A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF DOCTORAL WOMEN

STUDENT VETERANS IN RESIDENTIAL DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

by

Heather Catherine Cody

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs in the United States. Drawing from this purpose, the central research question for this study was: What are the experiences of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs? The theory guiding this study was Weiner's attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion, as it framed an exploration of the students' ability to perform in challenging academic events and maintain motivation to learn within a doctorate program. The setting for this study was any US-based university with a residential doctoral program, increasing the likelihood of finding interested participants. Using purposeful and snowball sampling, 10 women veterans were selected, who were current or former doctoral students and had served in any branch of the U.S. military, either full or part-time status. The data collection methods consisted of individual interviews, advice letters, and a focus group. Using Miles and Huberman as a model, the data analysis strategies included cleaning and coding the data, chunking the data into groups, setting aside outliers, creating clusters by combining similar groups, and identifying themes. The results of this study were that the cultural organization of doctoral education mainly impacted the experiences of women veterans within residential doctoral programs, and when these influences created challenges, they used grit to persist, mainly relying on their traits of conscientiousness.

Keywords: women student veterans, student veterans, doctoral programs, attribution theory, doctoral persistence

Copyright Page

Dedication

To my husband (Mike) and two wonderful boys (Michael and Conor), who sacrificed and supported me relentlessly throughout this journey. To my mom and best friend (Cathy), who has always been my biggest fan and made me believe that I could achieve any goal.

Acknowledgments

The process of obtaining a doctorate is no easy feat; as such, there are some influences that I would like to acknowledge. First and foremost, I want to thank those early women service members who broke through gender barriers and paved the way for future generations. Your sacrifice and grit have contributed significantly to our present-day military, which has no gender barriers. On behalf of all current and prior women who have worn the uniform proudly, thank you. I also want to recognize my chair (David Vacchi), who went above and beyond to ensure my success. You are more than a dissertation chair. You are a mentor, fellow veteran, friend, and researcher that I can only hope to become one day, helping to improve the experiences of veterans in higher education. On behalf of our entire cohort, thank you for all that you do!

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List of Abbreviations

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Goals, Plans, and Success (GPS) Program

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Veterans Affairs (VA)

World War II (WWII)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs in the United States. This chapter provides a foundation for the research problem within the literature, identifies the importance of researching women veterans, and introduces the research questions for this study. This chapter also describes the situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the research, and relevant definitions.

Background

This section discusses the background information for the study. This summary begins with the historical and social circumstances for the women veterans. Following, this overview reveals the theoretical principles that will underpin this research for understanding the experiences of women veterans as doctoral students.

Historical Context

Women had proudly served their country throughout American history, dating back to the Revolutionary and Civil Wars when volunteers made bandages, provided medical care, produced supplies, worked as spies, and secretly enlisted as men (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). However, women did not officially serve in the military until the creation of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901. Following, World War I enlisted roughly 35,000 women as either support specialists or nurses, while World War II recruited approximately 140,000 women as pilots, nurses, parachute riggers, and intelligence agents (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). While these early women service members volunteered to serve their country and followed military regulations, they did not earn the same

veteran benefits as men until 1948 when Congress passed the Women's Armed Services

Integration Act (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

Although this act granted women legal veteran status and access to benefits, it prevented

them from holding senior positions and significantly limited the number of women who could

serve as officers to 10% and enlisted to 2% (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans

Affairs, 2020). Women student veterans also faced unique challenges in using the G.I. Bill;

namely, a barrier for most women was a lack of knowledge that they qualified, although cultural

norms encouraged many to become homemakers (Aponte et al., 2017). The Vietnam War era

recruited significantly fewer women or approximately 7,000 (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). Nevertheless, women continued to serve and overcome

gender barriers through the transition to an all-volunteer force in 1969, witnessing the removal of

the service restrictions of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1967 and later gaining

admittance to the U.S. Military, U.S. Naval, and Air Force Academies in 1976 (Aponte et al.,

2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

Despite downsizing efforts, the number of women service members increased to

comprise 8% of the military and 2% of the veteran population by 1980 (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S.

