

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE VETERANS WHO UTILIZED RELIGIOSITY  
AND SPIRITUALITY DURING REINTEGRATION TO CIVILIAN SOCIETY

by Tara Robinson

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe the lived experience of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality as a coping strategy to deal with challenges faced while reintegrating back to civilian life. Currently most research that looks at the reintegration process of veterans focus on male veterans and are quantitative in nature. This study sought to take a closer look at female veterans and their reintegration experiences, and how their use of religiosity or spirituality impacted challenges faced. The research question to frame this study was: What is the impact of religiosity/spirituality on the civilian reintegration of female veterans. The theories guiding this study were Schlossberg (1981) model of human transition, and religion and spirituality as viewed by humanistic psychology and as a protective factor. Data was collected from twelve female veterans using semi-structure interviews. Data analysis for this study utilized Moustakas' four step process for data analysis. From the data analysis five themes emerged: being a female in the military is different, leaving one culture moving into another, adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges, building resiliency through faith, and faith is key. Each of these themes were directly connected and answered the central research question for this study. The research findings support the usefulness of religiosity and spirituality in helping female veterans cope with reintegration challenges, while also helping them gain a greater capacity to cope with life stressors.

*Keywords:* Female veterans, reintegration, veteran, religiosity, spirituality, transition

## **Dedication**

I would like to first give honor to God for his hand upon this work. Without the perseverance that only came through faith, this work would still be a group of words in a document sitting on my laptop. This work, and all my work that comes after this is dedicated to you. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, John and Leila Steadman. Thank you for being there throughout my life and showing me an example of what it means to work hard and persevere. I love and cherish you more than you can know.

My 20-year military career has served as one of the culminating points of my adult life. I have met so many military service members and veterans that I still to this day call my sisters and brothers. It would only be fitting for me to conduct research with the military population, because God has allowed it to have a major influence on my life, as well as the life of my family. I have known veterans, who were dear friends of mine, who succumbed to the darkness that awaits once military service members leave the military. I dedicate this work to the men and women who have served faithfully in the military, and I pray that this work, and the continuation of work like this can help to find a source of light in the midst of the darkness.

Lastly, and of course not least, this dissertation is dedicated to my husband Rodney and my children, Alyssa, Alexis, and Eric. I am forever grateful to you Rodney for your love, support, and encouragement through this process. When I came to the end of myself, you were always there to encourage me and tell me to just keep going. For that I am grateful and wouldn't be here without your support, and the cheers from you and the girls. Also, to my children, Eric, Alyssa, and Alexis, may seeing the work and dedication of completing this dissertation strengthen you in your pursuit of education, and never falling short of being all God created you to be. I am so thankful for each of you!

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Additionally, thank you Dr. Shelton for your encouragement and understanding the need for a study such as this. Thank you for taking your time to be a part of this work, and for your input. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Juanita White, my editor. You were there for me at the very end of this journey. When I felt as if I was exhausted and could not go on, you were there to help me polish up my work. Not only this work but the work that God has called me to.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Chief Warrant Officer (CWO)

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Religiosity/Spirituality (R/S)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality (R/S) when reintegrating into civilian life. I define reintegration as the transition period from military to civilian life because the servicemember is re-entering society. This reintegration process brings about challenges to many veterans due to the influence of their overall military experience on their life, and the rigors associated with returning to society (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018). While in the military, the servicemember gains a new identity and collective way of thinking, and this is a process that begins in boot camp and lasts through their time in the military.

Active duty military members have a different experience than national guard military members because the active duty service member is on duty, or at work, and a part of the culture for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When faced with challenges upon leaving the military, female veterans will need programs, and support systems in place to help them assimilate into a society whose mindset is fundamentally individualistic (Demers, 2013). The goal of this study is to use the theory of human transition, and the humanistic approach to understanding how R/S can bring meaning to the female veteran, as well as help with challenges faced during their transition. This chapter addresses the background, situation to self, problem, and purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and chapter summary.

## **Background**

All active duty servicemembers experience the process of reintegration into the civilian community. Transition is a significant part of the development of humans and can come with challenges to personal growth and transformation (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Often viewed as a time of opportunity for female veterans, the experience can become destructive if not understood. The transition to civilian life is a process occurring anywhere from weeks to years depending on the individual (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). Female veterans serve in different roles throughout the military, but in the last decades, females have found themselves in roles once dominated by male servicemembers (Demers, 2013). Beginning in 2001, the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) servicemembers found themselves in a military requiring a lot out of them in the form of increased deployments, and operational tempos. Additionally, these deployments, ranging in different lengths, can leave the military service members in a place where they must rely on their brothers and sisters in arms for much of their day to day lives to often include lifesaving challenges (Westphal & Convoy, 2015). This type of cohesiveness creates a bond and support often viewed as closer than the one established in a traditional family unit.

As a result of the hardships and stressors associated with the deployment tempo and training, as well as the cohesiveness created, the service member can leave the military with a loss of identity (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017). In the military there is a notion of “I am my brother’s keeper” and there is a sense of protection and belonging the servicemembers feel (Westphal & Convoy, 2015). Upon leaving the military service, the veteran leaves behind a family unit and a sense of comradeship. When female veterans leave the

military, some find challenges of reintegrating exasperated by a loss of self-identity, family, and marital issues, along with employment issues (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017).

Upon joining the military, the service member's first experience is boot camp, which can last anywhere from 2 - 3 months dependent on the branch of service. While attending boot camp they develop a collective mindset and way of viewing life, as they learn the military way of life during a period of isolation from civilian society (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). Along with a group of other enlisted individuals, their indoctrination period marks the start of feeling a sense of cohesiveness and collectivism, which becomes a hallmark of their entire military career. The disadvantage of reintegration is the servicemember returns to civilian society without the same type of indoctrination (Westphal & Convoy, 2015). Additionally, the member leaves a prestigious institution with a collective mindset to readjust to an individualistic society. Female veterans also face additional challenges based on their gender and identity. The military is a gendered institution that views males as the dominant gender (Demers, 2013). When a female completes boot camp, the challenge is to give up her female identity to make sure she can compete with her male counterparts especially when it comes to things such as promotion and jobs (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017). While reintegrating into society, females struggle to re-identify themselves consistent with the way the civilian society views them.

From a theoretical standpoint, the outcomes of the study can assist in increasing the understanding of how R/S contributes to building resilience, and the role it plays as a protective factor when female veterans face difficulties related to reintegration. Both spirituality and religiosity play a major role in the way people cope with life challenges and build resilience (Lee & Zhang, 2018; Mui & Kang, 2006). In the military, the service members meet their need for belonging through organizational cohesiveness and comradeship. Consequently, when a veteran



leaves the military and isolates or does not feel as if they fit into society, the deprivation of belonging can bring about feelings of sadness, isolation, depression, and without resolution, suicide (Ahern et al., 2015; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Blevins et al., 2011). When family members lack understanding or the veteran feels misunderstood, the social exclusion exasperates feelings of alienation. The humanistic psychology approach places value on the mind, body, and spirit of a person, and views life from a holistic approach. In this study, I look at spirituality/religion and how placing value on the spiritual side of a person can help with reintegration. Also, I attempt to unveil whether holding on to something greater than oneself can help female veterans become more resilient as they encounter barriers to successful reintegration.

When programs and services are not readily available to help these female veterans when they transition, the result could be social isolation resulting from the dearth of services available to assist them, causing them to develop strategies to fit back into society without assistance or support (Demers, 2013; Stone et al., 2018). Female veterans' negative experience affects their family members as well. Veterans noted feeling a greater degree of comfort when they speak with other veterans. They expressed how peer support enhanced feeling as if someone heard them because they experienced similar circumstances (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). The outcomes from the study could prove beneficial for therapists, community agencies, and pastoral counselors who find themselves working with female veterans reintegrating into society.

### **Situation to Self**

I have a passion and love first for female veterans, and secondly, based on understanding the role it played in my life, my love for spirituality. I am a retired United States Marine who served 20 years in active duty and recognize the challenges associated with reintegrating into the civilian sector. As a professional counselor and pastoral care leader in my church, I also

appreciate the role R/S played in the life of those I assisted. While in the Marine Corps, I served many billets and one of them was a drill instructor. The experience helped me gain a greater understanding of what it takes to bring a civilian into the military and strip them of their individualistic thinking. You also help them understand what it means to work together as a cohesive unit, so I can therefore personally attest to the importance of R/S to the recruits as they were going through the military indoctrination process. Their religious and spiritual beliefs helped them cope with the hardships of recruit training. Female service members have always been important to me, and as I moved up in leadership, I felt it was important to take care of the younger female Marines coming into my units. Females in the Marine Corps bond because we understand how we had to try harder to fit into the male fighting force. I formulated the epistemological assumption I carried into this study based on acknowledging there is a lack of understanding regarding the role R/S can play in helping female veterans cope with the challenges of reintegrating (Golden & Wendel, 2020). Also, existing programs and services may not sufficiently integrate the specific issues female veterans present.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is the transition experience and challenges faced by female veterans during reintegration require full understanding or acknowledgment as a perpetuating contributing factor for veterans experiencing diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Demers, 2013; Koenig, 2018; Strong et al., 2018). Female veterans experience stressors through their military service based on coping with gender differences, including having to set aside their role as caretaker and leave their family members behind during deployments (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018). These stressors can be a hindrance to successful reintegration into civilian life (Yan et al., 2013).

The timeframe for veterans to reintegrate into society differs for each person and can last from weeks to years (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). As the veteran leaves military service and reintegrates into the community they work towards severing ties with friends and other service members who they trust in a healthy way (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Researchers noted the positive effects of spirituality/religiosity on coping and resiliency. However, encouraging outcomes lack salient focus on female veterans thereby leaving them unable to justify their use in treating this population. The minimal available research involving female veterans, primarily concentrate on mental health issues, military sexual trauma, and academics (Yan, 2013). I sought to conduct a study to fill gaps in the literature on the reintegration experiences of female veterans who utilized R/S during their transition as a way to deal with challenges and foster resilience.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality to help with challenges upon reintegration. For purposes of this study, I accepted the definition of a process in which female veterans adjust and adapt to civilian life in the context of family, vocation, and interpersonal relationships (Yan et. al, 2012). I employed the theory of human transition and the humanistic psychology view of spirituality to undergird the study. When female veterans leave the military, they struggle to reintegrate into a culture and society different than the one they left. Reintegration requires veterans to establish a new way of living including finding employment and establishing new social networks. I viewed reintegration, as a drastic change from a well-defined military structure, to a less defined social structure.

One of my intended goals in conducting this research was to extend prior research on the topic of religiosity/spiritual integration in the treatment of female veterans confronting

challenges upon returning to civilian lifestyles. Lee and Zhang (2018) found both religion and spirituality helped promote coping and resilience. The researchers also purported to identify if a need exists for an integrated approach to treating female veterans by utilizing spirituality/religion to address problems they encounter when coping with reintegration. The intent was to improve support services, and programs available for female veterans.

### **Significance of the Study**

Koenig (2018) reported on the increasing prevalence of suicide in the veteran community, underscoring the importance of understanding contributing factors (Koenig, 2018). There exists a need for clinical care and prevention models for veterans to help decrease the number of suicides (Koenig, 2018; Kopacz, 2016). The overarching mark for this study was whether there are sufficient programs available, which utilize R/S to help prepare service members directly after they transition from the military. Additionally, because female veterans receive minimal attention in prior literature, investigating their perspectives ensures the inclusion of the differences in gendered experiences in scholarly literature. The provision of qualitative information assists in informing helpers in the female veteran populations of overlooked or under-addressed service needs. The development of appropriate programs can mitigate the challenges they face creating the ability for them to benefit from a smoother transition process.

### **Research Question**

*RQ1: What is the impact of religiosity/spirituality on female veterans who are reintegrating into civilian society?*

## Definitions

1. *Reintegration*- A process in which veterans reenter, readjust, and adapt to civilian life after leaving the military culture (Yan et al., 2012).
2. *Transition*- Any event or non-event that resulted in changed relationships routines, roles, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 1981, p.27).
3. *Female Veteran*-A female who served time in the Armed Forces on an active duty status for a period of more than 180 days and did not receive a dishonorable discharge (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016).
4. *Religiosity*-Utilizing religious practices such as prayer, meditating, fasting, organized religion as a means to help construct the meaning of life. It includes both intrinsic and extrinsic religious activities and marked by the belief in a higher power (Soltani et al., 2014).
5. *Spirituality*- “An individual’s understanding, experience with, and connection to which transcends the self” (Drescher et al., 2004, p. 74).

## Summary

Entering military service in the United States in the past decades represents a voluntary act of service for both men and women who choose to enlist. The nature of the military service is different than the civilian workforce as servicemembers will eventually need to leave the military and return to civilian life. This reintegration process is one that does not come without challenges based on adapting to military culture. Female veterans face different adversities than their male counterparts (Strong, Crowe, & Lawson, 2018)

In conducting this qualitative study, I examine the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religion as a coping mechanism as they reintegrated into civilian society. Researchers supported the need to explore veterans’ experiences to develop improved

interventions to assist them during the transitioning process. However, gaps continue to exist in the literature describing the needs and challenges of female veterans. In addition to contributing to filling the gap in salient research targeting the unique needs of female veterans returning to civilian life, I intended to provide an analysis to assist informing helping professionals, with useful data to support developing appropriate interventions and programs for the target population.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The primary objective of selecting a qualitative phenomenological design was to describe the participants' lived experience of utilizing R/S as a protective factor when reintegrating into civilian life. Different from previous studies of veteran reintegration, I focused exclusively on the lived experiences of female veterans. The transition can create difficulties, whether a person is transitioning from high school to adulthood, or other examples such as changing jobs or relocating (Castro & Durson, 2019). This is particularly true for military members who are transitioning from military service to civilian life. For many of these individuals, this transition goes smoothly, but a portion of this population encounters challenges causing them to seek help, or in the worst-case, look to suicide to escape the pain emerging from feelings of isolation, or being a burden to their family, friends, and society (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017).

Female and male veterans tend to experience military life differently, and understanding those differences is important to treating the unique need of female veterans as they transition into civilian life (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017, Yan et al., 2013). Currently, there is an extensive amount of literature discussing veterans and the effects of combat on their mental health (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017, Yan et al., 2013). However, I was unable to locate literature describing the experiences of female veterans who are reintegrating into civilian life using their religious or spiritual belief as a protective factor. Understanding this is an important and escalating issue. The dearth of information highlights the need for further research to address the role of spirituality in helping female veterans' transition into civilian life after their time

serving in the military. This chapter includes a synthesis of current literature, along with the theoretical framework, related literature, concluding with a chapter summary.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Researchers view military to civilian transition as a complex process, involving multiple dimensions (Gettings et al., 2019; Koenig et al., 2018; Lim, 2018). When developing a framework for this study, I chose to incorporate theories to support understanding the transition process of female veterans, as well as their experience reintegrating into civilian life. I selected Schlossberg's (1981) model of human transition, along with humanist psychologists who viewed religion and spirituality (R/S) as a protective factor in the transition process from their lens. The framework includes considering protective elements as part of the conceptual perspective.

