is this how a male in a position of authority is supposed to behave, but his successful attempt at reprimanding the subordinates also validates his ability to manage others in the future.

Modeling observed behavior is central for an individual to acquire gender competencies. Considering the lack of female representation in military leadership, women may be more likely to achieve leadership success by modeling behaviors more aligned to male characteristics (Brownson, 2014). Women veterans who have lacked role
models in the military may also struggle with how they exercise their own agency. Social cognitive theory further addresses gender-linked behavior in relationship to self-efficacy. Through self-efficacy, an individual learns to regulate their expression of gender roles and styles.

**Self-efficacy and gender role conduct.** According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is the capacity for one to exercise control over their thought processes, motivations and affect and the perception of agency (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Self-efficacy affects how confident a person is in their abilities to achieving a specific goal or outcome. “Perceived efficacy is therefore, the bedrock foundation of human agency” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 691). Individual’s beliefs about their self-efficacy develop in a number of ways. A gradual level of mastery of experiences, social modeling, and social persuasion are highlighted areas of influence on self-efficacy. Gender role conduct, as illustrated in occupational pursuits, is highly influenced by perceived self-efficacy. In a study conducted by Betz and Hackett (1981), female students rated their self-efficacy higher for types of occupations traditionally held by women and reported a lower sense of efficacy for careers deemed traditionally for males (as reported in Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 692). “[S]ocial practices within the family, the educational system, peer relationship, the mass media, the occupational system, and the culture at large” shape women’s attitudes and beliefs about their capabilities and their desired career pathways (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 692).

The social cognitive theory on gender identity provides a backdrop for understanding women veteran’s occupational experiences in the military, as well as their perceptions of gender role behaviors in the college setting. To deconstruct gender identity
development more fully, the following section will discuss identity development through the lens of identity control theory.

**Identity Control Theory**

Central to identity control theory (ICT) are the concepts by which meanings around identities form, as well as the nature of a person’s identity and the relationship between identity and their behavior within social contexts (Burke, 1991, 2007; Carter, 2014). What does it mean to be a female veteran student? What does it mean to be a college student? Identities and behaviors linked by common meanings create an associated identity with a prescribed set of behaviors. Identities are compiled meanings internalized as standards influencing one’s behavior. In addition to the identity standard, a set of perceptions of meanings become relevant based on the contextual situation (Burke, 2007).

Social situations are fluid, suggesting they are interactive and changing. In cases where a person’s perceived identity meanings are congruent with the meanings of their identity standards, people continue to behave as they initially chose. However, if a discrepancy exists between a person’s perceived identity meanings and their identity standards, they will counteract this disturbance and change their behavior. By controlling the perceptions of identity-relevant meanings, individuals engage in identity verification. It is through identity verification a person seeks out situations germane to their perceived meanings and consistent with their identity standards (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997). Since individuals have multiple identities, “each identity is a control system that attempts to control perceptions (of meanings relevant to their identity)” and align them to the meanings of their identity standard (Burke, 2007, p. 2202).
Identity control theory postulates three types of identities. Role identities are meanings central to a particular role an individual assumes, such as a mother or a nurse. Social identities refer to meanings we ascribe central to belonging in a particular group or category, such as an American, or veteran. Moreover, the meaning of the unique self creates a personal identity (Burke, 1999, 2007). According to Tsushima and Burke (1999), identity control theory states that the multiple identities are ordered within a hierarchy of control systems in which some identities are organized at a higher level than others and function to guide the principles of lower-level identities (as cited in Burke, 2007, p. 2204).

The meanings individuals place on sex and gender categories is fundamental to the application of identity control theory in gender development. Specifically, “male” and “female” categories are associated with particular meanings which function as standards for both males and females in the ICT model. Consider the example of a female who considers herself hyper-feminine. If she received feedback from her friends that she should act more masculine, the ICT model proposes she will feel a negative emotion and attempt to alter her behavior until the appraisals of her friends match her identity standard (Carter, 2014). Typically, males tend to have identity standards associated with “autonomy, agency, and independence,” while females tend to have identity standards associated with “connectedness, expressivity, and compassion” (Carter, 2014, p. 256). As women internalize the experience of a social world heavily influenced through the media, advertising and glamorized role models, their perceptions about gender roles and behaviors become their identity standard.
Doing Gender: The Interplay between Gender and Identity

In West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender,” gender is created and maintained through the individual playing out of certain roles in society. It is through the act of doing or “practice” by which a particular task or behavior is associated with a gender. Once this association is created, the act of “doing gender” perpetuates the meaning or identity as a man or woman (Carter, 2014). From a social constructivist perspective, gender identities are fluid and evolving through the formation of social interactions and contexts. As a woman practices “doing gender” across multiple social contexts, it becomes more likely she will develop a standard of identity which includes these experiences of gender.

Daily challenges plague women in the military; questions about their abilities to perform duty requirements or more covert insinuations about their belongingness and femininity can elicit inconsistent emotions shaping their identities. This results in women in the military needing to “do gender” carefully as a means to negotiate the turbulent social contexts they are immersed within (Herbert, 1998). The concept of “doing gender” is significantly embedded within the desire to manage what women would like to portray as their identity. Due to the nature of dynamic social situations, women have the opportunity to recreate their gender identities not only for what it means to be a woman, but also for what it means to be a woman in the military, and for what it means to be a female veteran student.

Chapter Summary

American higher education is a playground of change, challenge and transformation, major themes across its historical evolution. With landmark legislations,
such as *Dartmouth v. Woodward* (1819), the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, and the instatement of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, higher education impacts millions of lives making it more than an opportunity for the elite, but a public benefit to those who strive for advancement and career opportunities regardless of race, religion or gender. With the creation of land-grant institutions, women’s colleges and community colleges, higher education became the source of opportunity and knowledge for students throughout centuries of its history.

A review of the literature acknowledges change and transformation throughout the history of women in education and women in the military. Educated women once thought to be “dangerous” and “unsettling” have chartered pathways through postsecondary education with the creation of women’s colleges followed by the integration of coeducational institutions. Despite women’s continued advances in higher education, their professional career pathways remain a second best to the achievements bestowed onto men throughout history. Monumental political decisions such as the GI Bill and Title IX of the affirmative action policies bridged the gap between education and the military allowing women to capitalize on military benefits while furthering their education. Reflecting upon women’s history sets the stage for understanding the female veteran student in higher education.

As female veterans transition from military life to postsecondary experiences, it is important for student affairs professionals to familiarize themselves with some common challenges and causal factors. Specifically, concerns related to PTSD, MST, alcohol and substance use and risk for suicide are all issues a female veteran student may silently bring with her to college. Veteran-friendly institutions have programs with trained
professionals who assist all veteran students with their transition into college, as well as veteran specific benefits and issues of well-being.

Bandura’s social cognitive theory and Burke’s identity control theory frame the understanding of gender and identity development in women veterans. The concept of “doing gender” encapsulates the cognitive and social elements of both theories while also adding a behavioral component. It is through the practice of “doing gender” a woman develops her identity within a particular social context, such as the military or in college.

The research method selected, data collection methods including semi-structured interviews, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical consideration and limitations of the study will be discussed in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

At the heart of qualitative research is the desire to extract meaning from the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). A qualitative research design is best to give “social meanings people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations” that are interpreted and understood to illuminate the essence of the true phenomenon (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 4). According to van Manen (2007), a phenomenological study is, “a project that is driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning.” (p. 11). Since this research investigates female veteran students as they transition from serving our country to fostering their educational goals, it is important to garner a sense of “in-being” or what Heidegger (1985) refers to as “our everyday being-involved-with the things of our world” (van Manen, 2007, p.13). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how gender identity of female military veterans influences their respective college experiences at three Southwest institutions of higher education. The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context?
2. How does female veteran student’s perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting?
3. How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus?
This chapter elaborates on Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship as it pertains to the chosen research method as well as examines the rational for the research method, research design, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical consideration and limitations of the methodology.

Conceptualizing the Study through Interpretive Inquiry

To explore and develop an understanding of a central phenomenon, qualitative research is best suited for a study where the variables are less known (Creswell, 2015). Exploring the lived experiences of participants facilitates studying the central phenomenon through the rich and diverse context which the respondents ascribe meaning. In the case of female veteran students’ gender identity experiences, the purpose of this study is to understand how these gender identity experiences assume meaning within the college setting.

This study used the interpretative system of inquiry, which sought to understand the subjective meanings participants give to the worlds in which they live and work (Creswell, 2007). According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), the interpretative framework “assumes the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions,” and therefore, the participants are engaged in various meaning-making activities to guide the understanding of their personal experiences within the social situation (p. 5). Consequently, “meaning does not exist independent of the human interpretative process” and is essential for understanding the central phenomenon (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 17).

As a strand of interpretative inquiry, symbolic interactionism studies the interactions between individuals, groups, and objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Most
recently symbolic interactionism has evolved “to focus on the dynamics of self more than either symbols or interactions” (Turner, 2012, p. 331). Serving as a compass for guiding consistency of behaviors, the sense of self and how individuals are motivated to verify their sense of self based on the perspectives of others is particularly salient to forming the conceptual framework of this study (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Turner, 2012). The sense of self becomes prominent and influential to the understanding of gender identity experiences of female veteran students in the context of meaning-making.

Accordingly, Burke’s (1991) symbolic interactionist theory of identity control purports the working-self guiding moment-to-moment interactions. Individuals are continuously attempting to verify the congruency between their working self and their moment-to-moment roles (Burke, 1991, Turner, 2012). Through the interpretative framework, opportunities surface to gain insight into female veteran students’ interpretations of interactions with fellow students, and to explore how experiences in the military influenced the meaning assigned to their gender identity on the college campus.

Considering the various “conceptual ingredients” within the interpretative system of inquiry, a “tapestry of beliefs” emphasizing the theories and concepts from several scholars (Lukenchuk & Kolich, 2013, p.65) influences the purpose and methods guiding this study. As a qualitative research methodology, nestled within the interpretative framework, phenomenology best addresses the study’s research problem. It fosters the exploration of female veteran students lived experiences to illuminate how they assign meaning to their unique facets of gender identity on college campuses. The woven tapestry of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and the interpretative system of inquiry provide the foundation and scaffolding to best support this research (Creswell,
2007, 2015; Lukenchuk, 2013) The central phenomenon of this study is the exploration of female veteran students’ gender identity experiences on the college campus and the meaning they give to these experiences.

**Phenomenology**

Using phenomenology as a guiding method for this study, multiple theoretical and philosophical approaches interweave throughout the interpretative paradigm tapestry. The beginnings of *phenomenology* are most notably associated to Husserl (1859-1938), with contributions from other key philosophers Heidegger (1927), Sartre (1943), Merleau-Ponty (1945), and Freire (1970) furthering the fundamental characteristics of phenomenological philosophy and research (Ulysse & Lukenchuk, 2013, p. 23). First applied to the social sciences as a philosophical tradition, Husserl (1913) sought to study how people experience and describe things through their senses. In its most basic assumption, “we can only know what we experience by attending to our perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2015, p. 116).

According to Creswell (2007), if the phenomenological approach is used to examine a research problem, “it would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices, policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (p 60). Deeper features of the phenomenon often intertwine through an individual’s experience and description of the understanding about the phenomena. Therefore, the interpretation of meaning associated with the particular phenomenon is essential in phenomenology. “The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person’s reality, thus the focus on *meaning making* as the essence of human experience” (Patton, 2015, p. 116). Therefore, phenomenology as a
research design deeply explored the lived experiences of female veteran students’ gender identity on the college campus and added value to the existing literature on what is already known about this population. By attending to the contextual details respondents ascribe to their experiences, it is possible to interpret social meanings in relation to the phenomenon. In accordance with phenomenological thought, there is no “one reality” since “experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions” making phenomenology an appropriate selection for this study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19).

As a philosophy and as a methodology, phenomenology gives significance to the meanings influencing individuals even before they are truly aware of those meanings (van Manen, 2007). Ulysse and Lukenchuk (2013) believe “The “lifeworld” or Lebenswelt, designates the everyday world of our affairs” (p. 24). It is the heart of phenomenological study to describe the everyday occurrences, or lived experiences, of individuals and interpret the meanings associated with those experiences. Phenomenology studies “things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Husserl (1920) understood the Lebenswelt as a pre-reflective experience, one requiring the immediacy of the conscious life, free from initial interpretation (Dowling, 2007). However, it is through the understanding of the Lebenswelt the individual and their environment (context) are inevitably interlinked and interdependent upon each other (Schütz, 1932). The essence of meaning-making, Schütz (1932) writes, “It is misleading to say that experiences have meaning. Meaning does not lie in the experience. Rather, those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively.” (p. 69). Through reflective dialogue, participants attribute meaning to their gender identity experiences as a female veteran.
Patton (2015) explains that a phenomenological study “focuses on the essence of shared experience” and is “different from using phenomenology to philosophically justify the method of qualitative inquiry” (p. 117). Phenomenology serves the opportunity to bestow “a rigorous description of human life as it is lived, and reflected upon, in all of its first person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 5). The phenomenological research method is an appropriate selection for this study, as it provides no restrictions as to how female veteran students may share their stories of evolution.

**Social Phenomenology**

Schütz (1899-1959), though never a student of Husserl (1920), intensely studied his work to help advance a phenomenological basis for the social sciences (Wilson, 2002). Accordingly, Schütz (1932) adopted and expanded upon Husserl’s work to bridge the phenomenological philosophy with questions relevant to the social sciences (i.e. social relationships and social existence) leading to one of the Schütz’s greatest contributions, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Kim & Berard, 2009). Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology fostered critical consideration beyond the singular relationship to regard individual subjective experience as more of an objective experience within the social world, introducing the field of social phenomenology (Polkinghorne, 1983).

A central tenant in social phenomenology is to make sense and interpret the relationship between the actions of an individual, the situation or context and the perceived reality taking place within a social construct or setting (Polkinghorne, 1983). The construct focuses on the social element of human nature extending beyond Weber’s
notion of interpretive sociology to include an emphasis on typification. Distinguishing between different types of meaning and different types of understanding, Schütz (1932) capitalized on Weber’s work to delineate essential features of social phenomenology (Kim & Berard, 2009). Further distinction is made between the respondent’s consciousness and the observer’s perceptions, moving from the notion of “I” to “we” relationships and facilitating the observer (researcher) depiction of how the individual is making sense or instilling meaning into the study’s phenomenon (McKinney, 1969; Polkinghorne, 1983). Typifications are ubiquitous and necessary mediators in the comprehension of subjects and objects in the lifeworld in such a way that Schütz (1962) describes as “the unquestioned outer world is from the outset experienced not as an arrangement of individual unique objects dispersed in space and time, but as ‘mountains,’ ‘trees,’ ‘animals,’ ‘fellow-men.’” (as cited in Kim & Berard, 2009, p. 266).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) articulate the importance of the interconnected, interdependent relationship between the meaning an individual assign to a particular phenomenon and its association within the social world. More specifically, social phenomenology seeks to understand how an individual uses the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kim & Berard, 2009; McKinney, 1969). The “foundations of knowledge in everyday life, the objectifications of subjective processes (meanings), explains how the intersubjective commonsense world is constructed” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.20). Individuals are active participants within their social world, creating a reality that influences their experiences and the meanings associated with those experiences. McKinney (1969) suggests typification and typologies are intrinsic factors
for the basic orientation of actors to develop their own sense of “self” and conceptualized “roles” within a social structure.

Identity has a dialectic relationship with society since it is fashioned through social processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social processes create and maintain an individual’s identity. “Specific historical social structures engender identity types” which are social products created through the objective social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 174). The historical structure of the United States military, as well as the historical nature of higher education, poses a unique opportunity to explore women’s gender identity as meaning given in a social reality. Through the lens of social phenomenology, this study examines the interconnected, dualistic relationships of female veteran students’ lifeworlds to their social experiences and explores how they assign meaning to their gender identity experiences in complex social environments. Thus, a deeper layer of conscious exploration and deconstruction of female veteran student identity is possible.

**Meaning-Making Through Self-Authorship**

Most research on gender identity in female veterans examines female experiences as opposed to how they manage and understand those experiences (Herbert, 1998). Arnett (2000) further discusses the importance of emerging adulthood on the exploration of self-identity in the areas of love, work, and worldviews. The unique opportunities exposed to female veterans during military experience may influence how they constructed their own identity.

**Self-authorship defined.** Drawing upon the work of Kegan (1994), Baxter Magolda (2001) improved upon the theory of self-authorship. Self-authorship is “the
internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations.” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). This study will use the theory of self-authorship to understand how female veterans make meaning of their gender identity.

Answering questions about “Who am I?” and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” manifests in the interconnectedness of intrapersonal and interpersonal development which becomes evident as an individual cultivates self-authorship. At the very core of this study is the drive to answer, “Who are female veteran students” and “How is their gender identity shaped by their interpersonal experiences?”

Baxter Magolda’s work affirms the complexity of identity development through a matured belief system guiding genuine relationships with others. Self-authoring individuals do not separate from others, but instead reconstruct their relationships to be more authentic and mutually beneficial. The elements of “trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation and securing internal commitments” achieve self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Furthermore, the evolution of self-authorship compliments the support systems that encourage individuals to shift their meaning-making from external to internal processes (Baxter Magolda, 1995, 2008; Kegan 1994; Pizzolato, 2003).

As a holistic model, self-authorship describes how individuals grow and transform from dependence upon external views to derive their interpretations and meaning, to more internally consequent interpretations. The college context is particularly important in understanding how students achieve self-authorship. Specifically, college learning outcomes such as “critical thinking and intercultural competence require complex developmental capacities to understand multiple
perspectives, identities and relationships” (Barber, King & Baxter Magolda, 2013, p. 867) and within the collegial setting students are presented opportunities to harness their potential and transform their thinking. Complexity in meaning-making is a central element of achieved learning outcomes during college, and more importantly, fosters the construction of assumed identities as the college student participates in the process of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Barber, King & Baxter Magolda, 2013).

Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity development by illustrating how meaning-making aptitude interacts with the influence of context on perceptions relevant to students’ multiple social identities. The context in which a person experiences her life such as family, peer groups and sociocultural circumstances emphasizes the creation of multiple social identities suggesting each dimension of identity influences the other (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Meaning-making was used as a filter in Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple identity development. Abes, Jones and McEwen propose that contextual influences flow through the filter of meaning-making and are interpreted based on the complexity of those influences (2007). Participants in the transition meaning-making stage reflect tensions and conflicts within their identities. They realize the limitations of stereotypes and their sense of self resists the integration of multiple identity dimensions. Those with a complex meaning-making filter, a foundational meaning-making capacity, show a significant ability to determine the relationship between context and perception of identity. These individuals consistently present themselves independent of context (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2001). This research and conceptualized model
informs the study on female veteran’s ability to make meaning through their various contextual experiences in understanding of their gender identity. Meaning-making may be a filter for a female veteran’s multiple identities, and is congruent with the interpretive paradigm of this study.

**Research Design**

**Participants and Sites**

Phenomenology’s most basic purpose, “reduce[s] individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Most importantly, participants for this study “must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 121).

Selecting participants in a phenomenological study is purposeful and intentional. Studying individuals who experienced a particular phenomenon provides information-rich details allowing the researcher to deeply probe rather than creating empirical generalizations (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the power of purposeful sampling in a phenomenological study resides in the researcher’s ability to facilitate the participant’s storytelling to give insight into meanings they ascribed to the phenomenon.

In addition to purposeful sampling, convenience sampling considers the availability and willingness of the selected participants (Creswell, 2015). Snowball sampling may be particularly important for this study, as many female veteran students do not self-identify. Veterans tend to stick together (Sander, 2012) making it more likely fellow female veterans may know each other on campus.
The purposeful sample for this study is currently enrolled female veteran students at three institutions of higher education in the Southwest. Twelve students were interviewed, four students from each of the three selected institutions. For this study, a Female veteran student is defined as an individual who identifies herself as female, who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released from under conditions other than dishonorable” and is currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution. (Veteran’s Benefits and the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act). Ideally, participants left the military for a minimum of one month prior to the study, but no longer than three years ago so they can still vividly recall their lived experiences on campus as related to lived experience from the military.

Recruitment for the study began by meeting with veteran affairs and student affairs personnel on the three selected campuses. These personnel served as informants to assist the researcher in identifying possible participants for the study. A synopsis of the research (see Appendix C) was mailed to participants. Compliance with institution-specific Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies, including the approval for the institution as a recruitment site, occurred before participants receive invitations. The researcher posted flyers advertising the study around the campuses with proper institutional approval, as well as sent invitations electronically to those female veterans identified through the veteran affairs and/or student affairs office on campus. Prospective participants met inclusion requirements of the study. If a prospective participant meeting the requirements read and signed an informed consent form, this acknowledged participation was voluntary. In accordance with snowball sampling procedures, the
The researcher asked interested participants if they would recommend additional female veteran students for the study.

The sites selected for this study encompassed three different types of higher education. One of the institutions is a public, two-year Associate’s community college, the other a public four-year Doctoral university, and the third a private for-profit four-year Doctoral university. All three institutions are located in the Southwest.

**Data and Collection Methods**

Iterative in nature, qualitative research data collection is circular and consists of interrelated activities in which the researcher may engage throughout the study. Due to the exploratory nature of phenomenological studies, the quest of data collection is “on the recreation of the lived experience; full and complete depictions of the experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 39). Creswell (2015) outlines the fundamental data collection activities guiding researchers in their quest for understanding the phenomenon of inquiry, beginning with the identification of participants and proper sampling strategy, followed by obtaining permission to access the participants. The primary research questions inform the interview protocol design for collecting data. Lastly, collecting data and paying special attention to ethical issues completes the iterative process in qualitative data collection (p. 204). Rich contextualized data surfaces in the phenomenological study through the structured and semi-structured interview processes, (Patton, 2015).

The composition of data collection includes synthesized descriptions of the essence or experiences of the phenomenon for all participants and extracts the “what” participants had experienced and “how” they had experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).
According to Patton (2015), qualitative research permits the researcher to explore inquiry into greater “detail, context, and nuance; the data collected need not be constrained by predetermined categories” (p. 257).

**Semi-structured interviews.** “As a mainstay of qualitative data collection, interviews are at the center since they provide deep, rich, individualized and contextualized data that are centrally important to qualitative research” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146). In-depth, semi-structured interviewing will be the primary source for data collection and analysis in this study. In-depth interviews assume the participants have “unique and important knowledge about the social world that is ascertainable and that can be shared through verbal communication” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2022, p. 94) and “patterns emerge from the “thick descriptions” of social life recounted by their participants” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 95). Semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility for participants to tell their stories without setting limitations to their disclosure.

According to Baxter Magolda (2007), the “key to conducting a quality interview is accessing the meaning-making structure underlying any experience the interviewee regards as important.” (p. 496). Furthermore, the interviewer plays a complex role in the interviewing process of self-authorship as the interviewer “constructs questions in the context of what the respondent introduces” (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 496). Being reflective and supportive encouraged rapport fostering the substantive self-reflection by the interviewee (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researcher used *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its Administration and Interpretation* (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman & Felix, 1988). This guide illuminates the assumptions inherent to this style of
interview resonating with the “socially constructed, context-bound and mutually shaped interaction of the researcher and participant” framework of social phenomenology (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, as cited in Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 496).

All participants engaged in face-to-face interviews. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were audio recorded (with participants’ consent), with each participant. An interview protocol (see Appendix B) was developed and used for each interview. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), “a researcher uses the interview instrument to organize and guide the interview but can also include specific tailored questions to be asked of all respondents. The order of questions and wording are a unique and customized path with each participant.” (p. 154). The customization of each interview lends itself to the phenomenological design since the protocol provides the structure for the participants to share their unique stories, but with no parameters as to how to engage. The atmosphere of the interview should be conducive and supportive to hearing the rich, detailed, and meaningful experiences yet, the semi-structured nature of the interview will allow the interviews to maintain focus on the relevant purpose of the study. Creswell (2007) encourages researchers conducting phenomenological interviews to have patience, as asking the appropriate questions to solicit participants’ discussion of meanings of their experiences may be challenging and lengthy.

The researcher transcribed each completed interview verbatim. Each interviewee received a copy of their transcribed interview for member checking and verification of authenticity and accuracy. Ravitch and Carl (2016) state, “transcripts are not only important to data collection, they are the way that interviews produce real-time data. They are also useful for valid and rigorous data analysis.” (p. 159).
Observational and reflective notes. The researcher took observation and reflective notes after each interview. These notes supplemented interview data. Ravitch and Carl (2016) reference “observation and fieldnotes as an important qualitative method because it allows for the researcher to see and record firsthand the activities in which research participants are engaged in the context(s) in which these activities happen.” (p. 160). Data triangulation includes the use of observational notes (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Creswell, 2015). Following each interview, a reflection of experiences and impressions, as well as preliminarily emergent interconnections were documented. Reflective notes served as the lens by which the researcher was a co-constructor in this study, an important characteristic of phenomenological research.

Researcher’s Self in a Phenomenological Study

Mann and Kelley (1997) refer to reflexivity as “the awareness that “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which is it produced; it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, pp. 38-39). Within a phenomenological study “the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). Therefore, it was important to recognize how my reflections, impressions, and understandings of the meaningful stories female veteran students share impacted my views or how being a spouse to an Army veteran impacted how data interpretation. My reflective notes served as an opportunity to energize my passion and commitment to female veteran students. Moustakas (1990) writes:
“…it is in the recognition of the significance of self-searching and the value of personal knowledge as essential requirements for understanding of common human experiences. The researcher intuitively and reflectively sees in all the depictions the qualities or characteristic meanings that make the experience what it is and not something else. The creative synthesis is the peak moment when the researcher recognizes the universal nature of what something is and means, and at the same time grows in self-understanding and as a self.” (p. 90)

Recognizing the important role the researcher plays within this study is fundamental to understanding how perceptions and experiences could affect data collection, analysis and interpretation of the study.

The reflexive relationship is bidirectional, interactive and interdependent upon the connections between the interview and interviewee. This relationship represents the importance of introspection, cultural awareness and ownership of one’s perspective when delving into qualitative research (Patton, 2015). For an effective interview and an opportunity to truly self-reflect, the interviewee and interviewer must establish rapport. Rapport develops through an experience of empathy or, “verstehen meaning understanding at a deep level” and illustrates the human capacity to make sense of a social world and develop relationships (Patton 2015, p. 59). Thus, the ability to build rapport with student veterans directly influences the rich, contextual stories shared about their lived experiences. As a trained psychologist, I constructed this study, facilitated meaningful interviews and built rapport while still maintaining a clinical distance. These learned skills also influenced how I relate with others and identify my roles in the social context.
Researcher Bias

Qualitative research, as an iterative process, requires understanding of the interpretative processes of participants lived experiences, but also of the researcher’s experiences and interactions. Examining my own values, beliefs and biases underlying multiple facets of the qualitative research becomes an ethical responsibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This examination occurs during the époche stage of data analysis as well as a continual reflective mindset documented in observation and reflective notes. Creswell (2015) recommends, “Researchers can address credibility by admitting biases and assumptions and acknowledging limitations to the study’s methods” (p. 258). To minimize the influence of personal biases, validation strategies employed in this study will include triangulation and member checking. Furthermore, challenging my interpretations during data analysis is crucial to mitigating threats to validity, making this study credible and authentic.

These roles and perspectives as a female spouse of a military veteran, a community college faculty member, and a psychologist influence my notion of the female veteran student and how my own gender identity experiences may shadow interpretations of their lived experiences. A continual reflection on my own position was essential, as well as employing validation strategies to ensure my interpretations and researcher biases had a minimal effect on the findings of this study.

Data Analysis using the Phenomenological Process

This study uses Moustakas’ (1994) approach to analyzing data from the shared lived experiences of female veteran students. Moustakas draws upon the search for essence and meanings of those lived experiences and compliments Husserl’s
transcendental phenomenology through “systematic steps in the data analysis procedure and [provides] guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). The method of data analysis and procedures must relate back to the original research purpose and question. As the research process unfolds, the researcher selects methods and procedures producing “rich, accurate, and complete descriptions of the qualities or constituents of the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 43). This process incorporates five steps: epoché, horizontalization, clustering for meaning, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Scaffolding of knowledge represents the layers of understanding and meaning associated with each step of the analysis process, building onto each other culminating in the essence of the phenomenon of inquiry. These processes ascertain a deeper level of understanding about the gender identity experiences female veteran students experience in the college setting.

**Epoché**

The first step in the phenomenological process of data analysis is for the researcher to review any preconceived judgments about the phenomenon studied. The researcher should be receptive during the interview process (Moustakas, 1994) and consider any previous experiences with the phenomenon “In the Epoché, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, visually, naively, in a wide-open sense” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). This stage of analysis reinforces rigor, known as the “phenomenological attitude shift” (Patton, 2015, p. 575). Epoché results in an ongoing analytical practice throughout the research process.
Bracketing and Horizontalization

The second step in Moustakas’ phenomenological process of data analysis is the process of phenomenological reduction or bracketing and horizontalization. Husserl proposes the researcher needs to ‘bracket’ out the outer world as well as biases to synthesize essence and meaning (Laverty, 2003). Denzin (1989) identifies the following steps in the bracketing process: 1) locate key phrases and statements speaking directly to the phenomenon in question, 2) interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader, 3) obtain the subject’s interpretation of these phrases, if possible, 4) inspect the meanings for what they reveal about the essential features of the phenomenon, and 5) offer a tentative statement or definition about the phenomenon in recurring features. (pp. 55-56). The researcher spends considerable amount of time with the authentic data through the bracketing process.

Once all of the data are bracketed, the researcher reviews and identifies statements from the interview transcripts relating to the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). This process is known as horizontalization, or treating all aspects of the data with equal value. Here, the researcher examined all the data as having equal weight, regardless of perspective or element (Patton, 2015).

Clustering for Meanings

Significant statements emerging from horizontalization, were grouped together into theme clusters or categories (Moustakas, 1994). The process of statement clustering brings forth connections between participants lived experiences. Horizons stand out as invariant qualities of the lived experiences; therefore, the researcher can begin weaving a tapestry of meaning. Considering how lived experiences of female veteran students’
gender identity on the college campus assume meaning will illuminate the more holistic portrait of the women veteran student. According to Moustakas (1990), “the composite depiction… should be vivid, accurate, alive, and clear, and encompass the core qualities and themes inherent in the experience.” (p. 52).

**Imaginative Variation**

Imaginative variation is like performing a dance. This process provides a view of the phenomenon from various perspectives, allowing the researcher to enhance or expand on versions of the original themes (Patton, 2015). Textural description involves describing “what” a participant experienced, and constitutes integration and narration of each participants lived experience. Structural description refers to “how” the experience happened and requires reflection into the contextual and social elements in which the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this stage of analysis was to achieve a deeper sense of meaning as the process moves from a superficial to a more robust consideration of meaning.

**Synthesis and Essence**

The essence of the lived experience represented a culmination of the phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). In this stage, the researcher “intuitively and reflectively integrates the composite textural and structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181). To fully answer the research questions, the methodology must get to the essence of the experience of the phenomenon; therefore, this study employed a phenomenological focus compared to a study grounded in “phenomenology to philosophically justify the methods of qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2015, p. 117). This
Validation of Qualitative Research and Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research findings adhere to the standards of credibility or trustworthiness, triangulation, member checks, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Validation of research findings focuses on the authenticity and accuracy of participant data (Creswell, 2007). The goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalizable statements, but to “develop descriptive, context-relevant statements that can be applicable or transferred to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). Though qualitative researchers do not seek objectivity, their findings should be confirmable, accounting for biases or preconceived notions about the phenomenon.

Triangulation is a set of processes enhancing the validity of a study. According to Patton (2015), “understanding inconsistencies in findings across different kinds of data can be illuminative and important.” (p. 661). The goal of triangulation is not to seek convergence, but to develop deeper insight into the differing perspectives adding value to the study (Creswell, 2015). Data triangulation occurs when multiple sources of data illuminate the lived experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, data triangulation encompassed interview transcripts, observation and reflective notes.
Participant validation, or member checking, is a common process for qualitative researchers to ensure validity and establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking followed each interview and carried through the data analysis phase of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight the importance of member checks as one of the best ways to establish credibility. “If the investigator is to be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The sample size, in-depth interviews, multiple sources for data collection, as well as member checks all ensured the accuracy of the data and enhanced both the validity and trustworthiness of this study.

Engaging in ethical research is at the forefront of conducting any research study. Accordingly, participants completed informed consent forms (see Appendix A) prior to their participation in this research. Assigning pseudonyms for a participant’s names and storing all transcribed interviews, observation and reflective notes on a password-protected computer are two techniques that ensured confidentiality. This study and the researcher’s actions complied with Benedictine University’s IRB policies. Consequently, there were little or no known risks to the participants of this study.

**Limitations of the Methodology**

This qualitative study used phenomenology as the research design providing a deep understanding of the lived experiences of female veteran students. As such, common experiences can inform specific concentrations of support personnel, but does not lead to generalizable statements in a broad context (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher must be familiar with the
philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. Though purposeful sampling aims to attract those who experienced the phenomenon in question, Creswell (2007) warns of the importance of selecting participants who truly experienced the phenomenon.

After the selection of participants, the process of interviewing becomes an important strength, yet limitation of the study. In-depth interviewing facilitates the opportunity for those to share experiences and stories in detail and with great passion. Open-ended, pragmatic interviews elicit less restrictive opportunities for participants to tell their story, making interviewing a primary technique for collecting data in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007). However, bias frequently manifests during this stage, as interviewing may lead the researcher to assume individuals possess certain characteristics. Left unchecked, these assumptions could drive specific outcomes, as compared to drawing more relational connections between a participant’s characteristics and their lived experiences (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Additionally, Lamont and Swidler (2014) caution against the desire for researchers to create coherence of meaning to life experience. “Thus, reliance on interviews can lead to an image of individual selves as more coherent, with less contradiction and unpredictability than real lives normally encompass” (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, pp. 162-163). The researcher must be mindful of “not imposing order where there is none, and this requires considerable epistemological alertness and clarity,” a skill of experienced interviewers and researchers, according to Lamont and Swindler (2014, p. 163).

Additionally, bracketing required the identification and removal of all biases and prejudices associated with the phenomenon. However, this activity is essentially impossible given the philosophical and methodological assumptions through an
interpretive approach, (van Manen, 1990). “Thus, the researcher needs to decide how and in what way his or her personal understandings will be introduced into the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). To minimize bias, the study used: (a) designed interview protocol questions as open ended (see Appendix B); (b) sought diverse interview candidates by their age and race, (c) personally recorded interviews and protected participant’s confidentiality through the transcription process and (d) employed member checks and triangulation.

Chapter Summary

Through purposeful sampling procedures across three institutions in the Southwest, female participants who were invited to the study have recently transitioned out of the military and are currently attending a postsecondary institution. The use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was the primary source of data, augmented by observational notes and reflective journaling throughout the study. In a phenomenological study, the role of the researcher is fundamental to the findings of the study. The researcher must decide how best to insert herself within the study (Creswell, 2007) through the process of reflexivity.