Department of Defense, 2016). However, like WWII women veterans, a 1982 survey revealed

that women veterans did not have equal access to benefits and were often unaware of their

entitlements (Aponte et al., 2017). As a result, the Department of Veterans Affairs shifted its

focus on the unique needs of women veterans throughout the 1980s and 1990s, creating the

Advisory Committee on Women Veterans in 1983 to improve programs through bi-yearly

reporting (Aponte et al., 2017). Subsequently, a 1985 survey similarly revealed that about 60%

of women veterans did not use their GI Bill or healthcare benefits because they did not know they qualified (Aponte et al., 2017).

In 1991, Congress requested a follow-up survey to discover whether the experiences of women veterans had improved (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). These results comparably revealed the need for further healthcare improvements and defined women as a minority veteran group, although this effort focused solely on healthcare needs and did not investigate GI Bill use and accessibility (Aponte et al., 2017). Between 1990 and 1991, about 40,000 women service members deployed for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm; however, these women did not serve in combat due to gender restrictions (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). Afterward, in 1994, Congress established the Center for Women Veterans to transform the Department of Veterans Affairs culture and improve access to veteran benefits for women (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). In addition, recruiting efforts and exit transition programs initiated during the 1990s generated an increased awareness of military educational benefits among women veterans (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

The population of women service members continued to increase throughout the 1990s, growing to about 14% by 2000 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). Subsequently, more than 700,000 women deployed for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, exposing them to combat due to the undefined boundaries of the frontline (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). After generations of institutional resistance, the U.S. Department of Defense removed the final gender exclusion policy in 2015, outlining plans that created an integrated military force within five years to enable women to hold an estimated 14,000 combat positions (Aponte et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). Access and utilization of benefits for women

veterans continue to improve, with roughly 37% of eligible women veterans using their GI Bill

benefits (Cate et al., 2017) and women increasingly using the VA healthcare system (U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

Social Context

It is important to consider the social circumstances related to women service members'

military service. While the process of becoming a service member varies based on the branch of

service and career path of either enlisted or officer, the purpose of the recruits' initial training is

the same, namely, to convert civilian volunteers into military professionals who are disciplined,

physically fit, specialized, and mission-ready (Marines, 2020; U.S. Department of the Army,

2019; U.S. Navy Academy Naval Service Training Command, 2015). The literature widely

agrees that initial training significantly changes the identity of recruits (Bartlett & Stankorb,

2017; Moore, 2017; Moore et al., 2017; Stevenson, 2020; Soeter et al., 2006; Vacchi, 2012;

Vacchi & Berger, 2014); although research also concludes that the masculine culture of the

military creates unique challenges for women (Arminio et al., 2015).

Often, to obtain the acceptance of men, who make up about 84% of the military (U.S.

Government Accountability Office, 2020), women de-feminized themselves during their initial

training to fit the cultural norms of the military; although as they continue their service, women

learn the skill of blending their masculine and feminine traits to appear capable but not overly

masculine (Arminio et al., 2015; Barrett, 1996; Brooks, 2011; Green et al., 2010; Higate, 2007;

Shpeer & Howe, 2020). Overall, this process involves women alternating between promoting

their femininity to avoid disciplinary action (Herbert, 1998) and increasing their masculinity to

be *one of the guys* (Dunivin, 1988). However, this skill diminishes in combat when women

openly act more warrior-like and causes tensions between women and men that increase the

harassment of women, creates a loss of trust for women, and causes women to question their identity as service members (Demers, 2013).

Theoretical Context

The theoretical framework for this study was Weiner's 1986 attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion. As a central premise of the theory, the explanations that a student creates to rationalize the cause of their experiences are defined as attributions and are the focus of understanding their academic performance and motivation to persist (Demetrious, 2011; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986). When students determine that an event is changeable, their reactions are motivation and persistence (Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986). In contrast, when students conclude that an adverse situation is likely to reoccur, external, not controllable, and based on their lack of academic ability, their reactions often include anger, disappointment, a loss of motivation, and dropping out (Demetriou, 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986).