#### **Transition Model as Framework**

The Schlossberg (1981) human transition model defined transition as “any event or non-event that resulted in changed relationships routines, roles, and assumptions” (p. 27). Within the transition model, four key elements can ultimately affect the quality of the transition: *situation, self, support, and strategies*. Schlossberg (1981) called this a *4s* system, useful in identifying potential resources to help the individual cope with their transition. Furthermore, strengthening these factors assists the person in taking charge and control of the way they manage the stressors associated with the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981).

Ultimately, these four factors influence the ability of the individual to cope during their transition (Scholssberg, 1981). *The situation* describes what is happening or what has happened when the transition took place. The timing of the transition and the control people feel over their transition is central to this component (Evans et al., 1998). Next, *self* (whom) focuses on the person experiencing the transition along with available psychological resources (i.e., outlook,



values, commitment), and personal and demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, stage of life, and state of health). These characteristics affect how the individual views life. Then, *support* (available help) considers how relationships and sources help the person during the transition. Finally, *strategies* (how) refer to those coping responses used to change the situation, control the meaning of the problem, and aid in managing stress (Goodman et al., 2006).

Also included in the human transition model are three phases of adaptation. Schlossberg (1981) described the phases in terms of moving in, moving through, or moving out of the process of transition. In the moving in stage, the person moves from an old situation to a new one. An individual forming new relationships, learning new norms, and understanding rules and regulations of the new environment exemplifies elements of this phase. Next, the moving through phase describes the survival mode the individual adapts during the process of adjusting and managing daily events in the new environment while working to maintain commitments. In this phase hope and spirituality become important. Finally, the moving out phase represents the end of one cycle of transition where the individual is getting rid of old ways, disengaging from old roles and assumptions, and begins anticipating future life events (Goodman et al., 2006).

When using the human transition model with female veterans utilizing R/S to help with their transition, the model provides a tool to help understand how they move from one phase of transition to the next. Two sets of transitions mark the enlisted experience as the indoctrination into the military service stands as the first and exiting the military the next. Each element of the *4s* model provides a framework for gaining a better understanding of how utilizing R/S affects *situation, self, support, and strategies* of female veterans in transition. The use of R/S also provides *support* when using religiosity as a source of social support. Both religiosity and

spirituality help when used as a *strategy* for female veterans to gain a sense of *self* and internal control of the way they view their experiences of the *situation*.

### **Humanistic Psychology Perspective**

Humanistic psychology places value on the individual experience and how they express what occurred. It looks at the whole person and considers spiritual aspiration as an important part of the human psyche (Acevedo, 2018; Soltani et al., 2014). When one can understand their experiences, they can bring about a level of self-awareness allowing them to view situations differently. Altering their thoughts and behaviors contributes to their well-being, self-actualization, and resilience when faced with challenges (Soltani et al., 2014; Van Cappellen et al., 2016).

Focusing on humanistic psychology gives voice to understanding that human nature consists of three segments, working holistically together to balance the human psyche (Drescher et al., 2004). These three components include the mind, body, and spirit. Although the mind, body, and spirit all work in an interconnected way, they are also important in helping an individual gain an overall healthy sense of self (Drescher et al., 2004). The primary focus of this study was the spirit and how it can be seen as a protective factor in helping female veterans cope with challenges while reintegrating into civilian society (Drescher et al., 2004). Although not the main topic, it is important to mention how the mind is also central to how a person thinks and feels. However, focusing on spirituality helps to understand how the mind controlled by the spirit produces peoples' thoughts (Romans 8:6, New International Version).

The definition of spirituality undergirding this study is “an individual’s understanding, experience with, and connection to that which transcends the self” (Drescher et al., 2004, p. 74). Viewing spirituality based on this definition contributes to understanding how an individual’s

existential well-being, includes things such as a sense of personal meaning, beliefs, and worldviews that can be tied to how they view their spirituality (Drescher et al., 2004). When including religiosity, the foci become both the extrinsic as well as the intrinsic way an individual views religiosity as helpful. Looking at religiosity intrinsically, it is viewed as similar to spirituality, meaning the emphasis is more on those internal values and beliefs giving meaning to life and facilitated by a personal relationship with a higher power (Soltani et al., 2014). Whereas viewing religiosity extrinsically specifically concentrates on aspects of the social support it brings to a person's life and contributes to their sense of belonging (Drescher, 2004).

The reintegration of military veterans is a process every military member eventually experiences. Whether the experience is positive or negative will influence the way they bring meaning to life (Demers, 2013). The Schlossberg human transition theory helps in understanding the complexity that goes along with the human capacity to handle and cope with change (Goodman et al., 2006). The overarching idea of incorporating the Schlossberg *4s* model is to show how utilizing R/S could give the female veteran a greater capacity to regulate self and improve their ability to cope with transition stressors.

### **Related Literature**

Throughout this section, I synthesize the existing knowledge and literature of veteran reintegration, as well as R/S and the role it serves as a protective factor when coping with their transition. Considering there is limited research supporting the use of R/S for helping female veterans' transition into civilian life, my review of salient literature provides a synthesis of available relevant research. The literature reviewed for this study helped me gain insight into the lack of research pertaining to the phenomena of this study as well as supporting the need for

additional research to help understand the lived experiences of female veterans during their reintegration process.

### **Female Veterans**

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2016), there were 21.9 million veterans currently living in the United States, and 2 million or 9% were female. Currently, there is literature concerning veterans and post-traumatic disorder (PTSD) (Ellison et al., 2012; Freytes, et al., 2017; Koenig et al., 2018), their combat experiences (Blevins et al., 2011; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011), those transitioning from military to college (Ellison et al., 2012; Hart & Thompson, 2016; Lim et al., 2018) and even challenges associated with reintegration into society (Ahern et al., 2015; Sirati et al., 2013). The challenge with these studies is the researchers focus almost exclusively on male veterans and thus ignore the experiences of female veterans.

Literature emphasizing the experience of female veterans centers around their sexual trauma experience (Cichowski et al., 2017; O'Brien & Sher, 2013; Pavao, 2013) but there still exists a gap in the literature describing the unique problems faced by female veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. From the onset of military service, the needs of female veterans differ from their male counterparts (Berkel et al., 2019; Demers 2013; Strong et al., 2018).

### **Entry into the Military Culture**

In 2018, there were 1.3 million active-duty military members in the United States, and about 215,834 or 16.5% were women (Department of Defense, 2018). When considering this number, one can anticipate how many females will transition from active duty service to veterans in civilian society. Upon entering military service an expectation exists for female veterans to assimilate into a “gendered institution” geared to develop “masculine warriors,” which can lead

to them struggling to find their own identity once they leave the military culture (Demers, 2013, p 505). Culture plays an important role in how a person finds meaning in life and views socially accepted and learned systems of behaviors and expectations among a group of individuals (Bennet, 2015). This is also true of military culture.

The military culture is based on collectivism. With collectivism, the people within the group are willing to set aside their individual needs for the common good of the group (Hofstede, et al., 2011). This collective identity is created through what is known as boot camp or basic training, and the training is a “rigorous socialization process” ultimately fostering a collective identity and producing a strong emotional attachment and loyalty to the group (Castro & Dunston, 2019; Hofstede et al., 2011). The process of becoming a collective group allows military members to operate as one unit during combat operations, leaving their former culture and assimilating into the military culture (Demers, 2013).

When service members enter the military, they come from different cultural backgrounds, but once they enter boot camp, they start the process of assimilation into a new culture marked by different social standards and rules (Lim et al., 2018; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). As with all military basic training, the process starts with a stripping away of the civilian identity and replacing it with the new military identity, allowing the service member to become a part of a new culture (Castro & Dunston, 2019; Stone et al., 2017). For this reason, researchers suggested incorporating military culture and the support provided by the culture into the reintegration to improve the process (Ellison et al., 2012; Duvall & Kaplan, 2014; Foley et al., 2016;).

### ***Serving on Active Duty***

The military became an all-voluntary military in 1973 and since that time a need arose to increase the number of female service members along with establishing a greater sense of gender

equality (DoD, 2007). With these changes also came female servicemembers integration into male-gendered jobs to fill emerging personnel shortages (DoD, 2007). While in the military, rules and regulations guide how servicemembers live, dress, and behave. Uniformity undergirds the structured environment, that values leadership, a requisite trait for promotion to the next rank.

Westpha and Convoy (2015) used the term “military ethos’ to describe being in a structured environment, military service, and the time spent in the military. The term applies to all military personnel and helps to reinforce characteristics including courage, loyalty, excellence, and commitment to the mission as well as establish core values, which guide military service (Westphal & Convoy, 2015). It is this set of military ethos and core values that helps the military member develop a sense of self-identity, which becomes a permanent part of their worldview (Demers, 2013; Stronge, 2015; Westphal & Convoy, 2015). While learning these values, and being committed to serving in a peacetime environment, there also comes times such as deployments and combat situations, which cause service members to act out the values they learned and embedded in their hearts (Weshphal & Convoy, 2015).

Consequently, many active duty service members find their time served in the military marked by multiple deployments to combat zones (Freytes et al., 2017; Foley et al., 2016; Guiterez et al., 2013). Central to the military culture and time served on active duty, the military represents a force in readiness with combat serving as the mission and focus. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) officially began in September 2001, and America continues to actively engage in war in some capacity (U.S. Department of Statement, 2009). The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF]/Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF]) are the result of GWOT. During their time of deployment, the service member separates from their

family and must rely on their teammates for needs including protection from life and death situations (Ahern, 2015; Doherty et al., 2015). Researchers reinforced how the solidarity, comradeship, and collective mindset forms during tumultuous times, makes it difficult when service members leave the military (Freytes et al., 2017; Gettings et al., 2019).

### ***Leaving the Military***

Exiting the military is a unique process. The reason for exit contributes to the way the transition progresses (Goodman et al., 2006). The military is unlike a civilian job because when the service member separates, the transition process begins. Service members leave the military for different reasons, including medical issues, disciplinary separations, end of contract or service obligations, and retirement after 20 or more years of service. Exits are either voluntary or forced. Those who voluntarily exit or forced to separate a primary role, experience the transition process differently (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

### ***Challenges unique to Female Servicemembers***

While transitioning female servicemembers experience the same challenges as their male counterparts, and they also undergo gender-specific problems as well (Demers, 2013; Strong, 2015; Yan, 2016). Some of these issues include lowered support from both peers and leaders, as well as sexual harassment, and military sexual trauma (Carlson, Stromball, & Leitz, 2013; Cichowski et al., 2017; O'Brien & Sher, 2013). These factors exasperate the negative outcomes of combat and military service on the female service member (Demers, 2013; Strong, 2015; Yan, 2016). Female service members face different challenges when compared to their male counterparts. Beginning with the enlistment process, requirements for females may include having higher entrance exam scores, and once they enter relinquishing their female identity to conform to a male-gendered institution (Demers, 2013). Although the experiences of female

service members may differ from their male counterparts, a sense of belonging motivates them to remain committed to the mission, which further complicates their transition to civilian society (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017).

### **Civilian Reintegration (Situation)**

Transitioning from the military to the civilian society sets in motion a change in community status, leaving the structured lifestyle of the military, and the bonds they established with people who shared common beliefs and values. The military culture is distinct from other existing cultures. Researchers determined the transition from the military to civilian society following military service can take several weeks, months, or even years (Gorman et al., 2018; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). While some veterans transition without major adjustment issues, there is still a significant number who struggle with this process (Castro & Dunston, 2019; Coll & Weiss, 2013; Freytes et al., 2017).

### **Challenges of Reintegration**

Current research supports how reintegration into the civilian community is difficult for service members, and many feel they have unmet needs, their family, friends, and the communities they live in do not understand (Ahern et al., 2015; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2015). Veterans feel as if they are “navigating two identities” when trying to integrate and understand the expectations of varying cultures (Demers, 2013; Stone, Crowe, & Lawson, 2018). Subsequently, cognitive dissonance associated with leaving a collective culture and reintegrating into an individualistic culture creates unanticipated challenges (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Likewise, researchers found the transition into civilian life is a turning point in the life of a veteran, which comes with both challenges and opportunities influencing their overall well-being in multiple areas of life (Ahern et al., 2015; D'Aniello et al., 2017; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011;



Strong et al., 2018). While there are many issues veterans face when reintegrating into society, current researchers documented common issues including readjustment, mental health, including suicide, and finding care providers in the community (Carston & Durson, 2019; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Demers, 2013; Matarazzo et al., 2019)

### ***Challenges of fitting in***

Veterans who reintegrate into civilian life reported experiencing what Castro and Durson (2019) described as a reverse “culture shock.” This culture shock begins when a military member joins the armed forces and goes to boot camp. The shock can reoccur during the process of leaving service. Some veterans discussed how the culture shock experience leaves them feeling like a stranger in their native country while others go on to report feeling like they “just don’t fit in” (Castro & Durson, 2019; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Demers, 2013). Considering their experiences, researchers found veterans transitioning back to civilian life feel friends and family members do not understand what it takes to get back to normal, which creates a sense of loss, and lack of support in their efforts to re-integrate and fit in (Ahern et al., 2015; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2015; Duvall & Kaplan, 2014; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Their challenges with reintegration pose problems that highlighted the need for teaching new coping skills for the overall well-being of the veteran, as well as their family (Freytes et al., 2017).

### ***Mental Health Challenges***

Both male and female veterans confront concerns regarding their mental health. Many situations can negatively affect the mental health of the veterans such as stressors related to mental, behavioral, and emotional disorders, as well as abusing substances (Freytes et al., 2017; Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Soltani et al., 2014; Stanton et al., 2017). Based on the tempo of combat operations and deployments experienced by service members returning from combat, researchers

revealed how personal and professional stressors experienced during deployment complicate the transition process. The resulting problems create the need to find care for mental health symptoms (Matarazzo et.al., 2019; Stanton et al., 2017).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and moral injury are among the major mental health issues faced by veterans who served in combat, and particularly among the veterans of the OIF/OEF era (Hinjosa & Hinjosa, 2011; Sirati et al., 2013; Soltani, Karaminia, & Hashemian, 2014). Although veterans with extensive combat experiences suffer from these maladies, other mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety coupled with emotional disorders can negatively affect any veteran during their period of transition (Strong, 2015; Yan, 2013). These mental health challenges not only cause veterans problems when re-integrating, but many find themselves isolating based on denial and many live with undiagnosed and/or untreated symptoms (Hinjosa & Hinjosa, 2011; Matarazzo et al., 2019; Stanton et al., 2017).

Psychological injuries can hinder a veteran from successfully integrating into community and family following military service. As a result of these mental health challenges, the impairment in social functioning caused by the symptoms can lead to problems in other areas of life as well (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Stanton, 2017). Researchers discovered mental health issues and the impairment of social functioning can affect the ability of the veteran to find and keep a job (Ahern, 2015; Coll & Weiss, 2013; Hinjosa & Hinjosa, 2011). When the veteran is not able to keep a job, the frustration further exasperates the difficulties of transitioning and result in experiencing additional harmful outcomes such as homelessness (Pavao et al., 2013; Yan, 2013).