Since this research aimed to account for those experiences which quantitative analysis simply cannot account for the qualitative research design was the best methodology and approach to answer the research questions. The lived experiences of female veteran students attributes meaning to her gender identity, and investigating through qualitative study emphasizes the assumptions about meaning-making and authentic experiences. An interpretative paradigm set the stage for an exploration of the “lifeworld” of these female veteran students on campus. Lukenchuk and Kolich (2013)
illustrate a tapestry of beliefs to include the qualitative methodology within the interpretative paradigm. Phenomenology best aligned with the research purpose and questions as it illuminates the unique facets of gender identity through the lens of female veteran students on college campuses.

Social constructs foster the development of identity, which is at the crux of this study (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burke, 1991). The female veteran student’s gender identity bears meaning through the notion of self-authorship. The manifestation of interconnectedness, interpersonal and intrapersonal development pulls at the very core of what is means to be a female veteran on a college campus (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) found meaning-making may become a filter through which an individual perceives their identity; therefore, the interpretative paradigm and phenomenological research design best suits the research purpose of this study.

To add to the credibility to this study, Moustakas’ (1994) approach to data analysis, which is congruent with phenomenological design and Husserl’s transcendental thought to phenomenology, was the best method. At the core of data analysis is the ‘essence’ or synthesis of meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This approach to data analysis allowed the flexibility of inquiry through the in-depth interview process, but provided guidance in the clustering of meaning and synthesis of essence culminating a phenomenological study.

As with most qualitative studies, assurance of trustworthiness and authenticity are necessary elements to consider the study credible and confirmable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Validation strategies confronted any researcher bias and observation and reflective notes attempted to minimize undue assumptions and values (Creswell, 2015). The goal of
this qualitative research was to both understand the lived experiences of female veteran students and provide contextually rich data illuminating the meanings associated with their gender identity on college campuses. The use of member checks and triangulation provided evidence to support the validity and credibility of this study (Patton, 2015). Considerations for the use of interviewing as a data collection method provided avenues of strength and limitation (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).
CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS AND PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

The recruitment sites selected for this study encompass three different classifications of higher education institutions as outlined from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2015; a public, two-year Associate’s community college; a public four-year Doctoral university, and a private for-profit four-year Doctoral university. All three institutions are located in the Southwest.

Twelve veteran females served as informants for the study, four female veterans from each of the three institutions. The women represented the following military branches: Air Force, Army, Marines and Navy. For the purposes of this study, each institution and participant is assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Below, I describe each participating institution and my participants.

Institutional Profiles

Middle South Community College (MSCC)

Middle South Community College (MSCC) is a public, two-year, Associate’s community college founded in 1987. MSCC is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges and the newest community college to the Traverston Community College District. As a community college, MSCC has its roots within the historical and cultural values of the communities it serves.

Located in one of the fastest growing regions of the state, MSCC enrolls approximately 15,000 students annually. The institution offers five transfer associate’s degree and two transfer certificates. In 2015-2016 academic year, MSCC reports a 37
percent completion rate for all transferring associate’s degrees. MSCC participates in 
Title IV financial aid funding and identifies as a veteran-friendly institution.

In 2013, the institution celebrated its grand opening of their veteran’s center 
which is staffed by a Director, Coordinator of Benefits, work study students and part-time 
assistants. Approximately 130 female students identify as veterans at the institution and 
receive some form of financial benefit (i.e. Post 9/11 GI Bill or Montgomery GI Bill) 
because of their service.

**Southwest Caballo University (SWCU)**

Founded in 1885, Southwest Caballo University (SWCU) is a public, four-year, 
Doctoral university accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central 
Association of Schools and Colleges. Focused on primarily granting baccalaureate 
degrees, SWCU is a leader in innovative and dynamic program offerings across four 
satellite campuses and main campus. SWCU’s Fall 2015 enrollment including online and 
traditional programs at all campuses is 51,942. SWCU participates in Title IV financial 
ad aid funding and identifies as a military friendly institution.

In 2011, SWCU opened an expansive veteran’s center, making it the primary 
destination for all student veterans at the university to receive services, advisement, and 
support during their transition. Satellite veteran center offices are also located on each 
extension campus of the university. The main veteran’s center is staffed with Recruitment 
Specialists, Advocates, nine Certifying Specialists, a Director, a VetSuccess Campus 
Counselor and work study students. The institution did not disclose the number of 
enrolled female veterans receiving military funding.
St. Ogustus University

St. Ogustus University is a private, for-profit, four-year, Doctoral religious university founded in 1949 by the [xxx] Church. The institution is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, Accreditation Council Business Schools and Programs, and Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education.

The university offers bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral level degrees in programs that are rapidly expanding in the current workforce. Programs incorporate traditional and online learning models. Resulting from its religious affiliations, St. Ogustus University is committed to community enhancement projects and embeds its mission and vision into all institutional practices. St. Ogustus University uses a selective admissions process. Total Fall 2015 enrollment is 64,421 which includes online and traditional programs. St. Ogustus University participates in Title IV financial aid funding and identifies as a one of the nation’s top military friendly institutions.

The veteran’s center, located on campus, is staffed with a Director, three Student Support Advocates and work study students. The institution did not disclose the number of enrolled female veterans receiving military funding.

Participant Profiles

All the informants signed a consent form and the interviews took place on campus, many in the veteran’s centers. A snowball sampling was used to recruit additional informants, in addition to recruitment through the respective institutions veteran’s website. The study considered a total of 12 subjects, four from each of the three selected institutions. Female veteran student participants represented the various branches of the military: Air Force, Army, Marines and Navy. Participant ages ranged
from 23 years to 41 years old; ten of the participants were Caucasian and the remaining two were from minority groups (Latino and African American).

Table 1 presents an overview of the 12 participants with demographic information for each female veteran student.
### Table 1

**Participant Overview and Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Branch of Armed Services</th>
<th>Years Served</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaire</td>
<td>25 yrs.</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>MSCC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittney</td>
<td>30 yrs.</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>MSCC</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>23 yrs.</td>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
<td>SWCU</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>27 yrs.</td>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>4 yrs.</td>
<td>St. Ogustus University</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>24 yrs.</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
<td>St. Ogustus University</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynette</td>
<td>32 yrs.</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>7 yrs.</td>
<td>MSCC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy</td>
<td>41 yrs.</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>15 yrs. +</td>
<td>SWCU</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadine</td>
<td>25 yrs.</td>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
<td>MSCC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nema</td>
<td>25 yrs.</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>6 yrs.</td>
<td>SWCU</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>28 yrs.</td>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>SWCU</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>33 yrs.</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>11 yrs.</td>
<td>St. Ogustus University</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>27 yrs.</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>7 yrs.</td>
<td>St. Ogustus University</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All interviews for this study took place between December 2016 and February 2017. The following are brief profiles on the 12 participants:

**Blaire**

Blaire is an MSCC student, who has attended MSCC for two years, studying library science in the Associates of Arts program, with aspirations of moving into graduate school and becoming a librarian. She chose MSCC because, “It’s a community college and I heard really good things from the community.” Blaire is 25 years old, served in the Army, is married with two children and attends school full-time. While in the Army, Blaire was stationed in Arizona and Arkansas and worked as a Transportation Manager Coordinator. She separated from the Army as a Private First Class, E-3.

**Brittney**

Brittney is a MSCC student, who works in the veteran’s office. She is majoring in fine arts, digital arts and web design. She has a passion for photography and hopes to own a private studio in the future. She chose the community college because it is, “homey and smaller” and “I’m a small-town girl, so I just fit in.” Brittney is 30 years old, a full-time student, a veteran from the Navy, divorced and mother of two children.

While enlisted in the Navy, Brittney was stationed in Virginia and wanted to work as an aircraft mechanic, but ended up as an Aviation Yeoman because of injury and limited duty. She has fond memories of the Navy and is thinking of going back into the Service, in the Coast Guard. Brittney said that she separated from the Navy “because I was starting to have my children and they were very young… I didn’t want to leave them.”
Now that they’re a little older, the job security and benefits and just the comradery and all that – I miss it.”

**Dawn**

Dawn a relatively new full-time student to SWCU, works in the veteran center. At 23 years old, she is the youngest informant in this study. Dawn joined the Marine Corps right out of high school and spent 5 years in active duty. She was stationed in North Carolina and worked as an “engine mechanic for helicopters- Huey Cobras. They are the ones that kill the people not save the people.” Dawn trained in Florida and California and “was on a tour in Afghanistan in 2014. And I’ve been to a couple of different exercises – a couple in Yuma, a couple in 29 Palms in California.” Prior to her separation from the Marines, Dawn recalled, “I was in a leadership position for quite some time, pretty much the last few years that I was in, I was a Sergeant.”

Currently, Dawn is majoring in aeronautical engineering at SWCU with aspirations of continuing to graduate education. While in the military, she “worked with aeronautical equipment while I was in and that’s kind of what brought me to wanting to do this.” Dawn is divorced and wants to work for NASA, stating: “I am trying to get into an internship program with them either this summer or next.”

**Karla**

Karla is 27 years old, and a full-time student at St. Ogustus University for the past two years. She enlisted into the Marines right after high school, and completed boot camp in South Carolina which was the only female battalion at that time for the Marine Corps. She was stationed in California and worked on helicopters. Karla “was on their gun systems. I worked on machine guns and CH46s and also did countermeasures.”
While in the service she “was fortunate enough to receive a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal (NAM) which is a huge thing for Marines. I received mine as a Lance Corporal.”

Currently, Karla is a nursing major, aspiring to be a trauma nurse. As she excitedly spoke about her future, Karla said, “it sounds crazy, the blood and the guts and the craziness, the chaos and oh my gosh, you have to be on your feet…” She chose to attend St. Ogustus University because of their reputation for the nursing program as well as the institutional scholarships that will place her debt-free after graduation. Karla is married.

Laura

Laura joined the Army right after high school as a medic, and was stationed in Georgia. About two years into her contract, Laura was deployed to a combat zone. As she recalls, “I was the only female in my entire company. I was also the only medic in charge of 38 men. We were actually looking for the bombs on the side of the road…dangerous.” From Laura’s experiences in the military, she decided not to pursue a degree in the medical field.

During our interview, Laura spoke of her PTSD, sexual assault, her strong set of emotions related to the military and all her challenges with regard to being in the military and now being a civilian. She mentioned a strong connection to her church and religion giving recognition to that as a major support system for her, before and after the military. A business entrepreneurship major at St. Ogustus University, Laura plans to have her own business with her husband in the future. Laura is 24 years old, a full-time student and married.
Lynette

A Navy veteran, Lynette enlisted when she was 20 years old. Stationed in Washington on the U.S.S. Lincoln, she “started out as a Designated Airman working on the flight line, got hurt and ended up getting moved to the Jag Office.” She recalls the challenges with finding stable employment as a civilian despite having legal experience. She informed that the military provided her a lot of great experience but it doesn’t translate well in the civilian world.

Lynette discussed her educational pathway. Prior to her military experience, she attended another community college in the district. She did not perform well, left and came back to the institution twice before realizing that she needed to do something different with her life. Lynette has been a student at MSCC for one year after separating from the Service and changed her major from business management to programming and system analysis. Lynette is 31 years old, a mother of two children soon to be three, married, and taking a full load of classes.

Macy

Macy a SWCU student and the oldest female veteran informant in this study. An Air Force veteran, Macy served for over 15 years working on refuelers and aircraft maintenance. Macy stated, “the first unit I was in, it was maintenance. We had a very tight bond.” She was stationed in North Carolina and “went on a lot of TDYs [temporary duty assignment]. I think the one TDY that had the biggest impact was when we were doing medical evac from Afghanistan to Germany for a week.” She worked with the women’s coalition, is a member of the Golden Key Honor Society and Psi Chi
Psychology Honor Society. Macy is also the President of the Women’s Veterans Club at SWCU and a student worker in the veteran’s center. Macy explained, “because we’re older and are considered non-traditional, that’s one of the reasons behind starting the Woman’s Veterans Club so we have a place where we also belong to.”

Starting in the community college, Macy was accepted at SWCU and majors in biochemistry with a minor in psychology. She is planning to graduate Spring 2017 with a bachelor’s degree. Her future aspirations include going to graduate school and working as a physical therapist. The oldest student in the interview pool, Macy is 41 years old, and a full-time student.

**Nadine**

A student at SWCU for one year, Nadine is majoring in secondary education with an emphasis in physical education. She remarked, “I wanted to be a teacher” ever since she was in the military and exclaimed, “I wanted to be a Marine forever!” Once she was out of high school, she enlisted as a “3043, supply administrator” in the Marines. Stationed in North Carolina, Nadine excelled “because I adapted well, I got sent to other jobs that weren’t necessarily my job. I was helping Marines pass their PT test. I was training them to run and helped them lift weights.” Throughout our interview, Nadine mentioned that she “didn’t get treated differently.”

Attending MSCC for almost two years, Nadine is a nursing major and plans to move out of state to the east coast and secure employment as an ICU nurse in the future. Nadine mentioned preferring the community college atmosphere because the class sizes are smaller. Nadine is 25 years old, a mother, married, and a full-time student. She deeply connected to the values of the Marine Corps.
Nema

A student at SWCU for one year, Nema is majoring in secondary education with an emphasis in physical education. Nema remarked, “I wanted to be a teacher” ever since she was in the military. At 25 years old, Nema is also the secretary of the Women’s Veteran’s Club at SWCU. Nema considers herself a first-generation college student and spoke of her Mexican ethnicity and strong commitment to her family values and traditions.

Joining the Air Force at 18 years old, Nema was originally stationed in her home state, before being relocated to Alaska. She served as a medic and loved working with the wounded warriors. Nema recalled, “In the middle of my Alaska tour, I was deployed to Afghanistan. After 6 years of active duty, I got out.” Nema separated from the Service as Staff Sergeant, E-5. She is married, a full-time student and is a work study student for the veteran’s center.

Rachael

Rachael served in the Marines and was stationed in South Carolina and in Japan as an airframe structures mechanic. Rachael noted, “I have had experience with all types of machinery. That means I worked on various components of helicopters, which is what I did in Okinawa.” Upon separation, Rachael’s rank was Corporal. Three years into her service, Rachael was medically discharged. She was forthcoming about her discharge as well as her approved accommodations through the university’s Center for Access and Accommodative Services. Specifically, Rachael said, “I was not an anxious person before then, but I now have anxiety due to the military. That is mostly what I use this [disability
A student at SWCU since 2014, Rachael majors in robotics engineering with a minor in manufacturing. She is still deciding on a secondary focus of electrical or mechanical engineering. Rachael is very hands-on and enjoys the practical experiences that her program offers. Her future aspirations include a position where she “doesn’t sit behind a desk all day” but works on projects and creates prototypes. Rachael is 28 years old, divorced, and a full-time student.

Trish

Trish comes from a long line of military family members. Therefore, it was no surprise that she joined the Air Force when she turned 19 years old. Trish served 11 years in the Air Force as a C17 Load Master. She described her job in the military as flying consecutively for 21 days and then having a week of rest to fly again. From transporting prisoners to delivering humanitarian aid for tsunami relief, Trish has logged over 5,000 flight hours. Trish lived in four different countries and completed six different deployments over her time in service. Her drive and success is summarized by, “As soon as I joined the Air Force, anything that I could get that would be a license or certificate, I wanted to get. It was always important to me to achieve.” Trish separated from the Air Force as a Tech Sergeant, E-6. Both she and her husband served in the Air Force.

Trish has been a student for two years at St. Augustus University and changed her major from nursing to elementary education. She aspires to be an elementary school teacher for a nearby suburb of the university. Graduate school is part of Trish’s academic
plan and once she graduates she intends to “hang out, be a mom, go to school and have fun.” Trish is 33 years old, has a son and is married. She is also a full-time student.

Valerie

Valerie served seven years in the Navy and enlisted right after her 21st birthday in 2009. She was stationed on a navel ship in California and did three years on the cruiser, three deployments and then returned to California to a shore duty tour where she did assessments for her rank. In the Navy, Valerie was a Cryptologic Technical which does “anti-ship missile defense, so we protect the ship from missiles. We do radar detection of surface, and surface to air contacts.” After her son was born, she didn’t want to deploy anymore therefore she separated from the Navy. Valerie comes from a line of military family members and credits her dad as her “inspiration.”

A student at St. Ogustus University, Valerie is a nursing major. Valerie was helpful in the recruitment of female veterans from St. Ogustus University and is a member of the Veteran’s Club on the university campus as well as a student worker. She has currently been at the university for one year. Valerie is 28 years old, a mother, married and a full-time student.

Chapter Summary

The study considers three different types of institutions across the various Carnegie Classifications; a community college with a 25-year history of educational service to the community; a larger state university and major research institution, and a private, for-profit religious university. The two universities (St. Ogustus University and Southwest Caballo University) offer both online and traditional degree programs across bachelors, masters and doctoral levels. Based on their missions and visions, Middle South
Community College, the third institution in the study, provides a smaller, historically and culturally engrained atmosphere for the students whereas the universities’ focal points include the ‘university experience,’ resident halls and high-tech facilities and amenities.

All three participating institutions market themselves as veteran friendly or military friendly. Each institution has dedicated space for a veteran’s center, staffed in accordance to the institution’s needs. The veteran centers were supportive and encouraging of the study, provided space to interview, and access to student data for recruitment purposes. In accordance with the institutional policies I was granted permission to post my recruitment flyer on each of the veteran’s center’s social media, sites, which proved to be very beneficial for participant recruitment.

Twelve female veteran students, four from each participating institution were interviewed. The female veteran students represented the Air Force, Army, Marines and Navy branches of our military. Each participant told a unique and contextualized story about their gender identity and their lived military experiences which will be interwoven in the data analysis.

The following chapters address the study’s three research questions: (1) How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context? (2) How does female veteran students’ perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting? and (3) How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female veteran students’ expression of gender on campus?
CHAPTER FIVE: FEMALE VETERAN STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR GENDER IDENTITY WITHIN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter addresses the study’s first research question: *how do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context?* To gather participant’s perspectives, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each respondent at their institution, mainly at veteran’s centers. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their rich, contextualized experiences focusing on “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced the phenomenon of gender identity as a female veteran student (Moustakas, 1994).