Lovitts (2001) applied the attribution research presented by Ross 1977, Hirschman 1970, and Coser 1974 and Gardner (2009) used the attributional theory developed by Weiner 1986 to understand doctoral attrition. In both studies, the attribution theory enabled the researchers to focus on the experiences of students enrolled in doctoral programs, moving beyond the Tinto-based attrition model of concentrating on student characteristics and admission guidelines. Consequently, Lovitts and Gardner revealed different opinions among students and universities and a common cause for attrition. Largely, universities attributed doctoral dropout rates to the students' inabilities and inadequate admission guidelines (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001), while students cited other causes such as a lack of program knowledge, isolation, disappointment, poor adviser relationships (Lovitts, 2001), personal difficulties, department problems, and program

mismatch (Gardner, 2009). Through their efforts, Lovitts and Gardner comparably identified that university culture significantly influenced the quality of instruction and support that doctoral students received to understand expectations and connect with faculty and their new academic community; as such, when students experience an adequate culture, they often attributed their difficulties to their inabilities or program mismatch and eventually dropout.

While locating a theoretical model for this study, I found that Tinto's model of college departure (1975, 1993) was widely used in attrition research and had also been applied to understand the retention of student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009), resulting in a massive effort to identify the social and academic integration of students. However, the literature also revealed that Tinto's model was not well-suited for student veterans because, as nontraditional students, these learners do not require social integration to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Consequently, Vacchi's 2014 model of student veteran support was identified as a potential model for this study, drawing on Bean and Metzner and Wideman (1989). In short, Vacchi's model would similarly enable me to understand the experiences of women student veterans by focusing on their peer and external support, university services, academic interactions, and transition support.

Situation to Self

This discussion will serve as an opportunity for me to present my motivation for conducting this study. It further identifies the philosophical assumptions that I brought to the research, detailing my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Following this section will end with an overview of the paradigm that will guide this study.

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the qualitative researcher's philosophical assumptions are important because they direct the development of their research problem and questions. In turn, our assumptions further influence how we gather data to answer our research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, to fully articulate my assumptions, this section identifies my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions for this study.

Ontological Assumptions

When conducting a phenomenological study, it is essential to be aware of ontological assumptions and report differences in the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). Thus, my ontological assumptions for this study involved the awareness that the participants' points of view consisted of different perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). To account for this, I began by using multiple data sources to gather each participant's descriptions and perspectives of what it was like to be a woman veteran enrolled in a doctoral program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Afterward, my analysis included separating the participants' contrasting comments to reveal themes and understand how they view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemological assumptions are the researcher's process of building a close relationship with their participants to gather subjective evidence based on the unique views of their participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While I did not conduct field interviews for this national study, I sought to build a relationship with my participants using multiple data collection methods and virtual interviews. During my analysis, I also relied on the participants' quotes as evidence for what it means to be a woman veteran and doctoral student.

Axiological Assumptions

Axiological assumptions consist of the researcher's values that they bring to the study and their identity related to the context and setting of their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Aware of my axiological assumptions, I openly discussed values that influenced the narrative of what it means to be a woman veteran enrolled in a doctoral program and provided my interpretations jointly with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, my social attributes, such as gender, military status, and doctoral program enrollment, further influenced my axiological assumptions for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a woman veteran and doctoral student, this study was important since I had lived similar experiences as the participants. While I have endured the typical barriers of completing my doctorate, I have also encountered other difficulties related to my military experiences, such as navigating veteran benefits and feeling disconnected or different from peers because of my military background and deployment experiences. As a result, I have also become aware of individual attributes that have enabled me to persist to include my military mindset and values. This realization sparked my curiosity to study the experiences of other women student veterans. Through the results of this study, my goals were to help other women veterans achieve their dream of a doctorate and spark interest in the research community for the further study of women veterans.