Additionally, when a service member receives a mental health diagnosis, family members, in particular partners of the servicemember, should be included in treatment efforts by

engaging them in the recovery or treatment regimen (D'Aniello et al., 2017; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). With the prevalence of mental health challenges faced by veterans, coupled with coping with the stigma attached to mental illness, seeking help becomes increasingly difficult. They experience multiple barriers when attempting to understand and assess the care needed to relieve or treat symptoms (Matarazzo et.al., 2019; Strong et al., 2017). Researchers concluded when the goal is community reintegration, helping veterans understand their mental illness could facilitate a healthy transition (Ahern, 2015, Matarazzo et al., 2019; Resnick et al., 2012).

**Suicide as a Challenge.** Suicide among veterans and military service members is increasingly gaining national attention. The VA 's mission includes addressing and preventing suicide (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). In 2017, the veteran suicide rate was 1.5 times higher than non-veteran suicide, and there was a 6.1% increase in veteran suicide from 2005 to 2017 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

The suicide rate of military members, as well as the veteran population, elevated when considering multiple deployments and relocations, which puts them at greater risk (Kopaz et al., 2016; Reimann & Mazuchowski, 2018). Social isolation also increased their risk of committing suicide. Veteran rates were higher in those who were divorced, widowed, and lived in rural areas (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). As a result of this, suicide prevention efforts for veterans should take a systematic approach, which involves the community public health system combined with individualized care (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019; Kopacz et al., 2016; Reimann & Mazuchowski, 2018). Understanding the significance of suicide in the military community, when including suicidal ideation, both pose barriers to the successful integration of veterans. Castro and Kintzle (2014), Kopaz (2014), and Kopaz et al. (2016) discussed the need for early intervention to protect veterans from suicide

**Finding Care in the Community.** Veterans reported finding care in the community as a challenge after transition, which could become a barrier to treatment (Matarazzo et al., 2019; Strong et al., 2017). This challenge comes from the veterans feeling as if practitioners do not understand them or their experiences. When looking at this being an issue, understanding the basics of military culture is the first step for practitioners providing care for the military veteran (Forziat et al., 2017). Viewing the military as a culture, helping professionals working with this population must be culturally competent and understand the needs of the veteran community.

Researchers found a need for mental health care professionals to gain a deeper understanding of military structure and culture to be able to provide a safe place for veterans to come for care (Demers, 2013; Matarazzo et al. 2016). Additionally, mental health practitioners with experience and training working with veterans with TBI and co-occurring mental health issues, also need to understand the importance of attending to the needs of veterans who may present with concerns associated with reintegration. This would help facilitate the trust and understanding veterans seek when they struggle to find appropriate care (Ahern et al., 2015; Collinge et al., 2012; Demers, 2013). Although literature exists concerning issues related to caring for the veteran population, the female veteran population continues to receive only minimal attention when it comes to reintegration.

### ***Female Veteran Gender-Specific Challenges***

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2016), females represent only 2 million of the 21.9 million or 9% of the veterans currently living in the United States. Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reported women veterans are the fastest-growing veteran population (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Because some factors affect women veterans and requirement for care differently, there is a need for them to be aware of all

available programs, including their affordability, to help with the “gender-sensitivity” of their care whether mental or physical health ( Strong, 2015; Washington, 2011; Yan, 2013).

Upon a review of the current literature on veteran reintegration, the majority of the studies utilized male samples, with less being focused exclusively on female veteran populations. Typically, reintegration studies that also included women were more quantitative and problem-focused instead of seeking out the lived experience of the veterans from their voices (Coll & Weiss, 2013; Resnik et al., 2012). Also, of the few studies focused primarily on female veteran reintegration, only a few examined the use of R/S as an intervention in the process of transition. Current research on female veterans and the obstacles they confronted during transition included struggles with identity issues upon reintegration, military sexual trauma, and mental health issues (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan 2013).

Overall, there was a common theme in the limited research of female veterans' reintegration discussing their experiences with identity issues. In a qualitative study focusing on the concerns faced by 17 female Iraq war veterans when reintegrating into civilian life, Demers (2013) noted transitioning from military to civilian cultures presented a high level of stress for the participants. Of these challenges, a common theme with the women interviewed was trying to negotiate gender and identity issues, and negative experiences of war, which left them struggling to maintain a healthy state of mind (Demers, 2013).

When exploring overall mental health in academic literature, researchers noted female veterans experienced higher cases of PTSD and depression when compared to male veterans, and also an increased prevalence of some mental disorders than the general population (Mota et al., 2013; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). Depression and military sexual trauma (MST) occurred more frequently in female veterans than males, and higher risk combat deployments showed rates of

new-onset depression to be elevated among females than males (Cichowski et al., 2017; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). The existence of these mental health issues could also lead to problems such as joblessness and homelessness (Yan, 2013).

Female veterans reported more negative reintegration experiences than men thus leaving researchers to believe this could be a result of the multiple life roles of female veterans (Demers 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2012). Understanding the role of service is the primary role of any military member, which is exclusive to female veterans. They also face feelings of guilt associated with their role as mothers. During their time on active duty, many faced multiple deployments, duty assignments that did not allow family members, and long workdays, which caused them to have to leave their children for an extended time. Fulfilling their military responsibilities came with feelings of guilt because of the nature of the female gender role and mothers being the caretaker of the family (Berkel et al., 2019; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). While in the military, female veterans take on an atypical identity, but once they return to civilian society, expected to fulfill traditional female roles (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan, 2013).

Women veterans are not only left to deal with the challenges of returning home from military life to include scars of war and combat, but they also have to find a way to deal with the challenges they faced from their male counterparts and the assimilation process resulting from entrance into this masculine gendered institution (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018). While transitioning, female veterans noted they felt pressured to “fit into society” as well as to overcome the feelings of trying to fit in with the males from their former military service. When combined, these emotions lead the female veteran into a sense of identity crisis, which forces reintegration and a search for their true identity (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2012). Although literature exists concerning the transition process of service members into

civilian society, there remains a considerable gap in understanding not only the challenges they faced but also protective factors, which contribute to successful community reintegration.

### ***Challenges Faced While Reintegrating (Strategies)***

Environmental, external, and personal issues are all factors, which can positively support reintegration for veterans (Ahern, 2015; Castro & Durson, 2019). Once service members returned to civilian life, researchers demonstrated how many of them found connections with other service members about their age and gravitated toward those individuals for friendships and brotherhood (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Veterans also found it helpful to spend time with other veterans, which contributes to family members and friends feeling disconnected from the veteran as well (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). After a careful search of the literature, common themes supporting veteran reintegration were veteran social support, including peer groups, and R/S.

### **Veteran Social Support**

Social support is relevant to a sense of belonging because it includes benefits associated with positive interactions with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During the reintegration process, veterans can find the bonds between other veterans to be helpful as well as provide the support needed during a critical time. Comradeship is a hallmark of military service and feeling connected can help with reintegration (Suzuki & Kawakmi, 2016). Veterans can also find support in peers who transitioned into civilian life successfully and used their experiences to help others navigate their transition. Ahern et al. (2015), Castro and Durson (2019) Gorman et al. (2018), and Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) documented the importance of peer support for transitioning veterans.

### ***Group Support***

Ahern et al. (2015) reported on the importance of understanding community bonding with veterans reintegrating into civilian society. Veterans noted they felt the military took care of their members and this type of care was harder to find in the civilian community. A peer who successfully transitioned into civilian life served helpful as peer support for veterans going through their transition. Peer support appeared to be one of the most common assets for a healthy transition

In a qualitative case study conducted by Gorman et al. (2018), veterans received an opportunity to meet with other veterans in what the authors called a coffee social. This allowed them to further explore how veteran peer groups could provide social support and prevent isolation. Over nine months, the authors went to seven towns and observed a total of 2,236 veteran engagements (Gorman et al., 2018). From the study, the authors noted how common it was for the veterans to engage in conversations about community resources, as well as how to access services. The researchers concluded when veterans gather with their peers, it was beneficial in empowering them to build community relationships, which could in turn help with reintegration and transition into the civilian community (Gorman et al., 2018).

Veteran support groups also prove helpful when working with veterans coping with mental illnesses (Ahern et al., 2015; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Blevins et al., 2011). These types of groups helped the veterans establish a sense of belonging as well as provide positive effect on issues such as PTSD symptoms, relationships, and emotional well-being. (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Blevins, 2011). The commonality and social support received from other veterans also served to hold veterans accountable for their treatment (Ahern et al., 2015).



Blevins et al. (2011) found Life Guard<sup>®</sup>, which is an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) based workshop, to be a valuable part of veteran reintegration programs. With this type of workshop, veterans meet with other veterans in a non-judgmental environment so they can explore some of the feelings of guilt and shame associated with their military experiences. The groups helped attendees dealing with issues such as depression, as well as establishing relationships within the veteran community.

### ***Peer Support for Student Veterans***

While reviewing the literature, which studied veteran reintegration, researchers reported how many veterans leave the military and transition to a college environment (Blackwell-Starns, 2018; Hart & Thompson, 2016). When thrust into this type of environment, veterans can feel alienated due to the age and maturity level of the traditional college student, and when coupled with their military experiences cause them to not fit in (Hart & Thompson, 2016). Researchers emphasized how programs providing opportunities for peer relationships can prove helpful in improving a sense of belonging for veterans (Blackwell & Stanton, 2018; Hart & Thompson, 2016; Soltani et al., 2014).

In an analytical autoethnographic study presented by Blackwell-Starnes (2018), the author explored how a sense of belonging could contribute to student veteran's healthy transition to traditional college life. Utilizing peer groups throughout six semesters, the author found the constant contact the peer groups offered was essential in preventing isolation as well as creating a sense of belonging (Blackwell-Starnes; 2018). These peer groups helped the student veterans' transition into the traditional college setting and facilitated retention.

Further, in a study focused on understanding how peer groups helped veterans entering college, Hart and Thompson (2016) conducted a two-year study to see if either veteran-only,

veteran-focused, or veteran-friendly classes were more useful with helping student veterans' transition into the college environment. The researcher found colleges and universities offering veteran-only and veteran-centered classrooms proved helpful to veterans as they provided a meaningful environment to the veterans because it gave them a chance to share their lived experiences. The supportive environments helped to enhance classroom discussion and overall transition into college (Hart & Thompson, 2016).

**Religiosity as a Support.** The role of faith in the reintegration of military veterans is important to understand. There is a need to discover whether fostering resilient traits results from practicing spiritual fitness. The intercultural difference between military and civilian life is also important when looking to understand the role spirituality plays in the reintegration process (Dohering, 2019; Kopaz, 2016).

Berkel et al. (2019), Koenig et al. (2018) and Kopaz, (2016) found engaging in activities supportive of spiritual needs act as a protective factor for veterans faced with reintegration challenges. Religiosity does have biopsychosocial benefits for reintegrating veterans (Thomas, 2016). Veterans receiving services at VA hospitals reported using spiritual counselors as an alternative form of mental health was very helpful because they asked about their desire to incorporate spiritual practices (Bonner et al., 2013). I will discuss religiosity and the effects it has on the general veteran population in more detail later in this review.

### **Female Veterans and R/S as a Source of Support**

As stated throughout this literature review, female veterans reported their experiences of transition from a different perspective than their male counterparts (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan, 2013). This holds true for R/S as well. In a research study conducted by Berkel et al. (2019), the researchers interviewed 39 national guard female veterans to gain a better

understanding of how their faith played a role in their lives during their deployment, as well as after deployment. National Guard members are different than active-duty members in the way in which they deploy to a combat zone. Instead of being able to go back to a regular base like active duty military members, they reintegrate into society after coming directly from the battlefield. In the study, the women, having an average deployment time of 10 months, noted their faith was a very important aspect of both their identity and experience while deployed as well as when they reintegrated once the assignment concluded (Berkel et al., 2019).

Although most women in the study noted their faith increased and played a positive influence on how they coped with their deployment, some also suggested they experienced a faith crisis due to their active service (Berkel et al., 2019). Looking at this faith crisis during deployment supports the need for encouragement of the use of positive faith-based interventions during reintegration as protective factors in reintegration (Berkel et al. 2019; Doehring, 2019; Koenig, 2019). When spiritual needs resulted from unresolved combat experiences, veterans continue struggling with the issues decades later.

### **Religiosity/Spirituality (Self/Support)**

Religion has shown to be an effective means of providing such things as hope, self-actualization, and emotional serenity for veterans who utilized religion and spirituality to adapt to life stressors (Sirati et al., 2013). Further, researchers observed how increasing existential spiritual well-being caused a decrease in PTSD symptoms among veterans diagnosed with PTSD resulting from war-related trauma (Berkel et al., 2019; Bormann et al., 2012; Tran et al., 2012). Throughout the following portion of the review, I present literature, which presents issues regarding both spirituality and religiosity and how it helps not only veterans but general populations as well.

There are numerous definitions researchers use to define religiosity and spirituality. Koenig (2018) viewed religious behaviors as those activities the individual takes part in to help them engage their religiosity in a meaningful way. Some examples of religious behavior include attending religious services, prayer, those who use spirituality to help cope with stressful situations and life challenges (Tran et al., 2012).

### ***R/S as a Protective Factor***

Holt et al. (2014) purported how some use religion as a protective factor when coping with mental health challenges. When focusing on the importance of R/S in helping one move toward self-actualization or self-transcendence, researchers suggested the goal is to gain meaning in life. This meaning of life also brings about personal satisfaction, well-being, along with spirituality and has a direct positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being, which affects everyday relationships (Lee & Zhang, 2018; Mui & Kang, 2006). Researchers found the motivation to take part in religious activity, as well as a positive view of God, lowers the severity of depressive symptoms (Bawa & Chadha, 2013; Lee & Zhang, 2018; Tran et al., 2012). Considering the above statements, there is potentially a positive relationship between religious activity and protective factors to help female veterans cope.

**Religion and its Role in Helping People Cope.** Lee and Zhang (2018) determined religion as a source of comfort to individuals dealing with stressful times in their lives. The authors highlighted current literature concerning how religion and its effect on the lives of individuals, did not explore spiritual connectedness as a construct. Previous researchers examined religiosity from the framework of how external behaviors, activities, and attendance helped to bring about self-confidence, motivation, and a sense of spiritual connectedness (Lee &

Zhang, 2018; Mui & Kang, 2006). They found it was an important aspect of both psychological development and emotional well-being. (Lee & Zhang, 2018; Mui & Kang, 2006).