Data analysis was accomplished using Moustakas’ (1994) five step approach: epoché, horizontalization, clustering for meaning, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Each phase of the data analysis process was a scaffold to the next layer of meaning and essence of the central phenomenon (Patton, 2015). To suspend biases and judgments from the contextual stories of participants, I made reflective notes after the interviews and reviewed personal assumptions and emotions, which (Patton, 2015, p. 575) refers to as a “phenomenological attitude shift.” During the *horizontalization* phase, I considered each piece of data and made general notes on participant’s statements or thoughts that appeared meaningful to the study. Evaluating participants’ transcripts for themes and grouping significant statements into categories of commonalities highlighted the *clustering of meaning* step in data analysis. Through *imaginative variation*, I more deeply explored the themed categories to extract the underlying meanings of each participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In the last
stage of data analysis, a tapestry or *synthesis and essence* of the phenomenon became visible as I sought to produce “a unified statement of the essences of the experiences of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

Emerging themes reflected many commonalities within the literature review used to develop the study’s primary research questions. Data gathered from the participants regarding their gender identity within the academic setting was divided into two categories: 1) transitional experiences and 2) gender identity on campus. Within the category of transitional experiences, three main themes emerged: a) Institutional Support, b) Bettering One’s Life and A Feeling of Pride, and c) In the Mix, but Not Mixing In. The second category of gender identity on campus, three themes emerged: a) Self-Identifying is a Choice, b) Invisible and c) Having Benefits and Having Skills. The remainder of this chapter explores the categories above.

**Transitional Experiences**

Data gathered from study participants regarding their transitional experiences and gender identity in the college setting was consistent with the vast research on transition (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). In this study, Bridges’ (2004) model helps understand the experiences and emotions a female veteran may go through as she transitions from the military to civilian life, and then to college environments. Bridges’ (2004) model focuses at the end of the female veteran’s military service and works forward into civilian life using the four D’s- disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation to describe transitional experiences. When Bridge’s (2004) four D’s are applied to the study participants’ responses, three
themes emerged: Institutional Support, Bettering of One’s Life and A Feeling of Pride, and In the Mix, But Not Mixing In.

**Institutional Support**

Study participants asked to reflect on what support, if any, they received from their institution through transition into their student role. A main meeting location or Veteran’s center emerged as key to their experiences, as they assisted with scheduling, enrollment and the processing of paperwork to secure military benefits such as the GI Bill. Specific attributes related to positive institutional support include having staff who are friendly or compassionate and a knowledgeable resource for female veteran students. Lynette, a student at MSCC discussed her experience with institutional support as, “I love this office [veteran’s center]. He [Director] was actually able to help me find out that I had my full post 9/11 GI Bill.” She further depicted the type of support by recalling, “They’ll [veteran’s center staff] sit down with you, even if it’s stupid sounding; they’re very hands-on and they’re also really involved in the community and [on] the campus itself.” Laura, a student from St. Ogustus University, mentioned, “It’s nice to have somebody…you can just walk into the office… to talk about my schedule or to talk about next semester without having to wait in line.” Dawn, a student from SWCU stated, “I’ve never been to a place like where they’ve known all the answers like these guys do so they’re really great. I can call here and have them explain it [GI Bill benefits] to me.” To secure financial benefits such as the GI Bill, certain requirements such as being a full-time student can impact eligibility and monthly living expense stipends. Therefore, assistance with scheduling and enrolling in classes is a significant factor in the participant’s transitional experiences. Nadine described the importance of enrollment and
course scheduling as, “I needed 4 classes for my GI Bill so that was really cool…They [veteran’s center] helped me sign up for classes and stuff like that. They helped me find the classes I needed.” Cole (2013) discussed how the complexities of the new post 9/11 GI Bill increased the level of reliance veterans have on advisors to help navigate the program. This finding was supported through experiences shared by the female veteran participants in this study.

**Bettering One’s Life and A Feeling of Pride**

The second transitional theme of Bettering One’s Life and a Feeling of Pride emerged from the reasons female veterans attended a university or college after the military, as well as their unique experiences as a student on campus. Questions related to meaning-making were asked throughout the semi-structured interview, to learn if the participants’ responses aligned with Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory on self-authorship which states that “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relation” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269) is cultivated through intrapersonal and interpersonal interconnectedness. Self-authorship describes how individuals emerge from dependence upon external views to derive their interpretations and meaning, to more internally focused interpretations (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) further conceptualized meaning-making aptitude as the influence of context on perceptions of a person’s social selves which underscores the important and complex nature of meaning-making in the multiple identity development of individuals.

Female veteran students optimistically described their pride and gratitude for the ability to attend college. According to Lynette, from Middle South Community College, “I can at least go to school full time [and] I can stay home with the kids during the day. I
can go to school at night and then I can hopefully find a job where I can work from home.” Trish, a student from St. Ogustus University believed, “it was always really important for me to attend school.” She continued, “I always think of people in college as privileged. I think everybody should also feel very privileged in the classroom – to be there.” Blaire, a community college student described, “I feel very proud of myself because I didn’t expect to get this far.” Going to college for Blaire meant that she is “setting a great example for my daughter for one … all my kids actually. To Dawn, going to the university meant:

I feel really proud because I’m the oldest in my family… I feel like I’m accomplishing something. My whole family looks at college as something that’s hard to do takes a lot of energy and effort. So, I feel proud that I’m doing it.

Karla, a student from St. Ogustus University recalled, “I was concerned about my future. So, I decided to go to school and use my GI Bill.” Brittney stated, “I’m doing something for myself and not anybody else.” Rachael said, “One of the reasons I joined the military was to go to college because just before I joined I was doing three part-time jobs.” Lynette, like so many of the female veteran participants said that “[I] take pride in my education.” Nadine summarized, “I feel like it’s a blessing and definitely a privilege and I’m very happy to be a student on a college campus.”

Study participants report that being a college student means bettering one’s life and taking charge of their individual pathways of success. Most readily admitted attending the university was an opportunity to advance in their careers, as stated by Lynette, “I think you kind of realize you really can’t get that far without a college degree.” Also, female veteran students expressed a level of pride, privilege and fortune
when describing what it means to be a college student. Another important theme emerging from the data regarding the transitional experiences of female veterans is a desire and drive to be better, to succeed and feel a sense of pride that their college decisions may pave directions for bigger achievements.

**In the Mix, But Not Mixing In**

The third theme emerging from participants transition experiences reinforced the literature identifying transitional processes as both turbulent and a period of reidentification of “self” within the college setting (Ackerman et al., 2009; Giffey, 2012). This unsettling time is amplified for female veterans on campus; study participants expressed that their experience is separate and different from that of a fully integrated student on campus. Most subjects mentioned that part of the transition challenge stemmed from being older than other students, and they also discussed not having many friends and feeling like they didn’t belong. Nema, a student from SWCU was the only participant to identify her support system as the key to a smooth transition. She said, “I think for me it was a little bit easier because my husband transitioned too. If I didn’t have my husband and best friends, who were doing all the same stuff I did, I would have had a rougher time.” Research from Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) suggest that participants who can rely on personal and institutional support systems tend to have a more successful transition. Many participants did not have the same type of support system as Nema. Macy summarized her difficult transitional experiences:

> It didn’t feel like I really belonged here. I didn’t know anybody, [and] I didn’t have any friends. It was kind of like I would sit in class and not talk to anybody. I really didn’t feel like I was a part of the school community.
Lynette stated, “It’s frustrating. I already feel older but mentally, I feel older.” Nadine exclaimed, “It’s strange. So, strange! There was one class I had where most of the kids were actually teenagers and I was the only adult…” Valerie stated, “It was different! Even if someone’s the same age you can see the difference between military and the regular college student.”

Despite not feeling like they fit in or belong, there is a strong drive to succeed and overwhelming sense of pride for being a university student. Generally, the combination of gender and age are the factors contributing to a difficult campus integration. Rachael recalled, “I’m a more confident person, I don’t care what these other people think so I dress with whatever I feel like. In a way, my gender does set me off from some of the others.” Findings from Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) affirm Rachael’s identification of “confident” as a similar self-attribute reported by other female veterans when discussing transitional experiences.

Most participants identified a feeling of being stereotyped or judged on campus. However, three of the participants did not recognize any noticeable influence of gender on their transitional experiences. Brittney mentioned, “It’s tough being a female veteran because you’re in such a man dominated field that you’re not really like ‘hey what’s up chick.’ I definitely feel I don’t connect with a lot of other female students very much.” Lynette believed, “… there’s still a lot of gender stereotyping when it comes to women in the military and they’re supposed to look a specific way and they’re supposed to act a specific way. But, I’m very girly just not as high maintenance as some girls are.” She remembered a time when she went into the enrollment service office and “most people assume[ed] when they hear I’m on the GI Bill benefits that I’m on my husband’s benefits.
Or, that my dad gave me his benefits.” Valerie responded, “I think it’s like the way I carry myself. I’m confident. I can be assertive…usually when I meet people they think…I’m usually overpowering people.” Trish referenced, “there’s a lot of norms or behaviors that have become normal in our society” and “it’s hard, sometimes, to communicate with some of the younger men because it can be frustrating to watch the way they talk to other women.” Female veteran participant responses emphasize the challenges of fitting in or integrating into the college context, despite their strong attributions of confidence and assertiveness. Stereotypes and perceived judgments about female veteran students represent barriers for positive transitional experiences.

Two participants from St. Ogustus University, Karla and Valerie, report that gender did not impact their transitional experiences. Karla said, “I don’t think gender plays a role at St. Ogustus University at all. I think everybody is the same.” Valerie echoed a similar statement, “I don’t personally recognize any difference.” Nadine, a student from MSCC also didn’t believe that her gender influenced her transition and she noted, “I don’t think it makes a difference at all honestly. I think I get treated exactly the same.”

The uniqueness and variety of transitional experiences, as well as participant’s perceptions of barriers related to their transition, affirm Schlossberg’s (1984) transitional model suggesting that both personal and contextual factors shape a female veteran’s transitional experiences. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) describe further complexity of multi-layered transition from a military to civilian role, and then to the student role. Thus, the idea of being in the mix, but not mixing in appropriately describes the intricacies of participant’s transitional experiences as well as perceptions on how gender has influenced
those experiences. The next section will further unpack female veteran participants’ gender identity experiences and perceptions on the college campus.

**Gender Identity on Campus**

The women fielded questions about their gender identity on the college campus, exploring whether participants self-identify as a female veteran to others on campus, and to recall any experiences that made it easier or harder to be a student. Three main themes emerged from the responses: a) Self-Identifying is a Choice, b) Invisible and c) Having Benefits and Having Skills.

Interview data confirmed Herbert (1998) and De Sawal (2013) finding that many female veterans do not self-identify on campus and prefer to go unnoticed and be inconspicuous.

**Self-Identifying is a Choice**

Participants had mixed responses in terms of those who identify and those who don’t identify as female veterans on campus. Furthermore, some describe a sense of being misunderstood or even targeted, corresponding to general stereotypes when they identified as a female veteran on campus. Additionally, the women voiced an overwhelming sense of pride for serving in the military, more than just a role, but an assumed identity. This reidentification process is mentioned throughout literature on female veteran gender identity and transition (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Demers, 2013; De Sawal, 2013).

Six participants did self-identify as being a female veteran on campus. Macy responded, “Yes! Because, for me that’s just what I am. I’m not going to pretend like I didn’t serve just to make somebody else comfortable.” Dawn said “if they ask I’ll tell
them that I’m a veteran” but “I feel like that puts a target on me, or makes me feel or makes other people feel I’m different than them.” Valerie recalled that this topic comes up a lot in conversations with other veterans, “I’m a veteran, but I am a student worker at the veteran center so I wear a lot of our shirts.” For Laura, “that’s a big part of who I am and how I relate.” She described that occasionally “you kind of have to separate yourself from your identity as a woman because it’s a weakness.” Brittney stated, “Yes, I very much do. I’m a veteran. I think it makes me stand out more – like someone that’s been through some things. I’m proud to be a veteran so that’s the main reason why I say it.”

Six participants stated they do not self-identify on campus as a female veteran. Karla said, “…no not really. I don’t think people here understand us.” She further explained, “when I share with people, then I sometimes I feel like they look at me differently…she’s just an older chick…she was in the Marines oh, she’s gonna be crazy.” Nema responded:

I don’t bring it up unless I have a reason to…not that I am trying to hide it. But for me, it’s kinda like, a ‘look at me’ thing and I am not like that. Because, I don’t look like a veteran to them. For female veterans, it is less obvious they were in the military.

Lynette summarized by saying, “No, not really. I think it’s part of who I am, but it’s not all that I am.” Lynette described some of the perceptions of female veterans as “they’re not viewed by their male counterparts still as equal. Women are kind of seen as you proved you can do it. Good job. Here’s your participation trophy…” Nadine clarified, “I don’t necessarily tell people I’m a female veteran. I’m very proud of it [and] I loved
serving in the Marine Corps. It’s a family legacy.” Trish articulated her choice about self-identifying as a female veteran:

I typically don’t go in my classroom “I’m a veteran” you know. I used to in the very beginning and then, what I found is that people don’t understand – they don’t understand at all or they have a certain idea of what they think that I did or what my job was. I’ll never regret doing the military. But, I do think and I’m still struggling and will always for a while struggle with it – trying to find a way to keep it as part of my life. I am very much [trying to] reinvent myself to become a new person.

Trish’s response epitomized her struggle to maintain identity as a veteran, but also reconcile the need to assume new roles and identities as a college student. Baxter Magolda’s work (2007) validates Trish’s struggle, reflecting the interwoven belief systems that guide genuine relationships with others in social contexts.

**Invisible**

The second gender identity theme that surfaced underscores the balance between not identifying as a female veteran and identifying, but still remaining “invisible” as a veteran to others. Macy recalled her first semester on campus as SWCU, “It was because I didn’t know people and didn’t belong to any groups.” Feeling invisible for Macy was defined as the lack of connectedness and support. Rachael mentioned, “I have a service dog. It makes me stand out and completely different, but some might think there’s something wrong with me. They’re not actually interested in knowing me.” Despite Rachael’s perception of standing out because of her service dog, she still believed that other students weren’t interested in her as a female veteran student. When interviewed,
Laura recalled a recent event when her husband recommended she meet a male veteran acquaintance of his, thinking he could help Laura with her transitional questions. When Laura met this individual “he hardly glanced at me, he like barely shook my hand, and then he started talking to the guy next to me about something else and completely blew me off.” Laura felt that even after she had answered his questions, “he didn’t even acknowledge my answer and then just walked away and started talking to somebody else.” Laura said, “I wasn’t sure if that was because I was female, and he didn’t think I was a ‘real’ veteran or if he was just having a bad day.”

Two participants also recalled how the veteran’s centers promote their organization on campus by hosting table and tent events in open-areas. Brittney said, “I know there are times when we’ll be doing something like at a booth and people will be like shaking all the guy’s hands and then they’re just like ‘oh, hey’…. and they keep walking by [me].” Nema had a similar experience, “I think they recognized me as a veteran there but that was only because I was behind the table. Otherwise, I was invisible to them.” Nema offered, “I am a female veteran…maybe it falls back to the idea that I think people will say that “you were a girl in the military so you must not have done anything important” to justify why she feels invisible or not representative of a veteran on campus.

**Having Benefits and Having Skills**

Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) identified time management and organizational skills as assets in the female veteran’s pursuit of academic achievement. For study participants, who believed their experiences as a female veteran made it easier to be a student, they noted time management, organization and practical experience skills. Those
who believed their experiences as a female veteran made it more difficult to be a student also mentioned feelings of anxiety and having to balance multiple roles, including being a mother. Institutional support, as well as the use of GI Bill benefits underscored some of the positive experiences participants mentioned. Ackerman et al. (2009) argued that veteran service offices have an integral role in helping female veteran students not just access and utilize their benefits but to help them become part of the culture of the campus. This study confirmed that assertion.

Valerie stated, “I think just being in the [veteran’s] center and being around people I can relate to and talk to…going back to school isn’t easy, so a lot of us are on the same page.” Karla also talked about the social support of the veteran’s center and expanded, “you served I served you know how I feel like – and it’s like an unsaid thing between veterans.” which is fostered in the veteran’s center St. Ogustus University. Dawn believed, “So far, just the veteran’s center seems to make it easier for me to meet people and helps me build more connections with people.” Nema recalled her time as a medic in the military, “I spent almost half of my enlistment doing shift work and the other half doing clinic work. So, I had a chance to work with a lot of people and most were strangers and that made it easier for me on campus.” For Rachael, “being in the military and being a veteran – time management – you’re given a deadline and you have to get it done or there’s serious repercussions versus just a bad grade.” She further added that her “hands-on experience is something I got from the military which has helped me in my classes.”

The benefits of the GI Bill emerged as an important element making it easier for female veterans to be a student. Trish stated, “I know the power of the GI Bill and I do
not feel guilty for calling my counselor and saying I need to switch class or dropping a class.” Nadine recalled, “I definitely think the G.I. Bill has probably a huge blessing because it helps with books and bills monthly, so it’s been great.” Lynette discussed, “a lot of people think that you’re like getting a “gimme” education because you get your school paid for…I’m constantly pushing myself to be the best…to prove that I deserve to be here at MSCC.” According to Caspers and Ackerman (2013), the Post-9/11 GI Bill is one of the most financially appealing benefit packages throughout history anticipating significant impact on current and future veterans.