Paradigm

A paradigm consists of the qualitative researcher's basic worldviews, influencing how they will conduct their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The beliefs that I used to guide this study were the social constructivism worldview. As determined by Creswell and Poth, social constructivism is a researcher's attempt to comprehend their lived world through exploring the complexity of the participants' interpretation rather than categorizing events into few groups.

Using this paradigm, my goal was to understand the reality of being a woman veteran and doctoral student, depending primarily on the participants' perception of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews, focus groups, and advice letters further consisted of open-ended questions to encourage this input and enable the participants to construct their unique meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Problem Statement

The population of women service members is about 16% of the military and is expected to increase 4% by 2040 (Aponte et al., 2017), creating a larger population of women student veterans given that 82% of women join the military for educational benefits (Taylor et al., 2011) and 27% of student veterans are women (Falkey, 2016; Holder, 2011). The literature widely concludes that a common challenge for student veterans is navigating the cultural differences between the military and university life (Soeters et al., 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Although the research also suggests that women experience unique challenges when navigating these cultural differences as student veterans, resulting in them questioning their gender identity and isolating themselves from peers (Heineman, 2017). Meanwhile, doctoral program culture, which is further different from the military culture, has been identified as a significant influence for a doctoral student's ability to persist, impacting the quality of instruction and support students receive to understand expectations, connect with faculty, and integrate into their new academic community (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). The problem is that while we understand to some extent student veteran success, we do not understand how doctoral women student veterans succeed or socialize during their doctoral experiences.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States. At this stage in the research, persistence was generally defined as the student's continued effort to complete their degree regardless of challenges or failure. The theory guiding this study was Weiner's attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion because it provided a framework for understanding the students' ability to perceive challenging academic events and maintain motivation to learn within a doctorate program. Drawing on this theory, I sought to discover how the vast cultural differences between the military and doctoral departments affected the persistence of doctoral women student veterans.

Significance of the Study

This section discusses the significance of the study. This summary begins with the empirical and theoretical significances for women doctoral student veterans. Afterward, it concludes with the practical contributions of this study.

Empirical Significance

Research indicates that women veterans are capable of succeeding in their higher education goals (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011); although this research is based on GI Bill benefit utilization, the extant literature sheds little light on the experiences of women veterans as students. Given that other student veteran studies generally focus on all veterans and included few women as participants (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2013; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012), the experiences of these unique learners are mostly not known aside from the 2017 qualitative study by Heineman, which sought to discover the experiences of women veterans enrolled in community

college. Understanding the experiences of women veterans as doctoral students is an important topic that deserves research; as such, this study sought to fill this gap in the literature.

Theoretical Significance

The attribution theory is most commonly used to understand the problem of employee attrition (Costa & Neves, 2017; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts, 2005; Vlachos et al., 2017); although Lovitts revealed similarities between employee and student attrition, suggesting that their processes for assessing the situation and making a decision to persevere were equivalent. Consequently, Lovitts changed doctoral attrition literature through her efforts in utilizing attribution research to discover how doctoral students viewed their decision to persist or drop out and compared these perspectives with faculty. Gardner similarly applied the attribution theory to compare the views of doctoral learners and faculty within low and high attrition programs. In both studies, the attribution theory enabled the researchers to move beyond the Tinto-based model of understanding the problem of attrition to focus on a better understanding of student experiences (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). This study mirrored these efforts by using the attribution theory to discover the perspectives of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs.

Practical Significance

The literature reveals that women differ from men as service members, although these differences are often concealed (Arminio et al., 2015; Demers, 2013; Herbert, 1998; Suter et al., 2006). For example, women hide their differences during initial training by de-feminize themselves to fit the masculine cultural norms of the military. In addition, women further conceal their differences throughout their service, namely by regulating their masculine and feminine behaviors to gain the acceptance of men (Demers, 2013; Herbert, 1998). Given these concealed

distinctions of women service members, it also likely that they experience the transition to higher education differently. Thus, the practical significance of this study was to understand the unique experiences of women veterans as doctoral students and shed light on persistence strategies other doctoral students can employ to persist.