Further, in a study focusing on spiritual connectedness as it pertains to church attendance, researchers discussed the feeling of connection was a driving force in helping people build relationships that promote overall mental and emotional security (Mui & Kang, 2006). In the study, the investigators used two data sets to take a closer look at the effect of spiritual connectors on depressive symptomology of Black, White, and older Asian American Christians. Their findings concluded frequent church attendance predicted lower depressive symptoms in older Asian Americans, but not Blacks or Whites. They attributed the differences to small church sizes in the Asian community, as contributing to the social-cultural connectedness experienced by this population (Lee & Zhang, 2018). Although church attendance alone in the older Black Christian Americans did not predict lowered depressive symptoms, spiritual connectedness served as a buffer against the influence and functional limitations of the depressive symptoms because they have a strong connection with a higher power (Lee & Zhang, 2018). With this, the authors concluded the relationship with a higher power served as a coping resource when dealing with depressive symptoms.

Additionally, researchers studied religiosity as helping families who may be experiencing difficulties. Doolittle et al. (2015) noted improved overall life satisfaction when families coping with children who had special needs were involved with religion along with using other coping strategies. Viewing this study from a family systems approach, it is understandable how when one family member is not well, it can affect the overall functioning of the entire family unit as well. Family support contributed to helping veterans reintegrate into society, and when coupled

with the addition of R/S, offer positive effects on the whole family unit (Doolittle et al., 2015; Koenig, 2018; Kopaz, 2016).

Further, religiosity proved beneficial and useful for coping when individuals transition to later life. Religious involvement, as assessed by cognitive and behavioral functions, assisted people when certain life experiences such as health decline, losing a partner, and economic decline (Silverstein & Bengtson, 2018). Religious practices had a positive effect on individuals as it helped them manage life challenges, as they transitioned from one stage of maturation to another (Silverstein & Bengtson, 2018). Understanding separation from military culture using the Schlossberg (1981) theory of human transition and the 4s system, undergirds why conducting this study highlights how religion affects veterans who find themselves struggling through the transition process.

Viewing religious involvement as central to developing healthy self-concept and self-esteem, also has an indirect effect on overall well-being when considering mediators such as spirituality and gratitude (Sharma & Singh, 2019). Positive emotions, such as self-transcendent, play a role in understanding the relationship between spirituality and well-being. Further, self-esteem is an important mediator in determining both quality of life and overall well-being (Kopaz, 2016; Rackin, 2017; Van et al., 2016). Holt et al. (2014) and Rankin (2017) found religious behaviors effective when encouraging the use of healthy behaviors and developing positive self-esteem. They also documented how self-efficacy acts as a mediator between religious involvement and the use of good hygienic practices (Holt et al., 2014; Rankin, 2017).

**Religion as a protective factor for veterans.** Researchers included the use of religion as a protective factor with veterans in a large number of studies. However, as with most research focused on veterans, they primarily include mostly male populations and geared towards R/S role

while in combat, as well as the role it plays in helping alleviate mental health symptoms (Bormann et al, 2012; Koenig et al., 2018; Kopaz, 2014). Minimal researchers investigated the role of R/S on reintegration into civilian life. Additionally, studies focusing on R/S on reintegration including female veterans utilized a quantitative research approach.

One of the themes supported throughout literature concerned R/S and veterans capable of expressing themselves spiritually. They reported experiencing a sense of peace when dealing with difficult challenges (Bormann et al., 2012; Kopaz, 2014). Spiritual well-being is also important when viewing veterans' suicide prevention programs and efforts (Kopacz, 2014). Knowing the effect of spirituality and religiosity on the mental health of veterans is helpful when encouraging veterans to commit to participating in this type of intervention. Throughout literature, spirituality presents as important to personal identity and very useful when providing therapy to veterans (Koenig, 2018, Kopaz, 2013; Kopaz et al., 2016). Additionally, when veterans can express themselves spiritually, they experience a sense of peace, even when enduring unfortunate circumstances (Bormann et al., 2012; Kopacz, 2013).

When considering the harsh realities of war and the additional mental health issues experienced by veterans, several researchers investigated both spirituality and religion as potential protective factors. In a quantitative research study completed by McLaughlin et al. (2010), they noted 76% of those in the military believe religiosity had a positive effect on their health, and the use of religiosity assisted them in coping with health issues. The authors also noted military service members and their families were more likely to use religious faith as a mechanism to deal with the stress and uncertainty surrounding military duty and deployments.

Koenig (2018) and Kopaz et al. (2016) reported a positive relationship between reliance on personal spiritual beliefs and the mental health of veterans. When veterans experienced

challenging situations, they found their level of peace helped give meaning in life with assurance “that things were going to be okay” (Bormann et al., 2012, pg. 498). In a quantitative analytic research study conducted by Kopacz et al. (2016), the authors explored the relationships between public and private use of religious practices among military veterans with a self-reported history of suicidal ideations. The authors suggested practitioners consider the frequency of religious behavior when utilizing it as a protective factor in the case of suicide. How a person uses their religion is also important in determining its effectiveness. Allport and Ross (1967) noted “the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated person lives his religion (p. 442).”

When veterans can express themselves spiritually while at the same time meet with a chaplain, they felt more peace when dealing with difficult situations (Kopacz, 2013). By helping veterans understand their spiritual and religious identity, chaplains along with clinical personnel can help the overall well-being of the servicemember (Kopacz, 2013). Spiritual well-being had a positive relational effect on the life satisfaction of veterans with social support, overall spiritual well-being, and life satisfaction along with improved mental health (Soltani et al., 2014).

Successfully integrating religion and spirituality into therapy with veterans can be challenging because of the nature of the military culture, as well as those who participated in combat or endure the effects of trauma. In a study conducted to help inform individuals working with veterans utilizing spirituality as an intervention, Foley et al. (2016) proposed a parallel process model, which used signs and symbols to help veterans identify with the use of these terms. The signs and symbols reflected terms widely used within the military community. Using these terms in a way veterans easily understood assisted practitioners to better communicate the significant role of spirituality and religion in treatment and at the same time gave the veteran



confidence regarding the practitioners' ability to understand them and their spiritual needs (Albright & Fletcher, 2016; Bawa & Chadha, 2013).

Religious involvement also gained attention in literature examining the mental health of veterans. Researchers documented how religious involvement plays an important role in the way veterans cope with traumatic events, and helped them to relieve negative emotions, considering the potential for their symptoms to worsen and lead to long-term mental health disorders (Koenig et al., 2018; Kopacz, 2014). Tran et al. (2012) determined religiosity had a positive influence on veterans who struggle with PTSD and depressive symptoms.

The inherent structure of religiosity becomes more significant to veterans because they could hold onto it even in times of chaos (Ahern et al., 2015). The lack of structure also resulted in some veterans feeling an absence of purpose. When a veteran becomes a part of the church family and community, it represents a source of structure and support, helping the veteran find a sense of peace in the chaos experienced from reintegration (Koenig, 2014; Tran, 2012).

Researchers found extrinsic-social motivation beneficial in combatting social isolation (Tran, 2012). In a quantitative study conducted by Tran (2012), the author noted veterans who actively participated in religious events had lowered symptoms of both PTSD and depression. When viewing religious involvement as a protective factor, researchers suggested the veteran be actively engaged and motivated while participating in the religious activity to gain the benefits needed to help maintain spiritual health (Koenig, 2014; Tran, 2012). Considering the positive role religious well-being had on veteran suicide rates, researchers discussed the potential benefit to veterans re-integrating into society. Not including R/S as a proactive factor and ignoring the value in helping veterans improve mental, physical, and social health could deprive them of the opportunity to empower themselves (Kopacz, 2014; Tran, 2012).

**When R/S is not helpful.** Throughout the literature, R/S resulted in improved lives of the veteran populations studied. However, the concept of moral injury could pose additional challenges for veterans, and be the gateway to lowered mental health, which can result in problems with reintegration (Doehring, 2019; Koenig, 2019; Yan, 2016). Military moral injury is a lack of trust of beliefs based on the moral challenges faced in combat. Emotional, spiritual, and psychological impairment marks this type of impairment. Guilt is a factor that imposes the greatest amount of distress (Koenig, 2019).

In a quantitative study conducted by Yan (2016), the author found moral injury had a significant impact on the mental health of veterans. Additionally, Yan (2016) noted how veterans who were not able to integrate their military experiences with their moral framework suffered higher symptoms of both PTSD and depression. Helping veterans acknowledge the source of their moral injury, while at the same time assisting them to express their guilt and shame resulting from their injuries, demonstrated useful in improving their overall mental health growth (Doehring, 2019; Koenig, 2019; Yan, 2016).

### **Summary**

While extensive literature exists concerning the experiences of veterans (males) reintegrating into civilian society, there is significantly less research addressing the needs of female veterans and specifically, the gap in the literature as it pertains to the impact of R/S on female veterans. Although there appears to be an increasing interest in the issues experienced by female veterans, little is known about their personal experiences of reintegration into civilian society along with how R/S can help with their transition. The majority of the literature on female veterans included such things as MST, sexual assault, and their use of VA healthcare services (Demers, 2013; Stone et al., 2015). These studies were also mostly quantitative and

more problem-based rather than focusing on the experiences of the female veterans from their perspective.

Understanding how transitions occur in the life of everyday people, not pathologizing the process as specific to female veterans acknowledges some transition successfully after military service (Castro & Dunston, 2019). The focus of this study is on protective factors, which help those who are struggling or the ones who may find themselves stressed during and after reintegration. Although this study exclusively targets female veterans, it will also serve to fill the gap in research by adding R/S as a protective factor in the transitioning veteran population at large. Given the use of R/S as documented in previous studies, results in lessening the effects felt when coping with challenges in life, could also serve as a protective factor to decrease negative emotional and mental health outcomes of transition on those veterans who may be struggling. I addressed these issues while conducting the study.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity or spirituality (R/S) during reintegration into civilian society. One of the goals of this study was to help provide further knowledge and support to improve the services female veterans receive when they transition. Researchers documented the reintegration process from the view of male veterans, but there remains a gap in the research to support female veterans and their transition experiences (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018). This study, with a focus on the lived experiences of female veterans, provides a platform for participating female veterans to make their challenges and coping strategies known, as well as offer them opportunities to express their concerns. I discuss the research design, research question, participants, procedures, data collection, and data analysis used in the study, concluding with a summary of the topics I covered.

### Design

Utilizing a qualitative research method, with a transcendental phenomenological design, in this research study, I intended to help gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the female veteran participants. The philosophical roots of qualitative research lie in the subjective experience of humans rather than objective reality and oriented in constructivism or interpretivism (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, qualitative research methods served to describe the nature and essence of the human experience from the voice of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2014) purported one of the ways qualitative research differs from quantitative research is quantitative research attempts to ask such questions as how much, how many, or how

frequently. The author highlighted how qualitative researchers use inductive approaches to analyze insights that are more difficult to measure using quantitative methods. Considering the majority of current literature discusses veteran reintegration, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding from the voices of female veterans. I chose to utilize a qualitative research method as a quantitative approach would not lend itself to the overall goal of gaining valuable, rich information from observations and interviews with the target population.

### ***Phenomenology***

Within this qualitative study, the transcendental phenomenological research design aligned with the philosophical approach of seeking to understand the human experience purely through the lens of a specific population (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the transcendental phenomenological design entailed analyzing the words and statements provided by participants to unveil patterns and themes based on data analysis (Creswell, 2014). The emerging themes proved useful in answering the overarching research question. Thematic categories helped to characterize and identify patterns of behavior but also assisted with interpreting the individual perceptions of the female veterans studied (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, transcendental phenomenology helped to bring a new dimension to the phenomena under investigation. Based on prior studies, I selected it as it was the most appropriate to help explore, describe, and understand the lived experiences of female veterans faced with integration challenges.

### **Research Question**

The central research question of the study was:

RQ1: What is the impact R/S on civilian reintegration for female veterans?

### **Setting**

The setting for this qualitative study was in the natural environment of the participant. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, and the desire to not expose anyone unnecessarily with travel, I completed the interviews using the Zoom video conference platform. Additionally, I chose this method because it has been a major outlet for such things as telehealth, and is a preferred approach to collecting data for qualitative research studies when considering the potential of becoming infected (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). The media alternative also opens the door to include participants in different locations. The ability to collect data from a broader geographical pool of candidates was helpful when completing the current research as it allowed me to explore the lived experiences of female veterans from different parts of the country. Additionally, the zoom platform increased female interviewee's feelings of comfort as they participated while remaining within the security of their natural surroundings.

### **Participants**

I purposely selected the participants using both snowball and criterion sampling. Criterion sampling entails the participants of the study meeting some predetermined conditions prior to contributing their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The inclusion criteria included discharged female veterans who served her military time as an active duty service member. Those excluded from the study were male or female servicemembers currently serving on active duty and females who served their time in the military on a National Guard or Reserve status.

Qualitative samples are typically smaller and do not target a specific number of participants as the goal is theoretical saturation (Patton, 2002). The sample for this study included 12 female veterans, which I assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my study, I contacted several female veteran

Facebook administrators to gain permission to post a flyer to their page. I also used snowball sampling to identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria.

Once I identified possible participants either through email, or phone call, they received a copy of the informed consent. The form contained the purpose of the study, as well as informing them of their ability to opt-out at any time. All 12 participants agreed to continue, signed the consent form, and sent it back to me via email. Once they signed and returned the document, I contacted them to set up a time to interview them. The participants did not receive compensation for their participation in the study.

### **Procedures**

Once I attained approval through Liberty's IRB, I started recruitment via female veteran Facebook groups, as well as acquaintances who knew females that fit the criteria for the study. After drafting and disseminating a recruitment letter to several veteran Facebook group administrators, I obtained permission to post a flyer on their Facebook page to invite female veterans to participate in the study. I was able to recruit four participants through a veteran Facebook group, and eight of the other participants through snowball sampling.

As I identified potential participants, I screened them to ascertain whether they met the stated criteria. Following their memorializing the informed consent form, we arranged a time and date for their interview. I asked each participant to set aside from 35-60 minutes for the audio recorded, semi-structured interview. The times ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and ten minutes, during which time I obtained the rich data needed for the study. When the collection of data was complete, I started the analysis process, which I discuss later in this chapter.

### **Researcher Role**

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument who collected and interpreted the data. Considering, “the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer,” I took careful steps to ensure the quality and integrity of data collection started with the interview process (Patton, 2002, p.341). When the interviews began, I was intentional about establishing rapport with the interviewee to assure I was obtaining quality information (Creswell, 2014). The participants appeared comfortable during the interviews and freely shared their experiences when responding to each question.

While conducting the study, I was very mindful of my active duty military experience, as well as the struggles I faced when I was reintegrating. Additionally, I remained cognizant of my personal biases towards the effectiveness of religiosity based upon my experience of using religiosity to cope with my personal reintegration process. To ensure I was staying in the present with the participants, and not imposing my own experiences and judgments into the study, I kept a journal for self-reflection and bracketing after each interview. The purpose of this was to express former knowledge, experiences, or preconceived notions that could potentially cause a bias in the outcomes (Creswell, 2014: Patton, 2002). The interview process was easier than I anticipated. From the beginning of the research, I was able to remain unbiased and present with the participants as they shared their stories.