Some participants recollected more challenging experiences as a female veteran student. Macy, who still reports for some military training exercises stated, “[When] I need to study or trying to schedule my training around my school schedule, that’s really the only difficulties.” Trish reported feeling conflicted, “I think the one thing that’s hard as a female veteran is that I have a lot of anxiety. So, I am either organized and I have to be 15 minutes early or I almost freeze.” Nadine, Brittney and Blaire, all mentioned that “not being with my kid(s)” is a difficult part about trying to be a female veteran student. Throughout the interviews, each elaborated on the challenges of balancing the role of being a mother, a student and a veteran. Social structures within an institution as well as social relationships between the female veteran participants means that veteran student may occupy two or sometimes more conflicting identities during their transition into the collegiate setting (Livingston & Bauman, 2013). The female veteran participants see the roles of being a mother, a student and a veteran as often colliding with each other.
Chapter Summary

Female veteran students’ understanding of their gender identity within the academic context is interwoven through two major categories: transitional experiences and gender identity on campus. Within the two major categories, six themes emerged. Transitional experiences are enhanced by institutional support, including a main location or veteran’s center to assist with scheduling, enrollment and GI Bill. A friendly, compassionate and knowledgeable staff is important. Female veterans believe they are bettering their lives and report that attending a college or university will open career doors, enhance their livelihood and provide opportunities to be role models for their children. They have a sense of pride and privilege for being a college student. They are concerned about being in the mix, but not really mixing in, analogous to being on campus but not really fitting in. The category of gender identity on campus emerged the idea that self-identifying as a veteran is a choice, however there can still be a feeling of being invisible. All felt a great benefit of having skills to be a successful student, yet feel their age and breadth of experiences meant inability to connect with younger students. These themes are consistent with much of the findings from the literature review and provide a platform for future discussion.

The next chapter addresses the second research question of this study, which seeks to understand how participant’s perceptions of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting.
CHAPTER SIX: HOW PARTICIPATING FEMALE VETERAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR GENDER IDENTITY ROLES SHAPED THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS IN THE COLLEGIATE SETTING

Introduction

This chapter will explore findings addressing the second research question, designed to assess participants’ perceptions of how their gender identity roles shape their interactions with others in the collegial setting. The study used the term “gender identity” to refer to “a sense of one’s own gender, including knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of being male or female” (Egan & Perry, 2001, p.451). As social expectations influence how a female veteran view herself as a woman and how she defines herself within social contexts (Clemmitt, 2009), this chapter presents perceptions the participants shared about their experiences on campus. The lived experiences shared by the female veteran students were grouped into four categories: a) “30lbs of Stigma,” b) Inclusion, c) Struggles Interacting with Students, and d) Heightened Self-Efficacy. The chapter brings together some of the rich, contextual stories shared by the participants supporting the above groupings.

Perceptions of Female Veteran Students

Participants responded to questions about how they thought others perceive them on campus, as well as what meaning they assign to being a female veteran in a collegial setting. Identity control theory describes the emergence of three types of identities: 1) role identities — where meanings are assigned to a particular role an individual assumes, such as a mother or a medic, 2) social identities — when values are ascribed to belonging in a specific group or category, such as an American, or veteran, and 3) personal identity
— worth of the unique self (Burke, 1999, 2007). The process of identity verification requires participants to manage identity-relevant meanings and seek out pertinent situations consistent with the identity standard (Burke, 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997). When applying identity control theory to the perceptions of the female veteran student participants, the four emergent categories illuminate the various identities and barriers shaping the fluid nature of gender identity. The discussion in the remainder of this chapter focuses on the four categories and emergent themes.

“30lbs of Stigma”

When unpacking the concept of stigmas, four themes surfaced: a) You Don’t Look Like a Veteran, b) Assumptions, c) Ambassador, and d) Defining Moments that Impact Self and Others. This section will explore these themes through the participants’ observations of how others perceive them.

Participant Macy from Southwest Caballo University framed the main category of stigma when she spoke about a veteran center sponsored event entitled, “A Subway of Realization.” The Women’s Veteran’s Club hosted the event to bring awareness to various stigmas female veterans face during their Service and during transition to civilian roles. Typically, military members have rucksacks, which are akin to backpacks. These rucksacks carry gear and other belongings. According to Macy, “we did a little research and usually the average weight for a rucksack would be about 30 pounds.” She described, “female veterans carry the burden of stigmas that outweigh a rucksack,” and the Women’s Veteran’s Club symbolized to the campus what labels female veterans endure by writing various stigmas on rocks and putting those rocks in the rucksack. Macy said, “We had over 4 rucksacks filled with rocks of stigmas…that’s about 120 pounds of stuff
women have to get through just to feel equal.” This story epitomized how participants felt others perceive them and what it means to be a female veteran on a college campus.

**You don’t look like a veteran.** A consistent response from participants focused on not being viewed by others as a veteran. They expressed how others have a fixed imaged of what a veteran looks like, and they did not fit that image. Nadine, a student from MSCC stated, “Oh, wow! You don’t look like a veteran or I didn’t realize you were in the Marines” as a typical response she hears. Nadine explained “[maybe] they’re expecting a burly girl or something…they’re not expecting like a short girl.” Macy, a senior at SWCU described her experience, “most people would be surprised honestly, because some people have the impression that female veterans are supposed to be masculine and want to be men.” Valerie reflected, “I look different than what they are expecting me to look like.” Rachael reported that most people are “shocked [e]specially when I say…Marine. I don’t look like a Marine. I got that even while I was in active duty. Oh, you’re a Marine?” Dawn, a first-year student at SWCU said, “I don’t look like a Marine. I guess the idea of what a Marine looks like is a big burly guy.”

**Assumptions.** Participants described common assumptions they believe the students on their campus have about female veterans. Blaire identified that other students may be “a little bit intimidated because you know, of everybody’s view of the military…their eyes get buggy as soon as a female says they were a veteran. Like, I’m probably a “b” word.” Nema said, “They may be intimidated by a female who was in the military.” Trish described:

Either really super overly aggressive like, if you’re in the military than obviously, I was running around with a rifle, [as if] that’s what everyone does in the
military…. or they think I was just sitting at a desk. I definitely get from a lot of people that they don’t think women were as hands-on in the war as men.

Laura a student from St. Ogustus University shared:

I think they automatically assume that I was like in a medical role, which I was, but that’s nothing to do with being a female… I just kind of feel like the men are regarded as these heroes and the women are just like ‘oh the helpers’ you know, so it’s still kind of that stigma a little bit. The students think [female veterans are] gonna freak out in a moment’s notice and it’s just simply not that way.

Dawn who recently separated from the Service, believes that people think she is “mean or unapproachable.” She described a time when a student said to her “oh, you’re in the Marines – that’s cool – did you kill people? And, I’m like no; it’s not really like that.” Similarly, Nema said, “I think that many people don’t know what to ask or don’t care to ask because they assume. They may assume that they know what I have done or go through.” Males and females attribute certain values, creating a sense of gender differentiation within our society. This leads to the development of stereotypes and assumptions about social role expectations that illustrate the participants lived experiences (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Ambassador. Female veterans also share a sense of pride and the drive to give back, or to be an example for others on campus. When asked what it means for them to be a female veteran on campus, most participants aligned their responses similarly, with what it means for them to be a student. Nadine succinctly stated, “I’m a female; yes, I’m a veteran; yes, I’m a student. To me, it’s no different. I know I’m more fortunate than a lot of other students. I feel lucky and proud.”
Two students from SWCU shared their feelings about what it means to be a female veteran student. Rachael said, “I am proud to have served. To me it’s more like an honor or privilege to be here. I can go anywhere I want, but I chose to be here.” Nema expressed, “I feel super proud that I am female veteran at one of the best veteran-friendly schools in America. Yes, I am doing it. I am doing it successfully!”

Blaire noted the importance of setting an example. She stated, “You have to set an example for other students in a way because everybody is looking at you, especially when they know you’re a veteran. You’re really setting an example and you’re still representing that lifestyle.” Macy similarly mentioned, “You’re kind of an ambassador to the military because how you act reflects upon all veterans since a lot of the students never been around the military. All they know is [from] movies, TV and how we act.”

Trish said when she is on campus, “I keep in mind who I represent or if I tell someone I’m a veteran, I don’t want to look like I came rolling out of bed…” Resulting from the dynamic and fluid nature of social influences on gender identity, participants may choose to recreate their gender identities not only for what it means to be a woman in the military, but for what it means to be a female veteran student (Herbert, 1998).

**Defining moments that impact self and others.** The participants shared their most rewarding or significant moment as a female veteran student. Stories of perseverance, influence and accomplishment took center stage when they told their rich, contextualized experiences.

Nadine, Rachael, and Dawn emphasized their defining moments through experiences from the classroom. Nadine recalled, “Passing classes. I’m gonna keep showing up and do everything I can. I made it and I was proud. You don’t give up, you
just keep on coming.” Rachael exclaimed, “When I get that “A” then I know I worked so hard for and stressed over!” Dawn who described a moment with a faulty member said, “My English teacher knew I was a veteran, I’m not sure how, but she was talking…and that was nice knowing that someone else was interested and understood what it was like.”

Other participants recollected events that influenced others and how these events offered each of the participant’s personal insight into their own self. Trish remembered:

I think every veteran comes to a point where they can’t see what they did and they can’t make that connection, like how is this gonna fit my life or how can I use my experience in the military to impact society. I was doing my practicum in a junior high in the [Plymouth] District. [The junior high students] had to write a biography about something they researched and they had to present it. And, one of the girls did Amelia Earhart. So, I brought my leather flight jacket, my scarf, and my helmet and all my stuff to the class when she did her presentation. For the first time, I could see…that’s how I can impact people.

Nema partook on a task force to draft a memorandum on behalf of the veteran’s center for SWCU. She shared:

Last year, released on Veteran’s Day, it was a Presidential Memorandum that myself and two other male veterans wrote to the Department of Education to draft a pilot program. It is going to be a six-month program transitioning veterans into school and what works best to ensure that they are successful and know what to expect. Basically, it revolved around retention, why aren’t veterans graduating? To participate in this and for the director to see me as an important person to help write this document was a great honor.
Lynette, a student from MSCC recalled the time when she took part on a speaker panel about veteran’s issues on campus. Lynette reminisced:

Last semester I got asked to sit on a panel in front of [other students]; there was me and two other male veterans. I was really honored to get asked to do it. I’m a female veteran and I’m in school full time, but I’m also a mother. At that time my little one was still breastfeeding; this panel was lasting like 2 hours, so I’m under the covers breastfeeding her, still standing in front of everybody. Yeah, so this is like real life. You don’t have to give up being a mom to join the military. You don’t have to assume someone else’s identity to be a veteran. You can be yourself, whoever you are. Just being a female in general shouldn’t stop you from doing anything.

Trish, Nema and Lynette’s stories highlight the drive to impact others and create a sense of self that does not have to negotiate between identities or roles, but depicts lived experiences that incorporate and embrace what it means to be a female veteran student. In the face of stigmas and barriers, these defining moments portray the essence of gender identity in female veteran students (Carter, 2014; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997).

Inclusion

Social context plays an important role in shaping an individual’s perceptions of gender roles (Burke, 2007). It is important to consider how female veteran students define a veteran-friendly institution. In this study, all three institutions identify as being veteran-friendly. To the participants in this study, a veteran-friendly institution focuses on creating an institutional culture that embraces the unique experiences of female
veterans, offers a center, or dedicated space for veterans to receive assistance with benefits, tutoring or other pertinent services. The participants also expressed that a veteran-friendly institution will have faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about how a veteran student’s experiences can enrich the teaching and learning process, as well as have some knowledge about some of the challenges that a veteran student may encounter. Many of the responses affirmed the literature on veteran-friendly institutions. Participants largely defined a veteran-friendly institution as having a veteran’s center, consistent with the findings from Ackerman et al. (2009). There was also a sense from participants that at the heart of a veteran friendly institution were programs such as the aforementioned “Subway of Realization,” those where the participants felt that the programmatic efforts are inclusive and culturally friendly to veterans. This echoes Minnis’ (2014) statement that institutions should create a “culture which is supportive, appreciative, respectful, embracing, and inclusive of the veterans it educates” (para. 4). Being identified as a veteran-friendly institution requires more than just a veteran’s center, but eliminating obstacles that prevent veterans from achieving their educational and professional objectives (Lokken et al., 2009).

Nema and Macy, both from SWCU articulated their thoughts about a veteran-friendly institution. Nema shared:

I don’t know any other schools that dedicate an entire week to the military. The Salute to Service week. Who does that? It’s insane. It’s like it’s over the top! They also do surveys that see what resources they can connect us to housing, clubs and orgs, tutoring.
Macy described:

    I think we have a lot of services for veterans. We have areas for veterans like [Veteran’s Center]. SWCU does a whole week just dedicated to the military, Salute to Service Week. All throughout the week there’s different military related activities; there’s art, music, speakers, and to end, they do a basketball game where they honored [me] on the court for being a female veteran.

Nema and Macy’s experiences illuminate the inclusive nature of a veteran-friendly institution that inserts activities throughout the university from honoring veterans at sporting events, to hosting weeklong engagement opportunities open to the entire campus community. Within the category of inclusion, three themes emerged: a) Recognizing “Different Experiences,” b) Programming Improvements, and c) Understanding and Knowledgeable Faculty.

**Recognizing “different experiences.”** Laura believed that a veteran-friendly institution “recognizes that we all have different experiences.” She explained, “While an institution may not understand that, they have a veteran’s center that does.” For female veterans, there is this desire for the institution to be inclusive and provide opportunities to embed veteran-related activities across campus. Institutions should also recognize that not all veterans share the same experiences or have the same needs. Karla shared, “we have different outlets for us to go to or different things that help us out. We can go [to the veteran’s center] and you can usually find a veteran to talk to about any problems or just to have a place to hang out. I like to go down there.” Burnett and Segoria (2009) found organizational models embracing institution-wide support through mental health, tutoring, transition and career services not only recognize the unique needs of veterans
but also create a culture of inclusion and belongingness. Brittney stated, “I feel on campus we should have a veteran’s area because there are some of us that just need that quiet moment away from everybody sometimes.” Brittney’s statement is a reminder how inclusion and engagement are key factors for veterans, as is the need for distraction-free environments for some veterans.

**Programming improvements.** Some participants did not mention any improvement for their veteran-friendly institution, while others highlighted improvements at their institution such as leadership conferences/workshops for women. Karla suggested, “If they hold like women business leader conference. I think it would be cool to have something like that for female veterans. For us to be able to go sit with a panel and ask questions.” Interacting with “the female leaders of the civilian world” would be beneficial according to Karla. Trish, a mother to a child with PTSD said, “We don’t have a lot of programs for that or support for them [military parents with children with PTSD].”

Brittney and Blaire both recommended having a veteran’s lounge, which Blaire described as different from a veteran’s center. She defined a “veteran center is like information oriented and more towards ‘getting things done’ instead of a lounge where you’re just like hanging out.” Blaire recollected, “I was kind of hoping for a military lounge. Like meet up with other military people and sometimes you miss it and you want to go back and everything.” Brittney agreed, “It would be really nice to have a Veteran Lounge.”

Nadine recalled the importance of scheduling and early enrollment due to her GI Bill benefits. She stated, “I was only able to get one class this semester and it does affect
my G.I. Bill” so having “early enrollment here [for veterans] would benefit all of us.” Participants also noted how showing appreciation is beneficial for their experiences on campus. Veteran-friendly institutions must explicitly define what it means to serve veterans and support their educational goals by staying abreast of their unique and often unidentified prerequisites (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Palmer, 2011).

**Understanding and knowledgeable faculty.** Osborne (2014) recommends universities and colleges create training programs for faculty to help bridge the gap between the veteran students and administrative offices. Furthermore, campus open panels or forums for female veteran students to share their stories can help diminish feelings of separation from the military and break down perceptual barriers and stereotyping statements across the campus (Osborne, 2014). Trish “think[s] just being understanding and I think education…maybe checking your own biases in the sense” can aid faculty in having a better awareness of female veteran students in their classrooms. Nema suggested it is “important to specifically ask your class if anyone has come from the military” so that “faculty [can] understand that there is a transition coming out of the military and it isn’t an easy one.” Lynette stated, “Understanding that we do take our education seriously. We’re not here looking for a free ride. We’re not looking for people to pat us on the back…we expect to be treated like adults.” Macy described a time when she needed to have her cell phone available during a class. She shared, “She [faculty] was really understanding of that. When I’ve gone to talk to them, they’ve all been willing to work with me.” Laura recalled a time when she confided in a faculty member. She thought that faculty was “being genuine and themselves…talked to me like they would anybody else.” Nadine appreciated her faculty when “they will work with you and they’re
like “I totally understand.”” However, she also described an instance when a faculty said, “you’re turning it in the day it’s due or tough luck.” Nadine explained, “I think people, sometimes, aren’t as understanding; they think you need to choose, but you don’t have a choice sometimes.”

Participants also mentioned the importance of faculty being knowledgeable or educated about facets of the military. Dawn said, “If the faculty knew more about benefits and why we get [them] and, [why we] struggle in class. If the teachers understood more about PTSD that would help them and the students.” Brittney described, “Faculty that ask us questions to learn about us makes me feel like I matter in the class.” Valerie contributed, “caring about what we’re going through. If they have military knowledge or know where we can get resources…someone who’s informative, who understands and cares.”

**Struggles Interacting with Students**

In addition to participants describing the importance of feeling included in the campus climate and having understanding faculty who are knowledgeable about veteran issues, a third main theme emerged from participant responses. Respondents identified struggles interacting with other students as a major challenge with being a female veteran student. This theme is consistent with Ackerman et al. (2009) who reported that veteran students not only have transitional difficulties navigating a campus culture but also “just being a student” (p. 8). An essential element of being a student is the ability to effectively interact with others. Barber, King and Baxter Magolda (2013) believe that the college setting is an ideal environment for individuals to develop self-authorship. General education outcomes such as “critical thinking and intercultural competence require
complex developmental capacities to understand multiple perspectives, identities and relationships” (Barber, King & Baxter Magolda, 2013, p. 867). Respondents struggled to navigate the diversity of other students’ experiences, levels of maturity, and styles of interacting different from the type of interaction female veterans were accustomed to in the military.