Research Questions

Next, this section will discuss the research questions drawn from the problem and purpose statements. This overview includes the central research question and three sub-research questions for this study. Following each question, this overview will present a brief discussion to support the focus and use.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs?

The central research question was derived from the study's research problem and purpose statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and focused on understanding what it is like to be a woman veteran and doctoral student. Consequently, the literature reveals that women veterans graduate with advanced degrees at higher rates than non-veterans and male veterans (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011). However, current research does not reveal why this occurs or what women veterans experience as student veterans pursuing a doctorate. It is further not known if the cultural differences between the military and doctoral departments influence the attrition of women veterans.

Sub Question One

Why do women veterans pursue doctoral degrees?

This sub question concentrated on why women veterans enroll in doctoral programs and gained insight into what motivates them to take on this challenging and time-consuming task.

The literature suggests that student veterans attend college for the same reasons as non-veterans, namely for personal growth and self-improvement, expand career opportunities, improve expertise, and obtain career advancement (Zoli et al., 2015). It is also well established that veterans are further interested in attending college when they qualify for military financial aid programs such as tuition assistance and GI Bill, which reduces or eliminates their costs (Morris et al., 2019; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Although student veterans do not equally obtain all levels of degrees; rather, most veterans earn a bachelor's degree (40%), associate degree (25%), and master's degree (10%; Cate et al., 2017). Consequently, less than 1% of veterans pursue a doctorate or only .015% (Cate et al., 2017), and currently, we do not know what motivates these student veterans to enrolled in doctoral programs while others do not.

Sub Question Two

What do women doctoral student veterans articulate as obstacles to their success as doctoral students?

This sub question concentrated on understanding the challenges women veterans faced as doctoral students, gaining further insight into their experiences. The literature suggests that women veterans contend with similar challenges as non-veteran women while pursuing their educational goals, including childcare, mental health, and life balance (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Mattocks et al., 2012; Street et al., 2009). Although Demer (2013) and Foster and Vince (2009) concluded that combat exposure caused women veterans to experience feelings of isolation. Heineman (2017) equally determined that women student veterans experienced unique challenges with isolation. However, this distinction existed because of their gender-related experiences during their service and the vast cultural differences of military and higher education.

Sub Question Three

How do women doctoral student veterans describe their socialization to the academic profession
as a result of their doctoral coursework, research, and relationships with faculty?

This final sub question concentrated on understanding how women veterans felt about
their socialization into their doctoral and new research communities. The literature concludes
that doctoral students are more likely to persist when they socialize within their department and
research community (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), procuring academic, professional,
and social integration (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Smith et al., 2006;
Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In short, current literature concludes that engaged
doctoral students are more motivated and less likely to withdraw from their program (Spaulding
& Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). However, it is not known how socialization influences women
veterans to persist.

Definitions

1. *Student Veteran* – A former or current member of any military branch, regardless of their
   legal veteran standing, discharge, combat experience, or use of military educational benefits
   (Vacchi, 2012).

2. *Attrition* – Attrition is when a student withdraws from a degree program (Bair, 1999).

3. *Persist*– Persist describes a student who completes their degree program (Bair, 1999).

Summary

This chapter provided a framework for the research by discussing the historical and social
circumstances for women veterans and introducing the theoretical principles of the attribution
theory that underpinned this research. This effort further identified that researching women
student veterans was important because of the increasing numbers of women enlisting into the