### **Data Collection**

With the qualitative research method, the researcher is the instrument who brings their perspective to the meaning of the data collected (Wertz, 2005). Using semi-structured interviews, I collected the data for analysis. I constructed open-ended interview questions, which allowed me to be fully aware and focused on the participant (Creswell, 2014). I asked the same questions in



the same order for each of the participants but interjected additional questions to clarify information. The research question for this study was: What was the role R/S on female veterans who were reintegrating into civilian society? The goal of this study was to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity as they coped with transitional issues associated with reintegrating into the civilian community. I examined the participants' perception of the role of spirituality during transition and reintegration as a major source of knowledge throughout the study.

### **Interviews**

The semi-structured interview was the primary method of data collection. I utilized open-ended questions to allow the participants to go in-depth with their answers and followed the open-ended questions with additional probes to gather the participants' feelings and opinions about their experiences.

1. Why did you join the military?
2. How long did you serve in the military, what branch of service did you serve in, and what was your job in the military?
3. Talk to me about your experience of being a female in the military.
4. Why did you leave the military?
5. Describe your reintegration experience after leaving the military.
6. Please tell me about your current status such as marital status, children, job.
7. Talk to me about the challenges you face as you transition.
8. Tell me about those things that were helpful for you as you were reintegrating.
9. Discuss the support that you got from others while you were transitioning.

Religiosity/Spirituality

10. Tell me about your faith background growing up and when you entered the military.
11. How did your faith help you cope with the challenges faced during transition?
12. Tell me your feelings about how religious groups or organizations could help female veterans transitioning.
13. Is there anything else you would like to share to help female veterans utilize spirituality during transition?

The primary purpose of the interview questions used was to collect data describing the lived experience of reintegration for female veterans utilizing R/S, as well as take a closer look at faith and whether it can serve as a protective factor. The intent was for the questions to help understand the meaning of the participant's lived experience and how it influenced their overall well-being. I asked questions 1 through 4 to help frame background information about the military experience of the female veteran, as well as gather helpful information to understand the differences between female and male servicemembers. The variations could potentially affect the way the female veterans experienced challenges once they left the military. As noted in the literature review section, female servicemembers experience different challenges than their male counterparts (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018).

I posed questions 5 through 9 because of their direct association with the reintegration experience of the participants. The reason the veterans left the military, and the support and family dynamics after leaving the military could also help understand the unique challenges faced by the participants. Questions 7 through 9 inquired about the challenges the female veterans faced, as well as the support they received when experiencing problems. The importance of the interview questions was amplifying the voice of the participants, helping others understand the challenges and unmet needs of female veterans.

Finally, questions 8 through 13 shed light on the use of faith in the reintegration process. Knowing the faith background held by the participants assists in comprehending R/S as a potential protective factor. The participants expressed the use of faith and how they felt it helped their reintegration experiences, which shed light on how they felt faith could help other female veterans in similar circumstances. I continued to interview participants until I reached saturation when no new data emerged (Creswell, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

I employed an inductive thematic data analysis process, which infuses the actual data to structure the investigation. Once I collected the data through the interview process, I transcribed all twelve audio recordings. To become more familiar with the data and begin highlighting basic observations and patterns, I read over each transcribed interview while listening to the audio recording to ensure I accurately transcribed all the information the participants shared. After I completed the transcription process, I sent each participant a transcribed version of their interview to ensure the information reflected what they wanted to convey. As the participants returned the transcripts, I continued the analysis of the data. Notably, in completing the member checking, participants only requested minor changes to help clarify some grammatical errors.

Next, I reviewed all the data again and revisited the objectives and research questions to identify a preliminary list of themes, categories, and patterns. As prominent themes emerged, I assigned each an initial code. Finally, I developed a framework to capture phases, ideas, and concepts into themes identified as the most common responses. This approach considers the description and meaning of the lived experience of each participant in the broadest context (Wertz, 2005).

## **Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2014) defined validity in qualitative research referred to the credibility of both the data and the interpretation of the data. Notably, the author acknowledged qualitative research can lack reproductivity, generalizability, and comes with some form of research bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data, which contributes to challenges to its credibility. The researcher can, to some degree control credibility, transferability, and dependability. In the following section, I address the strategies I employed to ensure I attended to these important factors throughout this study.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the accuracy of both the data and the researcher (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I chose to use member checking to increase the credibility of the data collected. Member checking involves “verifying data, findings, and interpretations with the participants in the study” (Patton, 2015, p. 523). The process of member checking begins after collecting data to help clarify any of the findings. In this study, the first way I utilized member checking was after I documented the transcripts. As I completed each interview and transcribed the content, I sent the information to each participant to make sure it reflected what they wanted to share. I also prompted them to add anything they felt they wanted considered but I did not cover during the initial interview. Once I analyzed the data and emerging, I sent the themes to the participants to assure the accuracy of my interpretations. Each participant indicated they agreed with my characterization of the information they shared.

The researcher must have credibility to be useful in the field. However, professional integrity and methodological competence are important aspects of credibility, but there were no specific rules about how to conduct a trustworthy analysis (Patton, 2002). As the researcher, I

openly clarified my held biases, which could color the conclusion of the study earlier in this chapter. This process referred to as bracketing (epoche), entails me setting aside my own experiences, biases, and presuppositions to allow viewing the experiences of the participants from a pure perspective (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I also utilized professional integrity, intellectual rigor, and perseverance when conducting the study.

I used bracketing or epoche throughout the study. Transcendental phenomenology entails a core process of epoche. The term epoche is Greek and it means to “refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p.52). With transcendental phenomenology, the researcher sets aside their preconceived ideas (epoche) to see the phenomena through clear lenses not tainted by their views, ideas, or experiences. Constantly assessing the influence of the researcher’s experiences supports ensuring the neutralization of all biases and preconceptions (Lopez & Wills, 2004). By using this approach, researchers mitigate bias.

Finally, to ensure validity, I present rich, thick detailed descriptions of all parts of the study. In doing this, it builds a framework that promotes transferability to other studies. Also, I included a detailed account of the focus of the study, my role as the researcher, the position of the participants, their basis of selection, and how I collected and interpreted the collected data. Along with the analysis of data, I report the additional steps taken to assure accuracy. I listened to the recording three times before transcription, and once I completed the process, I read through the written material four times before data analysis began.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In the conducting of this research, I took several ethical considerations into account. Most importantly, I obtained approval through the Liberty University Instructional Review Board

(IRB) before I initiated the recruitment of participants for the study or collecting data. Each participant of the study received an informed consent form that discussed the data collection process, as well as any potential for harm. Further, I noted no participant would face coercion or force to follow through with an interview. If circumstances arose and they wished to withdraw from the interview process they could do so without penalty.

As no study is complete without risks, I considered steps to avoid breaching confidentiality throughout the study. I took care to ensure I mitigated any risks by protecting the aspects of the research I controlled. The participants received information about confidentiality during the informed consent process, as well as before the interviews began. I used pseudonyms through-out the research process, and at no time was information with the actual name of a participant and pseudonyms kept in the same area.

While analyzing the data and creating codes and themes, I stored documents in a separate password-protected folder on a password-protected computer. I also created a codebook with participant names and assigned pseudonyms but kept these forms in a separate password-protected folder, on a password protected computer as well. Finally, the data and information about this study will be kept for three years after this dissertation is complete, and at that time I will permanently delete all files.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity during reintegration to help provide further knowledge and support to improve services for this vulnerable population. I used open-ended questions during a semi-structured interview to collect data from 12 female veterans. The use of criterion sampling ensured participants met the

qualifications for participating in this study and snowball sampling assists with establishing diversity within the study population. After collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, I anticipate disseminating information to help counselors, social workers, pastoral counselors, and other agencies working to support female veterans dealing with issues associated with transition.

Although there was minimal risk involved in this study, I observed the emotional stability of the participants throughout the interview process. I also checked in with them once the interview concluded to ensure they did not have any unresolved or negative feelings. One of the inclusion criteria for the study was selecting candidates who utilized spirituality/religiosity as a coping skill. With great intentionality, this reinforced their ability to access these skills should they experience disruptive emotions while minimizing any potential risks. The participants noted they felt uplifted because they were able to share and be a part of the study, once I concluded the interview.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

In this chapter, I will discuss the details of the findings resulting from the study regarding the lived experience of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality (R/S) as a protective factor to manage challenges presented during reintegration into civilian life. The previously stated research question is: What is the impact of R/S on civilian reintegration for female veterans? Also, the theories guiding this study were Schlossberg's (1981) model of human transition, and humanistic psychology and its view of R/S as a protective factor.

My goal in conducting the study was to ultimately understand the lived experience of female veterans reintegrating into civilian life, as well as the role that R/S played in their transition. As explained in chapter one, I examined in detail the problems and challenges faced by female veterans reintegrating into civilian society, and the role R/S played in mitigating the effects of those challenges. In chapter one a discussion of the problem, purpose, significance, and rationale for the study was presented, while chapter two looked at and synthesized the current literature, which supports both the theoretical framework as well as the relevance of the study. I explained the procedures, research design, and my analytic process in chapter three.

In this chapter, I present the results of the data analysis in narrative form. From the data gathered, I generated themes by combining phrases, ideas, and concepts central to the research question, describing the lived experience of the participants in their voices. Finally, I conclude with a chapter summary.



## **Participants**

I interviewed twelve participants to conduct this study. The current section discusses the twelve participants (using pseudonyms) whose narratives provide the data for the study and offers a rich description of each of the female veterans. A portrait of each participant includes rank and branch of military service, job while in the military, and reason for joining as well as leaving the military.

I interviewed nine Black, one White, and two Hispanic female participants. The age of the participants at the time of the study varied from 31 to 62 years old, having 3 to 21 years in the military between 1981 to 2015. Nine of the females served in the Marine Corps and three in the Army. Subsequently, the ranks of the female veteran participants totaled 11 enlisted veterans and 1 Chief Warrant Officer. In the military, the enlisted rank structure consists of a hierarchy of ranks ranging from E1-E9, with E-1 being the lowest rank. While the Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) rank ranges from CWO2-CWO5, with CWO2 being the lowest rank. Each of the female veteran participants in the study shared her excitement about contributing their information, believing the study to be essential and could prove helpful for other female veterans.

### ***Sally***

Sally, a 52-year-old African American woman is married with three children. Sally joined the Marine Corps because she wanted to get away from her hometown and obtain money for college. She attained the rank of E-8 and retired from the Marine Corps after serving 22 years and 8 months. Her job while in the military primarily focused on administration tasks and she currently works with the Department of Defense. Sally shared she felt fulfilled during her time in the service, but wished she placed more value on her spirituality earlier in her military career. Additionally, she said as she separated from the military, other service members exiting during

the same time expressed worry about their next steps. Sally admitted as a result of her faith, she knew God would provide all she needed when leaving the service.

### ***Judy***

Judy, is a 45-year-old African American married woman with two children. Judy joined the Marine Corps right after high school because her now-husband wanted to join, and she wanted money for college. She was prior enlisted and later commissioned to Chief Warrant Officer (CWO). Judy admitted she is a hard worker and served 20 years before she decided to retire due to health concerns. She also wanted to support her husband who continued to serve as a Marine when she retired. Although she noted challenges being a female Marine, she became emotional when talking about leaving the military. Judy is currently pursuing higher education and has not held a civilian job since retiring in 2014. She also noted struggling to find significance in her new role as a homemaker and mother, considering the rigor of her military career.

### ***Lisa***

Lisa is a 62-year-old divorced African American woman with no children. Lisa joined the Marine Corps because her husband at the time was a Marine Corps recruiter and he asked her to join so he could make his quota for recruiting women. She attained the rank of E-4 working as an administrative unit diary clerk. Once she joined the Marine Corps, Lisa said she wanted to be the very best at whatever she did while in the military. Lisa ultimately left the military after four years because she said that she did not want to put up with a lot of the things she experienced any longer. After leaving the military she divorced her husband, leaving Lisa to find a career and provide for herself. Lisa went to college, became a cosmetologist, and later owned her own salon

until she retired about five years ago. Currently, Lisa works with veteran service organizations, helping them find resources and available benefits.

### ***Brenda***

Brenda, a 31-year-old Hispanic woman is the single parent of two children. Brenda joined the Marine Corps because she was looking for independence from her family and she liked the opportunities she felt the military offered. She attained the rank of E-5 and worked as a supply warehouse clerk. Brenda admitted to enjoying her time as a Marine and the challenges military service provided for her. She left the military after 10 years because as a single parent, her supervisors blocked assigning her additional jobs, such as a recruiter. Without them, she could not receive a promotion to E-6 and decided to leave the military. Brenda became emotional when discussing her separation because she felt she had more to give, and it had become a part of her life, as well as the life of her children. Brenda is currently going to college and desires to become a social worker so she can help victims of abuse.

### ***Melissa***

Melissa, is a 30-year-old divorced White woman with no children. Melissa joined the military because she wanted to do something that made a difference. She attained the rank of E-4 and her job while in the military was as a calibration technician. Following several hip surgeries, Melissa left the military after four years with an honorable under medical condition characterization of service. Melissa currently works with a calibration company in the administrative office.

### ***Sharon***

Sharon is a divorced 34-year-old Hispanic female with no children. Sharon joined the Army at the age of 24 because her husband wanted to join the Army. She decided to be

supportive of him wanting to join the military, so she went to the recruiting office with him and the recruiter convinced both her and her husband to join. Sharon was able to pass the entrance exam, but her husband failed. His inability to pass the test led to him making poor decisions and depression which eventually resulted in them divorcing before she went into the military. Sharon attained the rank of E-4 and after three years, medically retired.

### ***Shelly***

Shelly is a divorced 56-year-old African American woman with three children. Shelly joined the Army because she had two sons and she wanted to provide housing as well as financial security for them. She obtained the rank of E-5 as an administration specialist. While in the military, she had her third child, and after serving five and a half years she left the military. Shelly noted although changing her career was a hard decision to make, they wanted her to leave all three of her children for a year, so she chose to exit the military. Following her separation, she stayed near a military base and still interacted with the military regularly. Her children are now adults, and Shelly currently works with single women at her church.

### ***Katrina***

Katrina is a married 38-year-old African American woman with two children. Katrina joined the military so she could further her education while she took the time to figure out what she wanted to do in life. She attained the rank of E-5 and describes herself as being motivated to pick up rank and succeed in her career. Katrina served five years and left the military because she found it difficult trying to juggle a career in the military and family life. She also wanted to pursue education on a full-time basis.

***Courtney***

Courtney is a married 37-year-old African American woman with two children born after her time in service. Courtney joined the Marine Corps as a way of leaving her small town, and for the financial benefits, the military provided. She attained the rank of E-5, working as a maintenance administration clerk before leaving the military after 4 years. Courtney admits to learning a lot while in the military and enjoying the sense of comradeship she felt while stationed in Japan, but she decided to leave the military because it was not for her. She currently works on a military base and interacts with military service members on a day to day basis.