Dawn and Nadine described their struggle with not being able to rely on other students as a support system in the same way they relied on their military counterparts. Dawn said, “I had a close team; I knew everyone I worked with. I still don’t know anyone. So, that’s still a challenge.” Nadine remarked, “I think as a veteran you get used to having a huge support system and friends and things like that. And now you’re kind of away from your base.” Macy identified that group projects are the “biggest [challenge] because it’s I’m used to people being accountable. It’s the accountability that drives me crazy.” Blaire emphasized, “Getting mad at the other students for the way that they behave is a big challenge. I find them very immature most of the time. They’re like always complaining.” Rachael described her challenges with making friends when she stated, “I never fit in at all, so I’m kind of used to being that lone wolf. But, one challenge I do have is making friends.” Laura articulated her struggle with expressing emotions in front of other students. She stated, “I don’t like to cry in front of people…it feels like a weakness because in the military it is.”

**Heightened Self-Efficacy**

A person’s self-efficacy develops though experiences, social modeling and social pressures. Bandura (1986) coined the term self-efficacy as referring to the capacity for
one to exercise control over one’s thought processes, motivations and affect and the perception of agency (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Self-efficacy is related to study participant’s drive as well as the confidence they can achieve a desired outcome. Karla mentioned, “I feel like the military like it made me have the drive I have.” Nadine, also described becoming more responsible due to her experiences in the military. She stated, “I think the military was good for me before trying to go to college. I don’t know if I would have been responsible enough to go straight from high school to college.” Nema said that she is “more responsible and able to do school because of the military.”

Rachael and Brittney articulated more specific examples of how the military shaped their college experiences. Rachael believed, “Communication is kind of a big thing. Being able to just walk up and talk to a professor like they’re another person. I’m not afraid to just talk to a professor and ask them a question.” Military experiences have “definitely prepared me to know what I needed to do and how I needed to organize myself and how to make sure I set deadlines for myself,” according to Brittney.

Valerie shared her perspective on the important role of military in college career. She stated, “It helped me become a better leader, a better communicator, a better … I think in all aspects honestly, organization, integrity … all that stuff – all those things that made you a successful student you learned in the military.” Participants reported an overall heightened sense of personal agency, or confidence to be a successful student which they attribute to their lived military experiences.
Chapter Summary

Four main categories emerged: a) “30lbs of Stigma,” b) Inclusion, c) Struggles Interacting with Students, and d) Heightened Self-Efficacy, from participants’ perceptions of their gender roles and how those roles shape interactions with others in a collegial setting emerged. These categories are consistent with much of the literature on gender identity and gender roles. Several themes arose under three of the main categories.

The category of, “30lbs of Stigma,” arose from participants’ lived experiences about a campus event to enhance awareness about female veteran issues. This category included four themes, a) You Don’t Look Like a Veteran, b) Assumptions, c) Ambassador, and d) Defining Moments that Impact Self and Others. Participants emphasized the physical and outward appearance of being female as incongruent to how nonveteran students perceive veterans should look. Assumptions about personal character traits such as being assertive or intimidating illustrated that participants’ ideas of what others might think about them. However, being a female veteran student on campus presented respondents the opportunity to represent the military and its values, as well as feel proud of their accomplishments.

As the study fully explored participant interactions on campus, they responded to questions about veteran-friendly labeled institutions and characteristics of supportive faculty or staff. Within the category of inclusion, three themes surfaced: a) Recognizing “Different Experiences,” b) Programming Improvements, and c) Understanding and Knowledgeable Faculty. Participants believed that veteran-friendly institutions create a climate of inclusion that fosters respect for diverse and unique experiences and offers programming opportunities such as early enrollment for veterans and women in
leadership workshops. The women describe veteran-friendly institutions as having faculty who are supportive and can exhibit a level of understanding and compassion. Respondents mentioned the importance of educating faculty on veteran transitional challenges.

A noteworthy challenge for participants is interacting with other students. A significant theme centered on difficulties with students who appear less mature than them, or with levels of accountability inconsistent in group projects or assignments. Some participants mentioned the type of support system they were accustomed to in the military makes it difficult to rely on other students in classes.

Respondents attribute their military experiences to preparing them for college. The growth of inner confidence resulting from participant’s Service experiences heightened their self-efficacy which fosters the capacity to achieve as a university student.

The following chapter addresses the final research question of this study, assessing how participants lived experiences from the military influenced their expression of gender on campus.
CHAPTER SEVEN: HOW PARTICIPANTS’ LIVED MILITARY EXPERIENCES INFLUENCED THEIR EXPRESSION OF GENDER ON CAMPUS

Introduction

This chapter explores the final research question: *how have lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus?* The women’s expressions of gender in the military fell into two categories: a) Family Encourages Development of Inner Strength, and b) Wearing Camouflage. Participants’ gender expressions on campus were also grouped into two categories: a) Heightened Self-Efficacy, and b) About Face! In College Now. These categories will be explored below.

**Expressions of Gender in the Military**

To understand how participants lived experiences in the military influenced their expression of gender on campus, the research protocol focused on the contextual stories paving their entrance into the military, as well as recollecting aspirations related to their service. Subjects described their military experiences from the perspective of being female, and shared pertinent details about how they felt pressure to act differently. Furthermore, this study assessed how the women’s military experiences shaped their current experiences on campus. Thus, understanding participant descriptions of the culture in the military, compared to the culture of their campus, illustrated the influence of social context with the expression of gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The first category emerging from their experiences is *Family Encourages Development of Inner Strength.*
Family Encourages Development of Inner Strength

In January 2016, The Department of Defense required all branches of the armed forces to outline job position performance measures. Lyle (2015) reported these measures would begin to break down traditional gender-based barriers in the military. As the military culture continues to transform, this study explored what motivated participants to join the military and their unique experiences. The women reported how family influence was a strong motivator to join the military. Karla, who grew up near a military town, explained: “It really comes back down to my family serving, and my big brother joining the Marines right before I did.” Macy similarly recalled, “I’m from a military family. Both of my grandparents served in World War II. However, when they served, it was during a time when Blacks couldn’t really do anything, so they were cooks.”

Crediting their families for much of the motivation to join the military, participants shared some of their aspirations and goals they hoped to achieve from their military service.

Valerie recalled her first seven days on her deployment ship, “I think, I grew up a lot then. It was the biggest growth actually in my life.” Laura who was one of four medics in her platoon described how “there wasn’t a lot of faith in my ability to move people out of burning vehicles.” She explained, “I really had to express my knowledge as my strong point and set myself apart on my own. I learned you don’t have to put other down, you can just be yourself and everything will work out.” Lynette who “never foresaw [her]self being in the military” shared that joining the military was her “last-ditch effort to exert my independence, I guess.” Rachael served as a Squad Leader and “want[ed] more, like I had that drive to want something else. I want new, different
experiences from the military to give me strength to achieve whatever I wanted.” Blaire shared:

I always credit my motivation for being strong enough to join the military to my great grandfather because he was in World War II and he always so modest about it. I wanted to become better at everything. Everything! I wanted to learn how to shoot a gun or weapon. I wanted to have a better understanding of how to talk to people. I wanted to feel good about who I was and wanted to become a leader.

Volunteering for the military offered opportunities for participants to develop their inner strength to achieve future goals. Maturity and exposure to new experiences are primary elements to this sense of inner strength and ability, according to the women. Trish summarizes, “I started there [in flight school] as a student and ended up there as an instructor, teaching students how to fly a plane.”

**Wearing Camouflage**

As participants described military experiences from the perspective of being female, the second category of blending in, or *wearing camouflage*, emerged. This trait depicted the desire for the women to not solely identify as female, but to develop a new sense of self. “When you’re a female in a male dominated field, you stand out. It is what it is. You stand out” explained Macy.

Hoping to not stand out, Brittney recalled, “I was not just one of the girls in the military. You can’t act like you’re a female in the military. You have to be one of the guys and do the same thing as everyone else.” Dawn said, “They kind of take some of the feminine out already just in the rules. I didn’t really look very feminine when I was in uniform but they kind of make it that way, to make everybody look uniform.” Laura
“didn’t want to be looked at that way, like a girl” so she shaved her head and started body building to get stronger for her deployments.

Karla and Valerie described their experiences in the military in terms of assuming new identities. Valerie explained:

Sometimes you don’t have a gender role because when you’re doing things it’s all of you, it’s not like it’s who is a male and who is a female – you’re a sailor. And, they always emphasize that in the military – you’re a sailor first: you’re not a woman, you’re not a man, you’re not a son, daughter, you’re a sailor first.

Karla affirmed, “I wanted to be known for just being a Marine. I didn’t want to be a female, I didn’t want any of that, I just wanted to be a Marine.”

Nema reflected, “We are trying too hard to match them, that we are not being ourselves and having our own strengths. We have our own strengths to build on but we are pushing those aside to be equal with them.” Nadine, a Squad Leader, remembered, “Frankly, I was the only female that could stay in the run. I was fortunate enough to know better. I’m gonna work on it if I can’t do it. That’s what I did.” Though many participants did not recall similar experiences to Nema and Nadine, Nadine stated, “They don’t realize mental toughness overcompensates for being small or feminine. You can be feminine and still be powerful.”

Identity control theory (ICT) informs the nature of an individual’s behaviors and associated social contexts shaping their identities (Burke, 1991, 2007; Carter, 2014). When applying ICT to participant lived military experiences as female, two themes emerged: a) Choosing Roles and b) Worthiness.
Choosing roles. Subjects shared stories about feeling pressure to choose a role as a female servicemember, implying to be one’s self is not appropriate in the Service. Karla recalled, “I was given some advice from another female Marine… you can be [mean] or you can be [sexually promiscuous]. You choose your path and that’s how it’s gonna be. I just wanted to do my job and to do it well.” Trish believed, “I think being female in the military can go one of two ways, either you become a shining star because you’re different… or you go the route and fall into victim mode. People are gonna be really vulgar regardless…” Nema emphasized “there doesn’t seem to be any middle stereotype,” either “you’re labeled sexually or your lesbian.” Lynette remarked, “You have this label. You are either [mean], [sexually promiscuous] or a lesbian.”

Examining the theme choosing roles more granularly, West and Zimmerman (1987) posit that gender is developed and then reinforced through practicing behaviors one associates with a particular gender. Reinforced behaviors become the guide by which a person ascribes meaning to being male or female. As these behaviors are practiced through multiple social contexts, participants develop their identity standard (Carter, 2014). Within the theme choosing roles, two identities surfaced: a) Sexualized, and b) Victimized.

Sexualized. Three women described the stereotype that military women engage in sexual behavior to gain positions of authority or leadership. Nema remarked, “They thought I [engaged in sexual behaviors] to get promoted or to get an award which wasn’t true and it haunted me in there.” Macy also recalled how many assumed “we slept our way to a promotion [which] sets a bad standard for those who try to actually earn it.”
Rachael described a conversation with a male subordinate who said to her, “did you just….to earn your stripes?”

For other participants, they describe specific situations in which they felt sexualized. When Dawn arrived at boot camp, she recalled, “I immediately told everyone that I was married so they would leave me alone… there was a lot of men, not very many women so they chase after you. As a woman, you had to dodge that.” Macy shared, “They [males] would stand by the doors waiting for the new group out of basic training come in so they can scope out the women because it was a male dominated field.”

Lynette described two examples during her military career. On a Navy ship, “they call them fly pods and [males] would put pornography on when I was in there…just to see what I would do. I would pretend just like it didn’t bother me” recalled Lynette. Another example Lynette described occurred in the sleeping quarters. Every morning, “Chief would refer to the females as chicken heads… it was basically a very sexually derogatory term. I thought about it afterwards and [realized how] inappropriate for him to call us that.” Due to these overtly sexualizing experiences, participants articulated moments of victimization that underscored their need to choose a role.

**Victimized.** Women who experience military sexual trauma (MST) are more likely to develop symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Grossman, 2013). Additionally, Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) report that women are at greater risk of falling victim to sexual assault and sexual harassment when compared to their male counterparts. Nema stated that she “never had any bad experiences like being raped. It is sad but it happens. Military sexual trauma is a totally legitimate thing.” Blaire described, “When I joined [I was] kind of an airhead. So, I got picked on a lot for it. I’m
pretty sure some of it could have been chalked up to as sexual harassment.” Trish articulated, “You can let it get to you and sort of become the victim or you can say…I’m gonna do great”

Laura voluntarily shared her traumatic personal experience:

I was actually sexually assaulted. I just kind of called myself a slut and went on with it because that’s the way they handle sexual assault in the military. There was a list of things that the female just didn’t do. And, if you did one of those things than it was your fault. There’s a part of me that’s still a victim just because I feel like it’s dangerous, but the rational side of my mind [says] no woman should have to be afraid of what’s gonna happen and we need to change the way things are seen there.

Laura’s experience in the military is not unique because in 2012, Cooper (2014) reported that over 26,000 men and women were sexually assaulted in the military.

Worthiness. Despite the various roles participants described, their drive to camouflage into the military culture is evident through the desire to prove they belong, and are worthy of their uniform. Trish explained that she didn’t think she was treated differently but:

I feel like there’s a lot more barriers you have to go through as a woman that are put on you from society… In the military, it’s completely designed from a man’s point of view. Everything is from the way you talk, the way you walk, what you wear – it is all designed to be like a man. I think as a woman, go through more barriers to teach yourself how to talk directly, like how to break the glass ceiling…
Lynette remarked, “You knew your place and had to work twice as hard to prove that you could do what they did. And, you couldn’t complain. You weren’t allowed. You had to prove that you were worthy enough to be there.” Blaire had “to prove [her]self a little more” so she could “be tougher than they expect.” Rachael recollected, “Even if you don’t respect the person, you still respect the rank,” a pivotal moment where Rachael exclaimed, “I earned it!”

The moment Dawn entered the military she “immediately had to prove [her]self.” She reflected, “I worked hard to get past the “She’s a woman, she can’t do anything, she’s stupid.” I had to work really hard to make people actually see me as a person and not just another stupid woman.” Nema felt pressure to “not ask a lot of questions… [because she] didn’t want to be perceived like a dumb girl.”

As female veteran students established a sense of worthiness and value within the military context, an emphasis on concealing weaknesses emerged. The following section highlights responses developing the theme, a delicate flower.

**A delicate flower.** Gender differentiation is a social process by which males and females attribute certain values to a gender. Bussey and Bandura (1999) argue that gender differentiation leads to social roles and stereotyping, and these socially assigned attributes often determine a person’s status and acceptance across multiple environments. Four women described perceptions of weakness or inferiority to males from their lived experiences. Blaire recalled, “You can’t cry very much at all. You better hide it like you’re not trying to because they’re gonna pick on you for it – that’s a weakness. I had to
pretend to be stronger than what I was.” Karla described a time when she challenged a stereotype. She remembered:

It lit my fire even more to outsmart them, to outrun them, to do everything. And, if they can carry two guns, then I’ll carry three. Every time they told me I couldn’t do something because I was a girl or too pretty or anything like that, it just made the fire bigger, to destroy them even more. If you were yourself from the very beginning, you just got destroyed if they found your weaknesses.

Nadine shared, “Even when I was pregnant, I’d be there cleaning, getting my work done. I understood being part of a team and you’re only as strong as your weakest link. I didn’t want to be the weak link.” Dawn stated, “the men just think that you’re a delicate flower that you can’t do anything.”

Expression of Gender on Campus

As respondents reflected on their military experiences, they shared stories about the important role the military played in shaping their expression of gender on campus. Two themes emerged: a) A Balancing Act, and b) About Face! In College Now. These categories portray the multiple gender role expressions illuminating the complexity of how female veteran participants understand themselves on campus.

A Balancing Act

Lynette described her connections as a female veteran within the collegial setting as requiring balance. She said, “Having to balance between home, school, and family has been my biggest personal challenge. If I wasn’t a veteran, I wouldn’t choose to take a full course load, because, yeah, it’s hard.” Brittney mentioned her difficulties with trying to maintain a balanced lifestyle. She shared, “My kids at home, like daycare and
transportation and everything. I’m left to do everything on my own in which that has been the biggest challenge.”

Sometimes managing daily tasks reflects the balancing act the women described throughout the interviews. However, it is common for female veteran students to occupy two or more conflicting roles. How the participants manage these roles, or make meaning of these identities, becomes important to understanding their gender experiences (Livingston & Bauman, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The transitional meaning-making stage includes female veteran students who reflect tensions and discomfort within their identities, and those who recognize how the association between context and perception of identity depict the complex meaning-making stage (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007). Within the main category of a balancing act, five themes emerged: a) Mother, b) Big Sister and Cheerleader, c) Disciplined Leader, d) “Be a Woman,” and e) Authoring My Identity.

Mother. Six interviewees identified themselves as being motherly or nurturing when describing their gender role on campus. Trish said, “My gender role has changed a little bit from who I was and who I’m sort of becoming. I am definitely more nurturing in a sense for sure.” Dawn believes she is “still trying to figure that out.” Though Dawn “doesn’t really know how [she] fit[s],” she “kinda took over more like a motherly role… people kind of came to [her] for advice.” Blaire stated, “I think my mom instincts kick in.” Nadine described, “I identify more, I think, with being a mother than just being a female.” Valerie shared her gender role:

I’m a mom and sometimes around some of the younger students that I feel that part of myself come out a little bit. Sometimes in a group, I’m asked what are we
doing, and am like let’s get this started. The guys in the office also joke around that I’m mama because I go in and I say hey, this is dirty or stop leaving your stuff around. I’m not your wife, you know.