military. In short, larger numbers of women service members would similarly increase the population of women student veterans, given that most women join the military for educational benefits. Consequently, the problem for this study was the increasing number of women student veterans who will be entering higher education and faced with the challenge of overcoming the vast cultural differences of the military and doctoral departments. Overall, to provide further insight into this problem, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter provides a detailed account of the systematic review of the literature to investigate the lived experiences of women veterans as doctoral students. This overview offers a critical appraisal of the literature; specifically, this examination begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework that will guide the study. Next, this chapter synthesizes the existing knowledge for doctoral attrition, identifies controversies, and distinguishes gaps in the literature that warrant further research for this unique population of women.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Weiner's 1986 attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion. Fritz Heider initially proposed the attribution theory in 1958, focusing on how individuals perceived everyday events and determining whether the cause was external or internal (Demetriou, 2011; Weiner, 1979; Weiner, 1986). Later, Rotter (1966) expanded Heider's attribution theory by adding a focus on how perceptions and explanations created a sense of control. In his early work, Weiner focused primarily on Heider and Rotter, examining how students perceived their successes and failures based on their ability to control future events. However, after Rosenbaum introduced a focus on reoccurrence in 1972, Weiner published a revised attribution theory in 1979 (Weiner, 1986). Following, between 1980 and 1986, Weiner continued to amend his attribution model through many publications. During this time of edits, Weiner defined the roles of emotion, motivation, and achievement, added a focus on global occurrence and intentional changes, and compiled his framework within the publication of his book, *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*.

As a fundamental premise of the theory, the interpretations that a student creates to make sense of their lived experiences are defined as attributions and are the focus of understanding performance and motivation to learn (Demetrious, 2011; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986). Weiner further concluded that individuals use a multidimensional process to judge their lived experiences and create attributions. Specifically, this process is the *dimensions of causal determination* and includes the locus of causality, stability, globality, controllability, and intentionality (Weiner, 1986). Adapted from Weiner, figure 1 illustrates how I adapted and conceptualized Weiner's theory for this multidimensional process for doctoral students as they encounter successes and failures.

Figure 1

Adapted Attributional Theory of Achievement, Motivation, and Emotion for Doctoral Attrition by Weiner (1986)

Determine the Cause
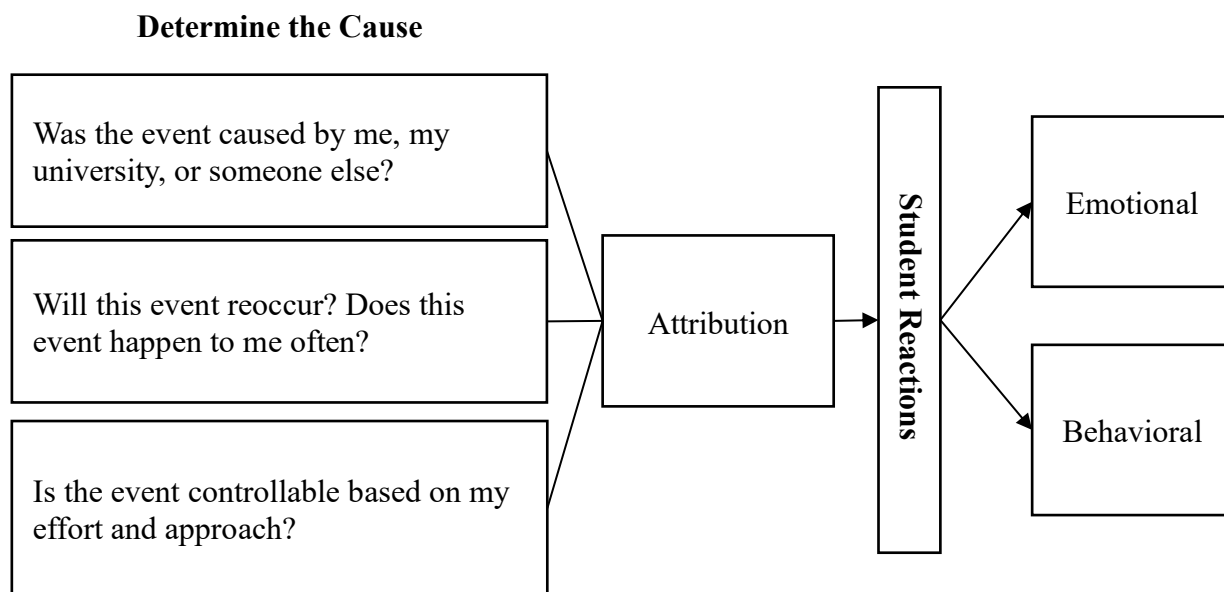
As shown in figure 1, the locus of causality dimension enables the student to judge whether the cause of the event is internal or external (Weiner, 1986). In addition, the individual