***Jackie***

Jackie is a married 37-year-old African American woman with two children, born after her time in the military. Jackie joined the Marine Corps at seventeen because she felt it was the quickest way for her to leave her home and she wanted to travel. She attained the rank of E-6, working as an aviation electronic technician before leaving the military after 13 years. Jackie left the Marine Corps as her husband continued as active duty. She shared not wanting to “spread herself thin” when it came to taking care of her family. Currently, Jackie stays at home and homeschools her two children.

***Cassandra***

Cassandra is a single 34-year-old African American parent of two children, which she had while she served on active duty. Cassandra joined the Marine Corps because she grew up in a military town and became intrigued by her friends who traveled the world because their parents served in the military. The desire to travel, as well as obtain money for college factored into her decision to join the military. She attained the rank of E-5 and worked as a maintenance administration clerk before separating from the military after 10 years. She indicated her inability

to receive a promotion to E-6 caused her to leave. Cassandra is currently going to college with the long-term goal of entering the social worker field.

### ***Miranda***

Miranda is a single 38-year-old African American woman, with no children. Miranda joined the Army out of a desire to serve her country following the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001. She attained the rank of E-6 and worked as an automated logistical specialist until she retired after 13 years in the Army due to medical concerns. Miranda currently advocates for female veterans who experienced military sexual trauma.

## **Results**

The research question for this study was: What is the impact of R/S on civilian reintegration for female veterans? The participants answered each of the interview questions, formed from the overarching research questions. Five major themes emerged, including, (a) being a female in the military is different, (b) leaving one culture moving into another, (c) adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges, (d) building resiliency through faith, and (e) faith is key. Each of these themes directly connected to the research question.

### **Theme Development**

I used an inductive thematic approach to analyze the collected data. As detailed in chapter 3, I recruited the participants through a female veteran's Facebook group and snowball sampling. Once potential participants self-identified meeting the inclusion criteria contacted me, I verified their eligibility and set up a date and time for an interview. Each received informed consent and consent to audiotape before responding to the interview questions.

Once I collected the data, I transcribed all twelve of the audio recordings within two days after conducting the interview. By transcribing the interview within two days, the information

remained fresh on my mind. Additionally, to become more familiar with the data, and to start to look for basic observations and patterns, I read over each transcribed interview, while simultaneously listening to the audio recording again. Reading and listening to the interviews at the same time ensured I accurately transcribed the interviews, and helped with the initial data analysis, finding categories and words for coding purposes. After I completed the process, I sent each participant their interview to ensure my transcription conveyed what they wanted to share. As the participants started to send the transcripts back to me, the analysis of data continued. Notably, the participants only indicated a need to make minor changes to help clarify some of their grammatical errors.

Next, I reviewed all the data again and revisited the objectives and research questions to construct a preliminary list of themes or categories emerging from repeated phrases and sentences. When prominent themes surfaced, I labeled them and assigned an initial code. Finally, I developed a framework inclusive of phases, ideas, and concepts into structured themes that identified the most common responses. In this process, I kept the most relevant and connected categories, identifying them as prominent themes and subthemes I describe below. Using the identified thematic development process, five major and ten minor themes emerged. The most common themes highlighted the way the participants perceived their treatment based on being a female in the military, as well as the importance of their faith.

Table 1

*Themes and Subthemes From All Data Sources*

Theme	Subtheme
Being a Female in the Military is Difficult	Adapting to a Male-Gendered Institution Unequal Treatment by Peers and Supervisors

	Experiencing Sexual Harassment/Sexual Assault
Leaving One Culture Moving Into Another	Leaving the Military Putting Family First Feeling Uncertainty About Next Steps
Adapting to New Challenges	Challenges Associated with Loss of Identity Challenges Associated with Day to Day Living Challenges Finding Care in the Community
Building Resiliency Through Faith	Faith Before the Military The Importance of Faith During Reintegration
Faith is Key	

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***Theme One: Being a female in the military is difficult***

In light of the issues faced at the onset of coming into the military, each of the female participants expressed difficulties in their experiences as females in the military and the challenges they endured to adapt to military life. I describe these hardships further in the subthemes expressed below. Several of the participants described being a female in the military in terms such as challenging, demanding, as well as intimidating (Courtney, Brenda, Jackie). The female veterans in this study noted they dealt with issues such as adapting to a male-gendered institution, unequal treatment from peers and supervisors, feeling like they had to work harder to obtain a promotion, and traumas associated with experiencing sexual harassment/sexual assault.

**Adapting to a male-gendered institution.** The Marine veterans (Sally, Melissa, Brenda, Jackie, Courtney, Cassandra, Judy, Lisa, & Katrina) noted their initial indoctrination into the military was conducted by female drill instructors because the Marine Corps is the only branch of service that still segregates female and male recruits in basic training. Their initial experience



with males occurred as they went to their first military occupation school. It was also noted in different job specialties, males dominated the workforce, leaving the female veteran as one of the few females in her work environment (Courtney, Melissa, Katrina, Judy & Brenda). This brought about feelings of isolation to some of the veterans. Miranda described her experience of being a female in the military as “rough...a struggle initially,” whereas others described it as feeling “awkward” or “different” (Judy, Lisa). Courtney added:

There wasn't a lot of females at all and I was a little overwhelmed at first. Especially going in and women were segregated from males in boot camp and combat training, and then going into the fleet and not seeing a lot of females, and maybe being the only one. So that was a little intimidating, to say the least. I kinda felt intimidated especially when we did our physical fitness tests. You can see the differences and I felt like it was a sense of a lighter Marine Corps. They allowed us in but with limitations. I felt like in a sense, and I don't want to say handicap, but it was almost like we were here, but we couldn't do all they could do.

Some of the female veterans (Brenda, Cassandra & Lisa) shared others warned them about the treatment they would experience in boot camp, and about the culture of the military. They shared their feelings of denial until they got into their job and experienced it themselves. Additionally, because of this treatment, and the absence of other females, the participants felt they had to do more than their male counterparts to adapt to military life. In doing this, it made some of them question their decision to join the military (Brenda, Courtney & Cassandra).

Despite warnings concerning expectations of females entering the military, once they reported to their assigned workplace and attested to the absence of females in the environment,

ten of the twelve participants discussed the struggle of adapting to their male-environment to be successful with their military career. Judy added in her interview:

With my first couple of enlistments in the Marine Corps, I think I may have assimilated, I don't know maybe I just started to look at things a little different and I just made the best of what I was given and learned how to deal with the stuff that I experienced.... I think I turned a blind eye to a lot of stuff and I just did what I needed to do to be successful and I focused on let me get 20 years so I can just move on and that's what I did.

It was this turning and looking the other way that allowed for this assimilation process to take place, but it also left some of the women (Lisa, Courtney) feeling tired of confronting disparaging issues. The outcomes became a catalyst for them leaving the military. Although most of the female veterans discussed a need to adapt and change to fit into the male-gendered institution, the way they processed the experience differed emotionally. When looking at the emotional effect of adapting to the male-gendered institution, Jackie explained:

Me, I am very resilient, so I really didn't have a problem going into a community and molding to the culture that was there, so I did not have any big hurdles or big issues I had to scale in order to be effective (as a female) in the Marine Corps.

Having to navigate in a male-gendered institution presented as a notable challenge for most of the participants. They openly shared their challenges and were vocal about how it affected their quality of life. Most of the participants came into the military after high school, and the problems they faced marked the start of identity issues, which I will discuss below.

**Unequal treatment from peers and supervisors.** Several of the females interviewed in the study noted the unequal treatment they received from both their peers and supervisors. Brenda noted she received different treatment than males who had children when she wanted to

change her job and recruit Marines for an additional job. She further added her supervisor said it would be “harder” for her because she was a single parent, even though she had a family care plan in place for her children. When she questioned her superiors about allowing a male who had children to participate in the same job, she said he “didn’t have an answer for me.”

Miranda discussed she felt she had to “really prove [herself] worthy around [her] male counterparts even when [her peers] questioned [her] ability to lead.” Katrina described her struggles achieving rank before some of her peers in this way:

My experience was initially, you’re part of a team, you are one of us. Then it seems the more rank you put on, the more that becomes an issue. Initially hey we are a team, but when you start putting on the rank it’s like yeah, she got that position this way or that way. It’s always something aside from you being a qualified individual.

As the participants discussed their feelings of not being treated the same as their male counterparts by their superiors as well as their peers, several of the female veterans noted initially they did feel as if they were a part of the team (Cassandra, Miranda, Katrina, Judy & Brenda), but as they started receiving promotions above their peers, they could feel the difference in treatment.

**Experiencing sexual harassment/sexual assault.** Five of the females admitted to being either sexually harassed or assaulted themselves. Sally openly shared her experience:

I was heavy chested, drew a lot of attention from the males, and heard all kinds of smart remarks and jokes or things like that. I remember when I was a Sergeant, I went to swim qual and my superior said Oh Sgt Sally, she has her own flotation devices. That was in front of everybody at the pool and I was like okay yeah, so how do you come back from that... You know and in front of everybody. Of course, later the Gunny apologized to me

one on one and that was kind of the end of it, but it was almost as if I had to draw the line in that manner in order for that language and that behavior not to happen.

The other female veterans discussed situations of sexual harassment and assault including using sexualized language, as well as actual sexual assault. Lisa described her experience of sexual harassment as being “overwhelming.” Of the women who reported being sexually assaulted, three of them became victims’ advocates, and openly help female veterans affected by military sexual trauma during their time in service.

***Theme Two: Leaving one culture moving into another***

Leaving the military is something every active duty service member must do. The reasons include the end of the current service contract, medical retirement, medical discharge, and/or retirement. The female veterans interviewed left the service for different reasons. Two of the females retired after 20 years, seven ended their contracts, one left for a medical reason, and 2 medically retired. One of the common things noted by the participants is they did not know exactly what they were going to do when they left the military.

**Leaving the military putting family first.** For some of the female veterans, leaving the military was for personal reasons such as not wanting to be in the military anymore, or wanting to attend college (Courtney, Lisa). However, for others, leaving the military was for family reasons such as not wanting to deploy again and leave their children, or getting out to support their husband. When Katrina gave her reason for leaving the military she stated, “So, it [being in the military] was a task trying to juggle my career and raising the kids, so I thought about that” (when making her decision). Jackie, who separated due to family reasons added:

I didn't want to spread myself thin with my family, and that's why I decided to transition out... It (leaving the military) was definitely not personal because if it was personal, I would have still been in, but it was definitely a family choice.

Although there were differing circumstances for leaving the military, all of the participants in the study became emotional when talking about ending their military service. Two of the women interviewed described their leaving for family reasons as being a tough decision to make and even wondered what could have happened with their career if they would have continued with their military service.

**Uncertainty About Next Steps.** Leaving the military engendered different feelings for the participants. When faced with leaving the military, many of the respondents related uncertainty about their next steps. All of them noted an interest in continuing their education from the onset but reported not knowing the financial implications of pursuing higher education. When asked to describe her initial feeling upon reintegration, Katrina noted:

I was lost, It wasn't what I expected. Definitely stepping into the civilian world coming out of the military, for one, you have a paycheck on the first and fifteenth, stepping out, there was no paycheck. Transitioning and trying to find a job and relocating all at the same time, it was a logistical nightmare for a family. When you are in the military and you have a question when you're at work, you can go and ask the Sgt, or the SSgt and they will point you in the right direction for resources on base. I felt like I was just flapping in the wind.

Cassandra reported "It was positively overwhelming. When you are a single parent in the military, you have to find and build a support system pretty quickly." The participants who were single parents at the time of leaving the military noted experiencing concerns about finances

more than their married counterparts. Once leaving the military all twelve of the participants eventually pursued higher education and utilized military funding to pay for their education.

***Theme Three: Adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges***

During the interviews, the participants shared that while on active duty, the military provided their daily needs. Once the participants left active duty, they become responsible for acquiring employment, housing, healthcare, and financial care. Consequently, the female veterans in this study noted when they reintegrated, they had to figure things out for themselves. This was something they were not accustomed to and resulted in further complicating the reintegration process.

**Challenges associated with loss of identity.** As stated earlier, the female veterans interviewed discussed having to assimilate into a male-gendered institution. After overcoming the rigorous socialization process into the military, the issues resurface as they re-socialize to civilian society. They described resocialization as contributing to the loss of their identity and struggle to figure out their role in society.

**Loss of Identity.** Many of the participants shared how they felt a loss of identity when leaving the military. They viewed this loss as an identity crisis capturing the loss of sense of self they experienced. When asked about the challenges, the participants described it as “feeling like a stranger in a new land” (Lisa) and needing a mindset adjustment (Courtney). Brenda shared “It’s like I lost myself. Everything. You have to rethink everything. Everything. Now you are starting to deal with things you have never dealt with before.” Jackie went on to reveal:

I think the biggest thing when transitioning from the Marine Corps to the Civilian world is that I worked with a lot of male counterparts in the Marine corps, and in my civilian job now I work with a lot of women. That was very hard for me when I transitioned out.

Getting used to women in the workplace as a majority versus in the Marine Corps how it was men in the workplace in most of the places that I worked.... I was like “this is different, there are more feelings here.

All the women expressed their feelings of ‘being different.’ While in the military, a few of the participants noted the expectation to, ‘just get over things’ and this is how they felt their friends and family expected them to be with their reintegration (Sharon, Miranda). Also, there was this internal struggle noted by the participants when looking at leaving the military they had come to know. Even with the challenges faced with being a female in the military, the participants still identified with the military way of life, and this way of life had come to form their identity. Miranda described that by discussing:

I think I had to take on a different identity. I think sometimes, especially female veterans have a hard time reintegrating back because we don’t know ourselves outside the uniform. We think that the uniform defines us in our entirety, so when we try to reintegrate back into society, we’re thinking they [civilian society] are still supposed to see us in that uniform when we’re not.

**Challenges associated with day to day living.** While being in the military, the female veterans shared how the military fulfilled their day to day needs. Upon reintegrating from the military, the participants faced unanticipated challenges. Jackie shared how everything in the military was a matter of checking the right boxes and knowing which boxes to check to be successful. Outside of the military, she had to find her way. Some of the challenges faced by female veterans included financial issues as well as employment issues.

The participants noted finding employment as a big issue for them. One of the downfalls was some of the participants did not have the education to move into a civilian job even though

they had work experience in the military. Brenda added, “To be thanked for your service, but [to be told at an interview] you are overqualified and underqualified is mindboggling.” The lack of formal education necessary to easily transition into the civilian workforce was one of the reasons some of the veterans pursued returning to school. Additionally, several of the women interviewed left the military and stayed near a military base (Sally, Courtney, Melissa, Pamela). This proved to be helpful as it allowed them to obtain military-affiliated jobs.

Consequently, the result of not being able to find employment caused the women to face unexpected financial challenges, specifically those who were single parents or unmarried. When asked about her biggest challenges reintegrating, Sharon shared, “let’s start with finances, you go from not having any responsibilities because the military pays for everything. But now I have bills that I have to set up.” Shelly, who was a single parent at the time of reintegration, described her financial challenges as being “difficult” because the job she was able to find only paid minimum wage, which was not enough to provide for her family of four. Because of this, she sought government assistance for food and housing. Two of the female veterans shared how they became homeless for a period because of the financial hardships they endured based on their inability to find employment.