Half of the participants in this study primarily identified their gender role on campus as motherly or nurturing.

**Big sister and cheerleader.** The second theme of gender roles resonating with female veterans is being a big sister or cheerleader to others. This theme illuminates the identity standard Carter (2014) described as “connectedness, expressivity, and compassion” (p. 256) differing from the theme of motherly aligning with the notion of taking care of others and cultivating. Karla shared, “So, being a college student now I assume the big sister role for a lot of people.” Macy perceived herself as a “cheerleader for some of the younger people I’ve talked to.” Lynette said, “I want to be a positive role model. I want to be a big sister and role model to other students on campus.”

**Disciplined leader.** Some participants integrated their military experience within the perception of their gender roles on campus. Macy discussed how she seemed to fill a motherly role for some students but also stated, “I think I’m a leader, too. From the military, I cannot help but [to] take control of situations and I think that comes out sometimes here, and definitely when I am in the center working.” Laura, who struggles with finding her place on campus as a female veteran student, shared:

I do still feel a little bit more like a soldier than any other girl on campus just because I have like a certain level of discipline for myself. I definitely feel more like a female soldier which doesn’t fit anywhere the female demographic at St. Augustus University. I’m not quite sure where I fit in yet.
Rachael, majoring in robotics engineering with a minor in manufacturing, mentioned that “in a male dominated field” she must “be tough, be a leader, and remind all those guys that I am as good as they are… better actually.”

“Be a Woman.” The final theme encompasses the nature of being a woman and the interplay between gender and identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) conceptualized “doing gender” as a process by which gender is practiced through various roles within society. By practicing specific behaviors, the women learned to associate those behaviors with a specific gender role. The female veteran had to ‘do gender’ intentionally in the military to prove themselves and compete in a male-dominated environment. As a student on a university campus, participants can now recreate their gender identities and develop new associations between practiced behaviors on campus and how those shape the perceptions of their gender (Carter, 2014; Herbert, 1998).

Valerie described her gender role on campus as “being just a woman in general.” She further explained, “I am figuring out who I am again. Being a college student helps but also makes it hard…it’s a process.” Nema shared, “always proving ourselves. To show that I can do it. As a female on campus, it is important to show other females that we can do these things. I guess the big idea is ‘Be a Women and Kick A--.’” Both women define what it means to be a woman as a process as well as an opportunity.

Authoring my identity. Five interviewees described changes in how they see their own identity and contextualized their military experiences as influencing their college experiences. Blaire recalled how “being picked on makes me a little bit warier of the way I present myself or the way I act sometimes.” She continued, “Sometimes I want to hide behind a façade or pretend I don’t want to talk to people for a while.” Trish
described, “There are aspects [of college life] that I’m naturally uncomfortable with like behaviors, but then I force myself to be around them and St Ogustus University kind of offers that and I like it.”

Laura and Lynette shared their perspectives on identity changes. Laura said, “Yeah, I don’t really trust guys.” Lynette described how other students don’t know “what it’s like to be treated like a second-rate person and have to earn your place” which makes it hard for her to understand other student’s behaviors on campus.

Valerie summarized:

Being a sailor, I would say influenced my identity. I guess some of my behaviors in the military can’t transition this into the civilian world … like now I have to learn to be more, I think more feminine…. I know it sounds weird, but it’s identifying yourself I think now. Though I’m a veteran, now I need to be a woman again.

About Face! In College Now

The second theme emerging from data analysis of gender expression on campus depicts participants’ perspectives on the military and college cultures. The social cognitive theory, as applied to gender development, emphasizes a lifespan approach suggesting that gender identity development is evolving throughout a person’s life. Notions of gender roles and behaviors are constructed through an array of social networks and contexts which change as a person experiences the world (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). This section considers how the female veterans construct their life worlds and differentiate two environments.
Nadine explained how the military and college are “two different things. They’re night and day.” “Here [in college]) I feel more like a child then being like an adult leader.” She shared an example of one challenge she faced transitioning from the military culture to campus culture. Nadine recalled “group projects” as a difficulty for her “because most of the time the group doesn’t do their work in college and nobody gets yelled at for it. You can trust people in the military more than you can trust your own group.” Blaire said, “There’s not much to compare. The people on campus are lackadaisical. They do whatever they want. We’re taught to be a team. Everybody [in college] is every man for themselves. It’s all about me. So, it’s a huge difference.”

Three participants described noticeable differences when comparing the amount of respect in the military to their experiences on campus. Trish stated, “It’s like a totally different world. There is so much respect in the military built in that you don’t have to question it; respect is given.” Lynette described:

We’re taught in the military to respect everybody. You know, you treat the cook who’s scooping food onto a tray the same way that you would treat your commander. You don’t treat people like garbage, and unfortunately here on campus not everyone believes that.

Brittney also articulated her thoughts about respect for others. She said, “They’re not alike at all. The culture of the military is to have respect for your senior officers and everyone. I feel like teachers don’t get a lot of respect from students.”

Valerie said that the military and campus are “Oh, so 180!” She reported that “you’re gonna see a huge difference in maturity, leadership wise.” Karla depicted, “If you make stupid mistakes in the military, you can cause somebody their life; in college if you
make a stupid mistake, then you’re gonna get a “B” on your paper. So, they are a night and day.” Dawn described an experience she had on the first day of class. She recollected, “My teacher had started talking about needing extra help or turning things in late and that’s just like not acceptable in the military. You don’t ask for help usually. You’re supposed to be put together.”

Laura recalled that “in the military, there’s no censorship.” Nema continued, “In college, it’s more gentle. In the military, it’s gruff and to the point. No filters.” Nema mentioned that “interaction and communication are two differences” between the military culture and campus culture that she has experienced.

**Chapter Summary**

When exploring the final research question, *How have lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus?* participants reflected on their gender expression in the military and *Family Encourages Development of Inner Strength,* and *Wearing Camouflage* emerged as two prominent categories. Two categories also evolved when the women discussed their gender expression on campus, *A Balancing Act,* and *About Face! In College Now.* Participants’ gender expression in the military had an impact of shaping their expression of gender on campus. These categories are consistent with the conceptual framework of this study and exemplify social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and identity control theory (Burke, 1991).

Several themes arose under these main categories. Subjects outlined the important role of their families as motivation to enlist into the military. Opportunities for growth and change resulting from their military experiences gave participants strength to pursue their future aspirations and goals. Once enlisted, the women described pressures to
behave differently while in the military. Within the category of *wearing camouflage*, participants shared the burden of choosing a role and a desire to establish a sense of worthiness. Generally, they described two main roles, sexualized and victimized, which align with the current literature on Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender.” The theme, *a delicate flower*, illustrated how the process of gender differentiation collides with the male-dominated military culture.

Participants shared the need to strike a balance between various tasks, roles and identities as they navigate their expression of gender on campus. The requirement to enroll full-time at the university to receive full benefit added a layer of pressure to balance, work, school, and family commitments. Examining various expressions of gender roles the women reflected upon, five themes emerged: a) Mother, b) Big Sister and Cheerleader, c) Disciplined Leader, d) “Be a Woman,” and e) Authoring My Identity. Half of the respondents primarily described motherly or nurturing as a main factor in their gender expression on campus.

The final category, *About face! In college now* informs the third research question of this study underscoring the importance of social context on gender identity expression. Participants articulated cultural differences between the military and campus environments on levels of respect, leadership, type of communication, and trust between other students.

The final chapter addresses the key findings, conclusions and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY, KEY FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY, CONCLUSION, AND REFLECTIONS ON MY JOURNEY

Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the study, and discuss key findings associated with each of the three research questions. Recommendations for future study, concluding thoughts, and a reflection on my personal journey of scholarship throughout the process of this phenomenological study complete the chapter and the project.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how gender identity of female military veterans influences their respective college experiences. Twelve female veteran students were selected for this study, four from each of the participating institutions. The women represented the following military branches: Air Force, Army, Marines and Navy. Participant ages ranged from 23 years to 41 years old; ten of the participants were Caucasian and the remaining two were from minority groups (Latino and African American).

Three institutions of higher education were selected from the public and private sectors for this study. These schools are located in the Southwest and classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2015) as a two-year Associate’s community college; a public four-year Doctoral university; and a private for-profit, religious, four-year Doctoral university.

This study utilizes a qualitative research design under the interpretative system of inquiry. Qualitative research is best suited for inquiry where the factors are less well known (Creswell, 2015) and the interpretative framework “assumes the social world is
constantly being constructed through group interactions,” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p. 5). Therefore, the participants engaged in various meaning-making activities to guide the understanding of their personal experiences within the social situation.

Phenomenology positions the study through an interpretation of meaning associated with the particular phenomenon and also bestows “a rigorous description of human life as it is lived, and reflected upon, in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 5). Finally, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for this study, as it provided no restrictions as to how female veteran students may share their stories of gender identity experiences on campus.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for gathering data. Rich contextualized data surfaces in the phenomenological study through the structured and semi-structured interview processes (Patton, 2015). Guided by the interview protocol, these interviews allowed the researcher to explore and seeking greater understanding about the central phenomenon of female veteran students’ gender identity experiences on the college campus. Most interviews took place in the selected institution’s veteran’s center and lasted approximately sixty minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and “are not only important to data collection, they are the way that interviews produce real-time data. They are also useful for valid and rigorous data analysis.” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 159).

A dynamic dance between data collection and data analysis is an inherent process of qualitative research. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) suggest, “There is an iterative qualitative “inductive” methods practice between data collection and data analysis…as one collects data, one also interprets it and formulates a range of ideas to test” (p. 35).
The collected data was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) five step data analysis approach: epoché, horizontalization, clustering for meaning, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Each phase of the data analysis process was a scaffold to the next layer of meaning and essence of the central phenomenon (Patton, 2015). During epoché, preconceived judgments about the phenomenon and any assumptions brought into the study are reviewed and reflected on; horizontalization is the process by which statements in the interview are collected to identify a range of experiences and gives way to the following step, clustering for meaning where significant statements are be grouped into theme categories; the fourth step, imaginative variation allowed participant experiences of the phenomenon to be analyzed furthering a deeper sense of meaning; and finally, synthesis of meanings and essences, in which thematic categories and their meanings were woven creating a composite of the textual and structural descriptions, the essence of the phenomenon of inquiry.

The goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalizable statements but to “develop descriptive, context-relevant statements that can be applicable or transferred to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). To enhance the validity and credibility of this study, Creswell (2007) suggests portraying authentic and accurate participant data is critical. Triangulation, a verifying procedure used in this study, relies on multiple sources of data to illuminate the lived experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A second validation strategy employed was participant validity, or member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) report that member checks are one of the best ways to establish credibility; all participants were sent their transcripts asking to confirm the “adequate representations of their own
realities” capture through the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

Additional measures strengthening the credibility of this study include peer review, debriefing, and monitoring of research bias. This study adhered to the American Psychological Association (2017) guidelines for conducting ethical research ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were not involved in the study without giving informed consent and permission to interview and audio-record the sessions.

Three research questions guided this phenomenological study: (1) How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context? (2) How does female veteran student’s perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting? and (3) How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus? In the remainder of this chapter, key findings and conclusions are presented and recommendations for future research are proposed. Personal reflections about the research journey are shared in this culminating milestone.

**Key Findings**

Findings are organized in alignment with the study’s three research questions. The first research question was *How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context?*

**Understanding of Gender Identity within the Academic Context**

Before participants discussed perceptions of their gender identity within the academic context, they were first asked about transitional experiences from the military to a college campus. Participants credit the veteran centers with helping them navigate
the transition and change of lifestyle. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) mention that institutions are offering “proactive services and transitional supports so that the responsibility for successful transition need not fall to the returning individual alone.” (p. 29). Findings from participant experiences confirm the work of institutions to assist veterans with their transitional needs. An interesting research discovery about the centers is how they serve a purpose for female veterans beyond administrative processing of benefits, by providing a support system.

Generally, participants reported more positive transitional experiences than negative ones. However, transition still remains to be a turbulent period of time for a majority of veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009). Mujica (2014), who interviewed three female veterans, also affirms these students tend to have few problems easing into college since they overcame challenging environments in the past.

Female veteran students with positive transition experiences optimistically described their pride and gratitude for the ability to attend college. They have a desire and drive to succeed and also feel a sense of pride that their college decisions may deliver greater achievements. “Living up to high values and working hard towards a common goal served to be the fulfillment of their hope to “be all you can be.”” (Burkhart & Hogan (2015, p. 117). Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) mention, “…typical situations that are stressful or difficult for traditional college women likely will not affect women veterans in the same manner.” (p. 37).

Another significant finding within the transitional stories of the female veteran student participants was the unsettling nature of not fitting in with other students on campus, leading to a feeling of isolation. “Because their experiences are so different from
those of their classmates...female veterans often complain of isolation in college.” (Mujica, 2014, para. 2). Despite not feeling like they fit in or belong, there is still a strong drive to succeed and overwhelming sense of pride for being a university student. Generally, the combination of gender and age are the factors contributing to a difficult campus integration. Participants reported being overlooked at table events sponsored by the veteran’s center and “ignored like we didn’t belong there...” Sander (2012) suggests that women veterans blend into the population more easily and thus are likely to go unnoticed. Physical characteristics attributed to military members such as boots, a particular haircut, or posture, are less identifiable to female veterans compared to male veterans.

This sense of invisibility or isolation influenced how participants assign meaning to their gender identity on campus. Self-identifying as a veteran on campus is a choice for participants; however, one of the women describe being misunderstood or even targeted after they disclosed their past profession. The women voiced an overwhelming sense of pride for serving in the military, as more than just a role, but an assumed identity. This reidentification process is mentioned throughout literature on female veteran gender identity and transition (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Demers, 2013; De Sawal, 2013). Study participants actively reconstruct their perspectives of self by weaving their gender identity experiences and the interpretation of those experiences to form meaning-making structures that influence how they develop self-authorship during college (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). However, an important question emerging from the research is that if only some female veteran students are self-identifying as a veteran on campus, how can institutions provide important support
services to those in the shadows? Sander (2012) states that some institutions are experimenting with improved targeted support services as a way to attract more female veterans. For example, having a female therapist on staff who specializes with female veteran issues, or hiring more female veteran student workers to assist in the veteran’s center may attract more female veterans to campus and motivate them to self-disclose their veteran status.

Additionally, participants elaborated on the challenges of balancing the role of being a mother, a student and a veteran. Social structures within an institution, as well as social relationships between the female veteran participants, means the veteran student may occupy two or sometimes more conflicting identities during their transition into the collegiate setting (Livingston & Bauman, 2013). The female veteran participants see the roles of being a mother, a student and a veteran as often colliding with each other. Burkhardt and Hogan (2015) reported similar findings suggesting participants are living two lives and have “adapted by maintaining this separation living as a veteran in civilian world.” (p. 119). Findings from this study confirm their theory that female veterans may not mention past military experiences to others for fear of judgment, and may go into seclusion to cope on their own.

**Perceptions of Gender Identity Roles Shaping Interactions with others in a Collegial Setting**

The second research question investigates how does female veteran student’s perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting. Participants responded to the question regarding how they thought others perceive them
Female veteran students endure unique stigmas attached to military service. One participant shared a story regarding an event the Women’s Veteran’s Club hosted at her institution, intended to bring awareness about the various stigmas female veteran students face. They labeled rocks with stigmas and filled rucksacks to weigh “about 30 pounds.” Macy described, “female veterans carry the burden of stigmas that outweigh a rucksack. We had over 4 rucksacks filled with rocks of stigmas…that’s about 120 pounds of stuff women have to get through just to feel equal.” This story epitomized how participants felt others perceive them and how this assessment shapes interactions with others. Participants reported how others think “female veterans are supposed to be masculine and want to be men” and made assumptions about their character such as being aggressive or “I’m probably a “b” word.” The student body could benefit from engagement activities to develop openness and shared learning experiences so female veterans can feel more included and connected to others (Buckhart & Hogan, 2015; Osborne, 2014).

Making others aware of the unique challenges and stereotypes female veterans face is inherently important for student service administrators to provide appropriate services and to support their academic goals. As a result of these stigmas, the study confirms female veterans have a difficult time interacting with other students, more specifically with other female students. Addressing gender bias and stereotypes holistically on campus can benefit many subpopulations of students and foster more prosocial interaction opportunities.
Baxter Magolda (2001) and Kegan (1994) writes that, to effectively function as an adult it is essential that one is able to give meaning to his/her feelings, thinking and social connections. Throughout the study the female veterans grappled with finding the words that give meaning to their feelings, and social connection post the military. However, before the interviews came to an end, most appeared to feel more confident in their roles on campus as they realized the limitations of stereotypes and how their sense of self resists the integration of multiple identity dimensions (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). Those with a complex meaning-making filter, a foundational meaning-making capacity, show a significant ability to reconcile the relationship between context and perception of identity. These individuals consistently present themselves independent of context (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2001), possibly an outcome related to institutional initiatives tailored to female veteran students.

**How Military Experiences Influence Gender Expression on Campus**

As participants described experiences in the military from the perspective of being female, they described the desire to not solely identify as female, but develop a new sense of self. Participants were challenged with the task of blending into the military culture and being forced to choose how to define themselves. West and Zimmerman (1987) posit that gender is developed and then reinforced through practicing associated behaviors. Reinforced behaviors then become the guide by which a person ascribes meaning to being male or female. As these behaviors are practiced through multiple social contexts, participants then develop their identity standard (Carter, 2014). Thus, a male-dominated environment guides female veteran’s identity standards. According to Trish, “… In the military, it’s completely designed from a man’s point of view.
Everything is from the way you talk, the way you walk, what you wear – it is all designed to be like a man.” Female veterans are pressured to decide how they will express themselves in the military. The participants may have appeared assimilated to a male dominant culture while in the service, however their stories informed me that their assimilation was to conform to expectations of the external world (Baxter Magolda, 1995, 2007, 2008). Internally, they were building and assessing the knowledge they were acquiring to form their personal beliefs. This formation of their values and belief systems is closely associated to how they develop their identities (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007). Kegan (1994) would refer to these female veterans as being self-authored because of their ability to reflect on their experiences and internally choose lasting values (Baxter Magolda, 2009; King, 2010).

In terms of women in the military, there were stories of participants being the target of sexual advances and/or being sexual assaulted. According to Burke (1991), the evaluation of self in relation to these stressors can lead to changes in identity. Knowing that female veteran students are in transition, not just from the military to civilian life, but also in transition from one identity standard to another, Valerie shared:

I guess some of my behaviors in the military can’t translate into the civilian world … I have to learn to be more, I think more feminine…. I know it sounds weird, but it’s identifying yourself I think now. Though I’m a veteran, now I need to be a woman again.

Veteran affairs staff and faculty must be more cognizant of the complexities of transition and its effect on a female veteran’s identity within the college setting. In some cases, female veteran students may have identity confusion due to their lived experiences, and
are working to author yet a new identity within the college environment (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

The subjects express their gender on campus in a multitude of roles. For many, it is a balancing act of competing roles with equal importance. Female veteran students are also mothers, cheerleaders, disciplined leaders, big sisters and women. Sometimes managing daily tasks reflects the balancing act and demonstrates a commonality for female veteran students to occupy two or more conflicting roles. The way participants manage these roles, or make meaning of these identities, becomes important to understanding their gender experiences (Livingston & Bauman, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). It is advantageous for campuses to offer workshops or activities which promote flexibility, leadership and offer day care options so that female veterans do not feel as if they need to choose between their competing roles. As the women have previously worked hard to dispel myths about their weaknesses and “to pretend to be stronger than” they might be, providing campus engagement activities that do not force them to select from various roles and instead embraces their multiple roles and complex identities would serve to enhance their learning opportunities on campus.

Notions of gender roles and behaviors are constructed through an array of social networks and contexts which change as a person experiences the world (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Understanding how female veteran students interpret the different cultures of the military and university setting is key to understanding how their identity roles may develop. Participants overwhelmingly described vast differences between the military and college cultures. They attribute a level of respect, professionalism and communication to military structures while finding it difficult to navigate the campus
culture, reporting censorship, an immaturity and inconsistency. However, it appears at
time the participants’ lived experience in the military contradicts their lived experience as
a student. For example, one of the women’s view of respect is incongruent between her
past and present roles; she shared how they are taught in the military to respect everyone
even the “cook…. you don’t treat people like garbage.” She went on to say,
“unfortunately, here on campus, not everyone believes that.” However, if females are
viewed as sexual objects in the military and are sexually harassed or even assaulted, how
can that be viewed as respect? Perhaps the participants view sexual assault or sexual
harassment as some typical behaviors in the military; therefore, these kinds of behaviors
are forgotten or suppressed through the transitional process into the civilian role. Segal
and Lane (2016) report:

Although these inappropriate behaviors (some of which are criminal) are common
in civilian society, the nature of the military culture creates additional problems
for victims of military sexual assault or harassment compared to civilian victims
of sexual assault or harassment because of the hierarchical structure of the
military, the emphasis on loyalty, group cohesion, and team work… (p. 18)

Female veteran students’ sense of loyalty and pride regarding their military service may
be a barrier to addressing some of their traumatic lived experiences in the military- which
may inadvertently affect their academic success.

Being a victim of interpersonal violence such as military sexual trauma (MST) or
sexual harassment may be different from other traumatic experiences due to “individual
factors such as helplessness, controllability, expectation, and threat to one’s life” (Linley
such traumas in the military may use meaning-making as method for coping with such
traumas (Larner & Blow, 2011). The cognitive reappraisal process allows study
participants to reconcile their assigned meanings to a given experience, facilitated by
social support, encourages them to better understand how such traumas have influenced
their identity to improve their coping strategies through the meaning-making process
(Baxter Magolda, 1995; Larner & Blow, 2011).

**Participant Recommendations for Programming Improvements**

Participants had ideas for programs that would assist with their transition into the
college setting. These recommendations may enhance veteran-friendly institution
engagement activities and impact retention efforts. The women suggested workshops
with female business leaders providing opportunity to interact with female leaders in the
civilian world. Furthermore, participants specifically defined differences between a
veteran’s center and a veteran’s lounge, believing a lounge would provide a distraction-
free space on campus to study, relax or meet with other veterans in a social atmosphere.
Veteran centers were seen as more of an administrative function than socially supportive.
A study conducted by Osborne (2014) identified that “the lounge provides a place for
veterans to study, watch television, socialize, and access veteran-specific information” (p.
258). Lastly, due to credit hour requirements for GI Bill benefits, participants recommend
all veterans are afforded pre-enrollment registration opportunities before the rest of the
student population is eligible to enroll for classes so they can secure the required number
of classes to maintain financial benefits for schooling and living expenses. Hale and
Bray (2011) found that “students who registered early…had significantly higher semester
grades and course completion rates when compared to students who registered late” (p.
Pre-enrollment registration offers opportunities for female veterans to obtain the necessary classes for benefit eligibility, and likely influencing their success and completion rates.

**Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Study**

This phenomenological study presents fresh insights into the experiences and perceptions of twelve female veteran students’ and their gender identity in the collegiate setting. This study also sought to add to the existing body of knowledge on female veteran students by exploring transitional factors related to gender identity experiences on campus. Much of the prior research on female veterans focuses on the debilitating and negative impact military service has on their well-being (Segal & Lane, 2016), whereas this study has highlighted some of the positive strategies and experiences female veterans use to create meaning in their lives and to understand their gender identity from their military experiences. The results have direct implications for those who work with female veteran students within the college setting. Specifically, veteran affairs staff, student affairs professions and faculty can develop a better understanding of the female veteran students on campus pursuing their academic goals. At the very core of this study are snapshots of participants’ perspectives and experiences which inform the most fundamental questions of “Who are female veteran students” and “How is their gender identity shaped by their interpersonal experiences?” As more female veterans return to school, understanding this subpopulation will go a long way in retaining and enhancing their success. Baxter Magolda’s (2001) work affirms the complexity of identity development through a matured belief system guiding genuine relationships with others in social contexts. During the course of this investigation, it became evident there is much
more to learn about the motivations, perceptions, and experiences of female veteran students.

The following recommendation for future study will aid in this understanding:

1. *Explore the impact parenting has on female veteran students’ transitional processes and what institutions can do, if anything, to meet the needs of this unique subpopulation.*

   Seven participants reported being a parent. Furthermore, the theme of assuming a motherly role surfaced throughout participant’s reported experiences in relation to how they perceive themselves. It would be helpful to learn if the role of parenting impacts transition and shapes gender identity differently for the mothers, when compared to those female veteran students who are not a parent.

2. *Explore how minority female veteran students experience their gender identity within the college context.*

   One participant in the study mentioned how she “stuck out even more” because she was a female and African American. Exploring how gender identity is shaped within ethnic and cultural contexts, compounded with veteran status, may bring awareness to this complex subpopulation and provide insights on how best to support minority female veterans.

3. *Research male college students’ perceptions of female veteran student to understand how social context shapes gender identity stereotypes.*

   This study explored female veteran students’ perceptions of their gender identity but one participant suggested research may examine, “a male’s perspective of what they think of females in the military. I bet a lot of them don’t care, but women hear them joke,
so they think they care.” This context could inform the role of stereotypes as well as how female veterans align their concept of “doing gender” based on the accuracy of male student perceptions.

4. *Investigate the role of transitional factors influencing gender identity of female veteran students who are within a year of graduation.*

This study did not specifically consider where participants were in their academic journey. A future study may investigate how gender identity evolves as a female veteran acclimates to the role of a student within their repertoire of identities.

5. *Examine the influence of knowledgeable faculty members about veteran related issues on female veteran student’s perceived levels of support.*

Participants characterized faculty who were knowledgeable about veteran’s issues as more supportive and understanding. Future studies may explore the specific knowledge that makes faculty more understanding about veteran’s issues. Interviewing faculty members about their perceived level of support for female veteran students would be interesting to investigate, drawing comparisons between faculty and student perceptions.

6. *Interview veteran center directors and coordinators to gain insight into their observations of female veteran students’ needs compared to the needs of male veteran students.*

Participants described significant reliance on veteran centers to help with transition, social and academic needs. Therefore, veteran center administrators are key to assisting female veteran students. A future study could explore what insight veteran
center directors and coordinators could offer about their views on female veteran students’ needs and how they may align or diverge with male veteran students’ needs.

My Journey as a Researcher

As an educator and proponent for life-long learning, I have always found myself engaged with my students, learning about who they are in and outside of the classroom. This study provided the opportunity to explore my passion for students more profoundly by uncovering some of the deepest, sacred experiences of my participants. I have a strong admiration for all 12 women and the struggles they overcame to forge forward and assume multiple equally challenging roles: as a mother, as a veteran, as a student and as a woman. Their dedication to serve as role models for their children and persevere despite feeling disconnected and invisible to many on campus gives testament to the unwavering commitment they achieve more for themselves and others.

It was a great privilege and honor to hear the women’s lived experiences. Their trust and willingness to share how their experiences shaped who they are and how they see themselves reminds me of the influential role I have as a researcher and as a faculty member. There is a power in listening to female veteran students’ stories, learning about their evolution as a woman, and understanding who and what impacts their gender identity development. This served as a reminder of the important role education has as a platform for sharing knowledge and insight. We truly can shape the future for our students, and do so in an ethically responsible way with clear intention to be student-centered.

One of the participants was a victim of sexual assault in the military. Of all the interviews, this was the most emotionally difficult one for me. I wanted to feel sympathy
for her, but realized she was simply depicting the complexities of female veteran’s service, congruent with the review of the literature. She exhibited strength of character through her lived military experiences. Institutions should foster a culture which is supportive, but also appreciative for individuals who suffer such traumas in the military.

As I reflect on my research journey, I appreciate the challenges and opportunities that strengthened my character and self-awareness. Research is a process; just as I sought to uncover and explore the female veteran’s participants’ persona, I too uncovered important elements about myself, as a committed educator and a voice for students. The women’s stories empowered me. Through the interview process, I often found myself sitting on the edge of my seat, intently listening their stories, feeling them unfold right before me. As a result of this journey, I will never forget, in the words of Nadine,

“You can be feminine and still be powerful.”
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM
Dear Prospective Participant:  

I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Organizational Change (HEOC) program at Benedictine University and my name is Lorelei A. Carvajal. I am inviting you to participate in my doctoral study, *A Phenomenological Investigation of Female Veterans' Understanding of their Gender Identity in the Collegiate Environment*. The purpose of this study is to explore how gender identity of female military veterans is influenced by their respective college experiences at three different institutions in the Southwest. I seek to address the following research questions: 1) How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context? 2) How does female veteran student’s perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting? 3) How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female veteran students’ expression of gender on campus? 

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time with no penalty to you. The study does not have any known or potential risks. You are invited to participate in an individual interview, which will last approximately one hour, at a location of your choice. You will be asked to respond to a series of questions about your experiences as a female veteran student on your college campus. These questions will include topics of military experience, transition into college, and experiences of gender on a college campus. Follow-up interviews may be requested for clarification of data collected. The interview will be audio recorded (pending your consent) and transcribed. The transcription of the interview will be presented to you for verification of accuracy.

For confidentiality purposes, the interview transcripts and all files pertaining to your participation in this study will be stored in a locked cabinet for 10 years and destroyed afterwards if no longer needed. All computer files will be kept on a secure server. I will also maintain a copy of the data on a password-protected computer. Only the principal researcher (me) will know your actual name. The researcher will give a secured code for the interview and assign a pseudonym to your name to keep all the information fully confidential. Excerpts from the interview may be included in the final dissertation report or other later publications. However, under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics appear in these writings. If, at a subsequent date, biographical data were relevant to a publication, the researcher would send a separate release form to you.
This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Ed.D. degree in HEOC at the graduate school of Benedictine University in Lisle, IL. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University. The Chair of the IRB, Dr. Alandra Devall, can be reached at IRB@ben.edu or at (630) 829-6295.

If you have questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at psychprofcarvajal@gmail.com or 630-917-5022. You can also contact my dissertation director, Dr. Sharon Wilson-Taylor, at swilson-taylor@colum.edu or swilson-taylor@ben.edu; or (312) 369-7221

Please acknowledge by signing below that you have read and consented to participate in this study, and you understand your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. You will be tendered a copy of your signed consent form.

Thank you in advance for your interest and participation in this study.

I consent to participate in this study

Name: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

______________________________ ________________________________
[Signature]

I give my permission to audio tape this interview

Name: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

______________________________ ________________________________
[Signature]
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Introduction and Demographic Initial Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself such as your age, what branch of the armed services you served in and where.
2. What is your current major and how long have you been a student at (name of school)?
3. What made you decide to enroll at (name of school)?
4. What are your plans after completing your degree at (name of school)?

Research Question 1: How do female veteran students understand their own gender identity within the academic context?

Transitional Experiences

1. After exiting the military, what made you decide to pursue a college education?
2. What does it mean to you to be a student on a college campus?
3. What are your experiences transitioning into the college setting after the military?
4. What kind of support have you received from your college during your transition onto campus?
5. In what ways do you think your gender influenced your transition to college life?

Gender Identity on Campus

1. Do you identify yourself on campus as a female veteran student?
   a. If yes, tell me why?
   b. If no, are there any barriers prevent you from doing so?
   c. How important is it for you to identify as a female veteran on campus?
2. Have you encountered a time in which you thought it was difficult to be a female veteran on campus?
3. What experiences, if any, as a female veteran make it easier or more difficult to be a student?

Research Question 2: How does female veteran student’s perception of their gender roles shape their interactions with others in a collegial setting?

Perceptions of Female Veteran Students

1. How do you think others who know you are a female veteran perceive you on campus?
2. What does it mean to you to be a female veteran on a college/university campus?
3. What are your most rewarding or significant moment as a female veteran student?
4. What are some characteristics of a supportive faculty or staff members?
5. What do you think a ‘veteran-friendly’ institution means?
6. How would you improve the experiences you have currently had on campus as a female veteran student?
7. What are your biggest challenges as a female veteran student?
8. How do you describe your own gender role on campus?

Research Question 3: How have the lived military experiences influenced, if at all, female students’ expression of gender on campus?

Lived Experiences from the Military
1. Tell me about your path into the military?
   a. What or who motivated you to join the military
   b. What were you hoping to get out of the experience with the military?
2. Looking back at your time in the military, being female, how would you describe your experiences?
3. Did you feel any pressure to act differently because you were a female in the military? If so, please describe an example.
4. How has your experience in the military shaped your experiences on campus now?
5. How do you compare the ‘culture’ of the military to the ‘culture’ of your campus?

Concluding Remarks
1. Is there anything I have not asked you related to your gender experiences on campus or as a female veteran, you would like to share with me?
2. Do you have any questions for me regarding this interview or the study?
APPENDIX C

RESEARCH SYNOPSIS
APPENDIX C

Research Synopsis

A Phenomenological Investigation of Female Veterans’ Understanding of their Gender Identity in the Collegiate Environment

A study by Lorelei A. Carvajal, doctoral candidate, Benedictine University

Who I am:
My name is Lorelei A. Carvajal, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Organizational Change Program at Benedictine University, Lisle, Illinois. I am also a faculty at a southwest community college where I teach psychology. You may contact me at 630-917-5022 or at my email address: psychprofcarvajal@gmail.com.

What I am doing and why:
As part of my dissertation research, I plan to explore female veteran students’ gender identity experiences on the college campus at three institutions of higher education. The study seeks to understand female veteran students’ lived experiences from the military and how those may shape their experiences on campus. I will conduct interviews with female veteran students who self-identify as female veterans from any branch of the military and who are currently enrolled at the institution. Data from this research will be gathered through the analysis of interview transcripts.

What I will do with the results:
All data gathered from this study will be kept confidential and secure. Participants’ names and institutions will not be disclosed to anyone; only the researcher will know the identity of participants and institutions. The information gathered will be analyzed and reported as part of my research findings. A summary of the findings from the study will be available upon request.

How the institutions and participants will be selected:
Three Southwest institutions of higher education are included in this study. The institutions are classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2015 as a two-year Associate’s community college, the other a public four-year Doctoral university, and the third a private for-profit four-year Doctoral university. The institutions selected are from the public and private sectors. The twelve participants in this study will be female veteran students who have served in any branch of the military and whom have an interest in talking about their gender identity experiences on their respective college campuses. Four female veteran students will be selected for interviews at each of the three institutions.

Possible risk to participants:
A possible risk to participants may arise in the form of breach of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality is not violated. All data collected will
be stored in a secure location, and names of participants and institutions will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. After the study is completed, all collected data will be securely stored for ten years the destroyed.

**Possible benefit to participants:**
There is a significant amount of literature on female veteran’s transition into college life. However, less literature exists on female veteran’s gender identity experiences in the college setting. Therefore, I will share my findings with participants as well as veteran’s affairs officers on college campuses as well as student affairs professionals in the hope they will benefit from learning about the unique experiences of female veteran students.

**What I am requesting from participants:**
I am requesting one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each selected participant at her institution. Each interview will last approximately one hour. The interview protocol questions will guide the interview as well as topics arising from participant during the interview process
Permission will be sought from each participant to audio-record the interview for transcription at a later date. All transcriptions will be kept secure and confidential. When findings from the study are reported, anonymity of all participants will be protected using pseudonyms.
APPENDIX D

DATA ANALYSIS RUBRIC
APPENDIX D

Data Analysis Rubric