**Challenges finding care in the community.** Upon leaving the military, some of the participants received healthcare from Veterans Affairs (VA), in addition to financial compensation. They based the benefits on their disability when leaving the service, however, participants described the problems they experienced when attempting to navigate the VA healthcare system. When prompted to further discuss the obstacles she faced navigating the VA system, Katrina related her biggest challenge was the way the VA handled her medical concerns. While in the military she received information regarding exactly what care she needed. The VA



addressed medical concerns to assure her readiness to perform her duties. However, following her separation, they did not share the details of the care she needed, leaving her feeling uninformed about her healthcare.

Other female veterans also expressed difficulties when trying to access VA healthcare (Lisa, Miranda, Cassandra). When asked about medical care, Sharon noted:

If you back up a few years ago, the VA was not the place that you wanted to be. It has gotten a lot better. VA hospitals would have you waiting in the lobby for two or three hours. It was very much a struggle. You could not afford healthcare, so you had to deal with it.

Other participants reported that it took longer than expected to get into the VA system, as well as locating local VA facilities capable of attending to their unique needs. These challenges to finding care in the VA system was something several of the female veterans discussed as challenging to their mental wellbeing as well.

#### ***Theme Four: Building resiliency through faith***

Of the 12 female veterans interviewed, 11 of them noted they were brought up with a faith background and spent time in church growing up as a child. The reliance on the faith they were taught growing up helped serve as a point of resilience when the participants encountered barriers to successful reintegration. The one participant who said she did not have a strong faith background (Janet) did reference attending Catholic church from time to time as a child. Miranda shared how while growing up she learned to “Lean on your faith.”

**Faith before the military.** When asked about their faith practices growing up, the participants reported attending a Christian school, being a naturally spiritual person, as well as spending a large amount of time in church involved in religious activities. Brenda shared that she

went to Catholic School from K-8<sup>th</sup> grade, but then went to regular public school for high school. As with other participants in the study, family had a great deal to do with the amount of time spent engaged in religious practices, but as the participants grew older, they made the choice to not attend religious services as frequently. Although they did not attend religious services as much, most of the participants expressed their appreciation for their families raising them to understand the importance of faith or spirituality in their lives. It was this faith the participants expressed holding onto while they were in the military.

**The importance of faith during reintegration.** Although most of the females who participated in the study reported some type of R/S background, it was noted by many of the participants that holding on to their faith became extremely important when faced with reintegration challenges. Jackie noted in her response:

My faith did play a part in my reintegration experience. There were so many unknowns. I myself believe that you give it to God, and you let it go and His will be done. For me that means less stress, less anxiety, less feeling burdened with decisions I need to make, less thinking about the future. At the time when I transitioned out, I had no idea. I knew I was going to school, I had two kids, and my husband was still in, but I had no clue what I was going to get myself into. So, for me, I'm at peace with its okay to not know.

Several of the participants went on to remark that without their faith, they did not know how they would have made it. Katrina described how her church community allowed her to be with like-minded individuals, which was important to her reintegration process. While seven of the participants discussed how church gave them the feeling of belonging to a group again, Melissa shared it was the freedom to pray and talk to God in open conversation that helped her. Also, their belief God was present for them was a source of comfort and support during their

transition period. Lisa, as well as several other participants, shared their Christian faith, trusting God is always there, served as a daily connection during times of struggle, easing transition hardships.

***Theme Five: Faith is Key***

The last theme to emerge was faith is key to all parts of reintegration. As the female veterans discussed their experiences and challenges faced while they were reintegrating, all 12 of them underscored the significance faith played in getting through each of their adversities. The reason for leaving the service, marital status after leaving the service, and changes in needed supports differed for them. However, a true belief and faith in a higher power linked each of the interviews together.

When asked the question “What would you recommended for a female veteran who was transitioning,” all the participants reported they would tell the servicemember to keep their faith central to their reintegration. Melissa in her response to the question shared, “Never lose faith. God is always there and will never fail you, even during your darkest times, He is there, and He will be the light.” When asked the same question, Brenda said “Figure out the relationship (with God) now...my faith helped me not unravel and fall apart.”

The participants in the study saw their faith as central to their transition as well as their purpose in life. Miranda shared:

Your faith is not only a part of your purpose, a part of who you are as a person.

Sometimes you lose sight of that because in the military they want you to just see yourself in that uniform, but underneath that uniform is a person. The person and what makes up that person is the faith that you have.

Because of their faith, all the female veterans in the study recognized their reintegration resulted in a successful transition into civilian communities. Although their reintegration was not without challenges, their use of faith in times of pressure was essential to reintegrating. Several of the participants also shared how they felt there needed to be more emphasis placed on the importance of spirituality while in the service, as well as during transition classes before leaving the service.

### **Summary**

The findings gathered from the transcendental qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews proved valuable to gain a better understanding of the lived reintegration experience of each of the 12 female veterans who participated. Distinct themes emerged in their responses to the research question: *What is the impact of R/S on civilian reintegration for female veterans?* The information obtained from the interviews provided enough data to reach saturation and provide adequate details that emerged into the following themes: (a) being a female in the military is difficult, (b) leaving one culture moving into another, (c) adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges, (d) building resiliency through faith, and (e) faith is key. The narratives provided rich detail to authenticate the findings made by the researcher, as well as give insight into the experiences of the female veterans. I will offer a summary and discussion of the findings, as well as discuss the implications of those findings in light of relevant literature and the theories utilized in chapter five. In the final chapter, I will also offer recommendations for future research, based on the outcomes of this study, but responsive to delimitations and limitations of the current study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experience of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality (R/S) when transitioning to civilian life. In the current chapter, I will present a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, and the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Additionally, it will include delimitations and limitations posed by the study, as well as recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter with a summary.

### Summary of Findings

Once I collected the data utilizing semi-structured interviews, I transcribed it verbatim, interpreted, and then coded. I identified and grouped significant categories and statements into themes. From the collected data and responses to questions, five themes emerged, (a) being a female in the military is difficult, (b) leaving one culture moving into another, (c) adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges, (d) building resiliency through faith, and (e) faith is key. Each of these themes directly connected and answered the central research question for this study.

### Research Question Addressed

The research question for this study was: *What is the impact of R/S on civilian reintegration for female veterans?* The detailed experiences expressed by the female veterans addressed the overarching research question. The participants described their faith as being central to their ability to reintegrate into civilian society upon leaving the military. The influence of R/S is currently felt in their lives as the participants also discussed continuing to use their faith daily, even after transition. Additionally, their personal excitement about their experience with

this phenomenon was also noted as all the participants suggested the use of faith for other female veterans reintegrating into society.

As noted in the chapter 4 results section, the female veterans all noted how they felt females had a different experience than their male counterparts while serving in the military. These differences presented themselves in ways such as feeling a need to adapt to a male-gendered institution, receiving unequal treatment from peers and supervisors, feeling isolated because only a few females worked with them, and experiencing sexual harassment while being in the military. Once they realized how much they needed to fight for equal treatment, the women reported doing such things as assimilating into their new environment and overlooking the actions of their male counterparts to focus on themselves and trying to be the best servicemember they could be.

The treatment marked the start of the female veteran losing their identity as being a female and attempting to rebuild their identity based on trying to fit into a male-oriented environment. Some of the women questioned their decision to enlist. While the participants understood the need to fit in to advance in their military career, the assimilation process resulted in them becoming resilient, which would later help them when they left the military. The assimilation process makes the female veteran reintegration process different from their male counterparts because males retain their gendered identity throughout their military career.

Upon leaving the military, the female veterans in the study noted additional challenges unique to their gender. Several of the participants chose to leave the military due to the strain of being a single parent in the military, as well as deciding to support their active duty spouse further his career. This posed the next set of challenges the females would experience. When interviewed, several females reported feeling challenged to live up to the expectations of being a

female in civilian society. They noted such identity issues as not feeling as if their job as a mother was important, as well as not fitting into the traditional female-gendered workplace due to the aggressive nature of their military service. This sparked an identity crisis for the females and also left them feeling like a stranger in their land. Many of the females decided to return to college to try and gain a level of achievement they experienced while in the military. The participants also discussed other challenges such as financial and employment challenges. Single parenting female veterans disclosed not understanding the need to possess specific educational requirements to fill jobs in civilian society.

Although faced with differing reasons for leaving the military, and similar challenges that affected each one of their reintegration, the common denominator for all of these women was their faith and the influence faith had on easing the strain associated with reintegration. When asked about what helped with challenges, they all expressed it was their faith. Despite the fact the women practiced their faith in varying degrees and in separate ways (i.e. prayer, reading the bible, journaling, attending bible study, time alone talking to God), it was their use of faith that helped them to cope and help move them through transition.

### **Discussion**

In this section, I present an explanation of how the current study both confirms and adds to the literature regarding challenges faced by female veterans reintegrating into civilian society. My goal in conducting the study was to build upon the limited research focusing on female veteran reintegration into civilian society, as well as highlight the role of R/S as a protective factor to foster resilience during transition from the military. The findings contribute to the use of R/S as a protective factor, which leads to resiliency.

## **Empirical Literature**

To truly gain an understanding of the difference in the reintegration process of female and male veterans, it was important to understand how the female veterans viewed their experience in the military. Previous researchers discussed how females and males experience military life differently and underscored the importance of considering those differences when developing an understanding of the transition experience for female veterans (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2013). The conclusions of the findings from this study supported this phenomenon.

### ***Being a female in the military is difficult***

Researchers revealed how female servicemembers face challenges such as receiving less support from both peers and leaders, being stripped of their female identity, and having to conform to a male-gendered institution (Demers, 2013; Strong et al., 2017). The findings in this research support the idea that female service members perceive their experiences as different than their male counterparts. The participants reported such things as dealing with unequal treatment from peers and supervisors, feeling as if they had to work harder than their male counterparts to be accepted, and having to adapt to a male-gendered institution to be successful.

Previous researchers documented the expectation for female veterans to assimilate into a “gendered institution” geared to develop “masculine warriors,” which can result in the female struggling to find her own identity once she leaves the military (Demers, 2013, p.505). The current research confirmed prior outcomes. Participants expressed the need to face identity issues during their return to the civilian environment. Their adaptation to a male-gendered institution, created identity issues during the resocialization process. Participants in this study reinforced this



finding as they described reintegrating as leaving them “feeling lost” (Katrina), “overwhelmed” (Cassandra), and “flapping in the wind” (Katrina).

### ***Leaving one culture moving into another***

The transition to civilian culture begins when the service member leaves active duty and changes their status to veteran. Additionally, there are four ways in which a servicemember can leave the military service by ending their service contract, retiring, medical separation, or medical retirement. The participants in the study left the military for at least one of the above reasons. Also, with respect to this transition, Weshphal and Convoy (2015) explained transition as a process during which veterans need to learn a new culture, set of norms, and language. The current study supported this as a culture change, with many of the female veterans admitting to feeling like they were in a foreign land. I will discuss the effect of moving into a new culture in further detail below.

### ***Putting family first***

While researchers supported the difficulty service members face during their reintegration into the civilian community, they acknowledged how females confront additional struggles when making their decision to transition (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Strong et al., 2018). As the findings from this research studied highlighted, some of the female veterans in the study left the military for reasons exclusively tied to their role as the primary caretaker of their family. Judy and Jackie both left the military so their active-duty spouses could further their careers. Several of the other participants left to care for their families, or situations unique to being a single parent in the military (Brenda, Shelly, Cassandra, and Katrina). Although some participants understood making a choice was a struggle, they knew it was the right thing to do. However, they went on to share how the joys and struggles also included feelings of guilt.

Understanding the totality of their emotions, being a wife and mother led to making the choice to put their family first. The need to make the decision was unique to the female veteran.

Researchers associated with males and reintegration found no indication of men leaving the military due to their role of being primary caretaker, furthering the need to understand the unique challenges of female veterans.

### ***Challenges of loss of identity***

Researchers demonstrated how veterans who reintegrate into the civilian society not only struggle to fit in, but also feel unsure about how to navigate the culture of their former or new environments (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Durson 2019; Castro & Kintzle, 2014). The outcomes of the current study also supported these findings. Upon leaving the military, there is an expectation for the female veteran to reintegrate into the civilian world, reclaiming their feminine characteristics. The identity could be that of a wife, mother, or re-establishing a traditional female role. Notably, researchers asserted the leaving behind of one culture while trying to integrate and understand expectations of the new culture potentially leaves veterans feeling as if they are “navigating two identities” (Demers, 2013; Stone et al., 2018). Having to navigate dual identities can contribute to an initial identity crisis upon reintegration.

While working in a male-dominated military, female veterans felt forced to assimilate into a new type of environment. However, they also reported feeling as if they didn't fit in when leaving the military and moving into a female-dominated work environment. Jackie described struggling in her civilian job because she did not know how to acclimate to a female-dominated environment. She recognized how working with predominately males required her to develop a direct approach to getting tasks completed. Unaccustomed to this work style, she struggled with civilian females in her new work environment.

Additionally, female veterans reported feeling unable to relate to other moms when they chose to stay at home (Judy, Katrina). Despite the attempt to identify with the other moms, Judy expressed how she felt her experiences in the military caused her to see her work as a mom as “menial” or “unimportant” in comparison to her military career. As a result of these types of feelings, some of the female veterans chose to pursue a college education in an attempt to find a similar sense of achievement they once felt in the military (Judy, Katrina, Cassandra, Jackie, Brenda).

### ***Adapting to a new culture faced with new challenges***

Previous researchers articulated how veteran’s reintegration process presents opportunities accompanied by both challenges and successes affecting the overall wellbeing in multiple areas of the veteran’s life (Ahern et al., 2015; D’Aniello et al., 2017; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Strong et al., 2018). The participants in this study supported this fact by sharing the difficulties they faced in areas such as their new workplaces, homes, and social situations with other women. Although female and male veterans share some of the same problems, gender-specific issues, such as having to reidentify as a female in civilian society influenced all aspects of the lives of the participants.

### ***Finding Care in the Community***

In the current literature, veterans discussed needing to overcome concerns such as finding care in the community (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro & Dunn, 2014; Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2015). The participants in this study confirmed their feelings of frustration when attempting to find local care in the civilian community, as well as the inability to smoothly navigate the VA system during their transition.

Current researchers explained how difficulties finding care could also become a barrier to treatment (Matarazzo et al., 2019; Strong et al., 2017). The participants described the difficulty of finding local and specialized care facilities. Another difference between VA care and care they received as active duty was the detailed disclosure they received while serving in the military. They did not feel they received the quality of care they needed from the VA.

### ***Building resiliency through faith***

Numerous researchers studied religion as a protective factor with male veteran populations. Investigators explored the role of R/S during combat, as well as helping alleviate mental health symptoms (Bormann et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2018; Kopaz, 2014). Eleven of the twelve females reported having faith from childhood. Because of this, they viewed faith as a protective factor when reintegrating into the civilian community. Participants in the study admitted to using their faith in the military, as well as during their transitioning.

Researchers documented how reliance on personal spiritual beliefs makes positive contributions to the mental health of veterans (Koenig, 2018; Kopaz et al., 2016). Veterans articulated religion was an effective means of providing such things as hope, self-actualization, and emotional serenity when confronting life stressors (Sirati et al., 2013). The current study confirms and adds to this finding because each of the female veterans studied shared her personal experiences of how her faith and use of her faith helped when faced with reintegration challenges. Some of the participants expressed feeling their faith was a source of comfort and hope for them as they struggled with problems. Consequently, holding onto their faith while they experienced difficulties helped foster resilience to make it through each challenge.

### ***Faith is key***

Prior researchers reporting on the use of faith practices documented activities, supported viewing spiritual needs as a protective factor for veterans faced with re-integration challenges (Berkel et al., 2019; Koenig et al., 2018; Kopaz, 2016). The female veterans shared how their felt faith practices were very important in their day to day life. The female veterans involved in this study participated in activities such as prayer, reading the bible, journaling, attending bible study, and spending time alone talking to God. One theme supported throughout literature concerning R/S related to how veterans expressed themselves spiritually, experiencing a sense of peace when dealing with difficult challenges (Bormann et al., 2012; Kopaz, 2014)

As Katrina expressed, her faith helped her cope with every reintegration challenge and it still helps her in her day to day life after transition. Likewise, all the female veterans interviewed within this study shared how their faith was integral to their reintegration and moving forward into transition. Most importantly, the participants all noted the number one thing they would share with a female veteran reintegrating into civilian life was to hold onto her faith.

### **Theoretical Literature**

I used Schlossberg's (1981) human transition model as the primary theoretical framework along with humanistic psychology and how to identify R/S as a protective factor. The study extended what is known about both of these theories because it specifically studied female veterans, an understudied population in research. Throughout the findings, I discovered evidence of the usefulness of both theories in understanding the transition process.

Schlossberg's (1981) human transition model defines transition as "any event or non-event that resulted in changed relationships routines, roles, and assumptions" (p. 27). The participants in this study started the process of transition as they were leaving the military service

and reintegrating into the community. Central to this theory, are four key elements that can ultimately affect the quality of the transition: *situation, self, support, and strategies*. When the elements exist, and available resources strengthened, the individual can take charge of and control how they manage the stressors of the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006, Schlossberg, 1981).

During the reintegration process, female veterans' use of R/S became a support and strategy that helped them recalibrate and focus on their values, outlook, and commitment to the transition process. As a result of their use of R/S, the female veterans gained the capacity to have greater control and greater ability to manage the stressors associated with their reintegration. Next, *self* (whom) focuses on the person experiencing the transition along with available psychological resources such as outlook, values, and commitment. The females in the current study reported a strong commitment to their faith and values, which proved to be a strength during reintegration. Also, understanding the demanding nature of the military, and the difficult experiences of being a female in the military, the participants came into the reintegration with a sense of what it meant to be committed to the process. Finally, faith accompanied by the resilience and commitment fostered through military service served as *strategies* (how) to assist them working through challenges. These coping strategies helped change the situation, control the meaning of the problem, and aid in managing stress (Goodman et al., 2006).

Additionally, Schlossberg's (1981) model of human transition consists of three phases, the moving in, through, and out phases. With the female veterans in this study, their use of R/S became central to them in moving through each of these phases and resulted in their transition. From moving into civilian society, moving through challenges, and moving out and transitioning, the participants in this study remained committed to keeping their faith central to

their process. Even when faced with the decision to leave the military (moving out), the participants' faith played a role in helping with the decision to leave. Holding on to values learned earlier in life gave the participants the capacity to control the challenges and stressors that surfaced while reintegrating.

### **Humanistic Psychology**

Humanistic psychology places value on the individual experience and expression of that experience. Central to this perspective is viewing human existence holistically, with three segments helping to balance the human psyche (Acevdeo, 2018). Additionally, humanistic psychologists include spirituality as a protective factor to help an individual gain an overall sense of self, which leads to self-actualization and resilience when faced with challenges (Solatani et al., 2014; Van Cappellen et al., 2016). The current study supports this theory as evidenced by the female veterans admitting their use of R/S helped them reintegrate once they left the military. Understanding how most of the female veterans learned the importance of R/S as a protective factor during their developmental years. Self-actualization promoted employing resilient skills when faced with challenges associated with reintegration.

### **Implications**

I expanded previous research in conducting this study to investigate the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized their faith as a protective factor when reintegrating into the civilian population. From the study, female veterans reveal how they utilized their religiosity or spirituality as a protective factor, as well as a coping tool. They discussed how it offered comfort and helped them make sense of the distress the participants experienced during their reintegration.

## **Empirical**

Adding to the current literature that supports the use of R/S to help female veterans' transition back to civilian life, my study contributes to the field of behavioral sciences. This includes helping professions such as psychology, sociology, mental health, and pastoral care. The implications of this study and the findings can affect the way service providers in these fields train, prepare, and carry out the interventions they provide to female veteran populations.

Most of the current literature on veterans focuses exclusively on males and their combat experiences (Blevins et al., 2011; Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011), and transitioning from military to college (Ellison et al; 2012; Hart & Thompson, 2016; Lim et al., 2018). Researchers tend to focus exclusively on the experiences of females, particularly their sexual traumatization (Cichowski et al., 2017; O'Brien & Sher, 2013; Pavao, 2013). Although, an important issue, a gap exists in the understanding of the unique challenges female veterans faced as they transitioned from the military. My study contributes to filling the gap. Additionally, female veterans describe their experiences as different from their male counterparts, warranting more research on those differences and methods of mitigation.

## **Practical**

Mental health workers, pastors, and chaplains working with veterans should be aware of the phenomena undertaken in this study, as well as understanding the lasting effects of military culture on female veterans. Based on the current study, participants' use of R/S helped them cope with challenges faced during reintegration. The above-mentioned helping professionals, as well as other service providers, can act as a bridge between female veterans and the resources available for their holistic care. Using the findings from this study, human service providers can



offer practical knowledge and insight into the expressed feelings of female veterans to help practitioners and other professionals make decisions for care based on gender-specific needs.

When faced with challenges upon leaving the military, female veterans require programs, and support systems to help them assimilate into a society whose mindset is fundamentally individualistic in nature (Demers, 2013). The study may also prove helpful for veterans and family members of veterans. Using their faith, the participants in this study demonstrated resilience even when faced with major hardships associated with leaving the military. Because of this, faith as an intervention when working with the veteran population holds implications for counselors, social workers, pastors, and others engaged in a professional relationship supporting the needs of veterans. Also, there is a need to establish and financially support programs to allow for additional interventions to assist veterans in understanding and utilizing faith in their reintegration and transition back to civilian life.

This study could be helpful for pastoral counselors and Christian counselors who may be working with veterans. Some veterans reported not feeling understood by practitioners in a therapeutic relationship (Forziat et al., 2017). Christianity could serve as a starting point for building a therapeutic relationship. When the service members leave the military culture, they will need support systems and programs to help them assimilate into society. Many of the females in the current study expressed how their relationships with their church community served as a source of support when they felt challenged with reintegration.

### **Theoretical**

The findings of the current study can also prove helpful when looking for protective factors that increase resilience when enduring challenging situations. Although the current population for this study was female veterans, some of the challenges they faced while

reintegrating, such as day to day living, maybe the same as an individual without military experience. Holding on to a belief in a higher power who is creator and sustainer for things in life could help a person endure hardships and can bring about a sense of holistic wellness. The outcomes of this study support the humanistic psychology viewpoint.

Prior researchers expressed views of religiosity and spirituality as protective factors, which foster resilience (Lee & Zhang, 2018; Mui & Kang, 2006). Most of the female veterans in this study had some knowledge of faith before coming into the military and understood the importance of relying on their faith when faced with challenges. Implications based on the current study concluded isolating the female veteran population and their use of R/S as a support, contributing to the human transition theory. They also extend the literature on humanistic psychology, which includes spirituality as a protective factor.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

To gain complete knowledge of both the accuracy and dependability of the results of the study requires exposing delimitations and limitations. Additionally, delimitations could also provide information to help direct future research. Primarily demographic information composed delimitations and limitations of this study.

#### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are those purposeful decisions made by the researcher to define or limit the boundaries of the study. Considering this was a study associated with female participants, excluding males did not pose a delimitation. I based the sample for this study on the participant meeting the criteria of being a discharged female veteran, as well as utilizing faith to cope with challenges faced during reintegration. Although I did not place limits on age, ethnicity, or race, I excluded female veterans who served in the National Guard. This posed as a delimitation

because Reserve or National Guard status are also female veterans but not included in an active duty status. As such, they may have different experiences when leaving the military.

### **Limitations**

This study included several limitations, which represent potential weaknesses out of the researcher's control. One limitation of the current study relates to ethnicity. Of the female veterans interviewed, nine identified as African America, two Hispanic, and one European American. This does not give an equal representation of all ethnicities, considering cultural beliefs and practices vary causing different results. To gain a better understanding of the influence of R/S on each group, future researchers could focus on one specific ethnicity.

Also, the sample size of the study could be a limitation as it only included 12 female veterans. A small sample size, reduces the ability to generalize to a larger group, thereby researching a larger group of veterans could prove beneficial. Data saturation hindered the need for more participants because using a qualitative methodology illuminated rich data from the participants interviewed, leading to answering the research question.

Further, eleven of the twelve participants in the study acknowledged growing up in a household where they experienced some type of religiosity. This could pose a limitation because their prior exposure to faith served as a protective factor and helped foster resiliency. Their prior exposure to faith differentiates them from female veterans who learned about faith after reintegration and during the transition process. Also, all twelve of the participants in the study acknowledged their belief in Christ. Utilizing only the Christian religion may not give a representation of other types of religious or spiritual practices and their effectiveness as a protective factor.

### **Recommendations**

I encourage future researchers examine the reintegration experience of female veterans using spirituality to seek to better understand the types of religious or spiritual practices utilized and the effectiveness of those particular religious practices. This could include isolating some of the different religious practices, such as prayer, bible study, and/or attending church to identify if one practice influences reintegration challenges more than others.

Also, as discussed above, all of the female veterans involved in this study professed to be Christians. This warrants further research into other religious beliefs and practices, and their role as a protective factor, which fosters resilience. The protective factor of Christianity with the challenges faced by veterans may differ from other religions or other deities.

Finally, as discussed earlier, of the females who participated in this study, nine served as Marines and three as Army soldiers. Isolating additional research to the lived experiences of one branch of military service could prove helpful to gain an understanding of how each service may differ in their treatment of females, thus possibly changing how the veteran utilized religiosity and spirituality when transitioning, as well as during their time in the military.

### **Summary**

My purpose for conducting this study was to describe the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity or spirituality when reintegrating into civilian life. Theoretically framed by Schlossberg's (1981) human transition model, as well as humanistic psychology and its use of spirituality as a protective factor, aimed to answer the question: *What is the impact of religiosity and spirituality on the civilian reintegration of female veterans?* My investigation found religiosity and spirituality to be of great significance to the reintegration experience of the female veteran participants. Notably, each of the female veterans who participated in this study

acknowledged their use of R/S as the number one factor that helped them successfully reintegrate.

The process of reintegration into civilian society is something all active-duty military service members experience. The need for a study of this type came about because there exists a gap in the current literature concerning female veterans and their reintegration experiences. In conducting the study, I reviewed whether the use of R/S helped the female veterans gain control of, and manage the stressors associated with reintegration into the civilian society. Understanding the way they employed protective factors can also support the use of R/S when dealing with other types of challenges.

The females in the study admitted to having gender-specific challenges and their struggles started during their time in the military. Being a part of a male-gendered culture made the female veterans feel as if they had to change their identity to advance in their career as well as fit in with their male counterparts. Consequently, this adaptation into this new culture caused problems during the resocialization process when returning to civilian life. With the limited amount of research targeting the female veteran population, the differences in their transition experience remain unknown. Increased time and research can inform program developers to pursue interventions addressing their gender-specific needs. The most important take away from this study is female veteran reintegration, requires supports to help them acclimate successfully and go forward to lead productive lives.

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## Appendix A

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 31, 2020

Tara Robinson  
William Bird

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-1 The lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity/spirituality when reintegrating into civilian life

Dear Tara Robinson, William Bird:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:  
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### The Lived Experiences of Female Veterans Who Utilized Religiosity/Spirituality when Reintegrating into Civilian Life

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- Are you a discharged or retired female veteran who served on active duty?
- Did you utilize religion or spirituality to help with challenges during reintegration?

If you answered **yes** to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a female veteran research study.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religion or spirituality to cope with challenges faced when reintegrating back into civilian life. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

Participants will be asked to complete an interview through the Zoom platform and later review their interview transcript for accuracy. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by email or telephone using the email address and phone number provided below.

Tara Robinson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Please contact Tara Robinson at (252) 503-9256 or [tduncan@liberty.edu](mailto:tduncan@liberty.edu) for more information.**

## Appendix C

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** The Lived Experiences of Female Veterans Who Utilized Religiosity and Spirituality During Reintegration to Civilian Society

**Principal Investigator:** Tara Robinson, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a female military veteran who served on active duty and was either discharged or retired from the military. You also must have utilized either religiosity or spirituality during that transition (i.e. belief in a higher power, prayer, meditation, organized religious practices and/or bible study). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of female veterans who utilized religiosity and spirituality to help with their reintegration back to civilian society. The study will add to available interventions to help with veterans transitioning to civilian society.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an audio recorded semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.
2. Participate in a member checking process. Once the data is collected and transcribed, you will be asked to review your responses to questions asked in the interview process to ensure accuracy. The time to complete this process will vary.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, this study can provide a unique opportunity for you to share your input, which could in turn help other female veterans have a smoother reintegration into civilian society.

Benefits to society include an additional intervention to help practitioners who work with veterans who may be experiencing challenges reintegrating back into society. This can also lead to improved services and programs for veterans.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. However, if at any time during the collection of data during this study I become privy to information that triggers the mandatory reporting requirement of things such as child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, this may become a risk

to you as a participant. I am a mandatory reporter and have a duty to report such instances to the authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer in a separate locked file for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting these relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study Tara Robinson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. William Bird, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

#### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

1. Why did you join the military?
2. How long did you serve in the military, what branch of service did you serve in, and what was your job in the military?
3. Talk to me about your experience of being a female in the military.
4. Why did you leave the military?
5. Describe your reintegration experience after leaving the military.
6. Please tell me about your current status such as marital status, children, job.
7. Talk to me about the challenges you face as you transitioned.
8. Tell me about those things that were helpful for you as you were reintegrating.
9. Discuss the support that you got from others while you were transitioning.

### Religiosity/Spirituality

10. Tell me about your faith background growing up and when you entered the military.
11. How did your faith help you cope with the challenges faced during transition?
12. Tell me your feelings about how religious groups or organizations could help female veterans transitioning.
13. Is there anything else you would like to share to help female veterans utilize spirituality during transition?