uses the stability and globality dimensions to determine how often the event impacts them as a

doctoral student and whether it is likely to reoccur in the future (Weiner, 1986). Furthermore, the

student also uses the controllability and intentionality dimensions to identify if the event is

controllable based on their effort and approach (Weiner, 1986). Weiner (1990, 2000) opined that

students often do not have enough information about their situation to navigate the dimensions of

casual determination accurately; instead, they commonly proceed with missing knowledge or

make a guess based on their past experiences. Moreover, it is also common for doctoral students

during the locus of causality dimension to conclude that the cause is internal or to create a self-

blame assumption (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Following, the student uses their conclusions

from dimensions of causal determination to create an attribution to define the cause of their

experience (Weiner, 1986). Students often attribute their academic successes and failures to

effort, ability, luck, or task difficulty (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006; Weiner, 1974). When this

conclusion involves a changeable reason, the student's reactions are motivation to learn and

persistence (Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986). However, when the student interprets the cause as

likely to reoccur, external, not controllable, and based on their lack of academic ability, these

reactions normally include anger, pity, a loss of motivation, and giving up (Demetriou, 2011;

Lovitts, 2001; Weiner, 1986).

The attribution theory, dating back to the 1970s, has been regularly used within higher

education research to understand student motivation and performance problems. As one of the

first studies to apply the model, Arkin and Maruyama (1979) revealed that students were less

likely to pass exams when they created self-blame assumptions based on their academic abilities.

Comparably, Wilson and Linville (1985) concluded that first-year college students' attributions

to explain their academic challenges were crucial. Further, students who believed the cause of

their struggles were internal and likely to reoccur had more anxiety, lowered motivation, and increased academic difficulties (Wilson & Linville, 1985). More recently, Lovitts (2001) used the attribution research presented by Ross 1977, Hirschman 1970, and Coser 1974 to investigate the problem of doctoral attrition. Through her focus on attributions, Lovitts lead the effort to capture the perspective of doctorate students (Gardner, 2009). Thus, in doing so, she provided new insight and transformed doctoral attrition research (Gardner, 2009).

The attribution theory was further used many times between 2002 and 2011 to understand problems related to student motivation and performance (Cortes-Suarez & Sandiford, 2008; Gardner, 2009; Hall et al., 2007; Hawi, 2010; Haynes Stewart et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2008; Poelzer & Liang, 2008; Wilson et al., 2002). Overall, these studies focused on identifying the principles governing attributions and how they could be modified to improve student performance (Demetriou, 2011). Moreover, many researchers also focused on understanding the attributions of discrete student populations such as Hispanic students (Cortes-Suarez & Sandiford, 2008), specific degree-seeking students (Hawi, 2010; Poelzer & Liang, 2008), and first-year students (Perry et al., 2008). Using Lovitts (2001) and Weiner (1986) for her model, Gardner similarly applied attribution theory to the problem of doctoral attrition, identifying the disconnect between student and faculty attributions for dropout causes. Concisely, these observations revealed that students often did not fully understand expectations, felt that their programs did not match their interests, and attributed the cause of their low grades to their inability to perform at the doctoral level (Gardner, 2009).

Despite this prior use of Wiener's model, a review of recent literature revealed that attribution theory was most commonly applied to understand the problem of employee attrition (Costa & Neves, 2017; Gardner, 2009; Vlachos et al., 2017). Although, when limiting the search

results to dissertation publications, student researchers have continued to use the attribution theory for understanding the problems of attrition and student motivation. This study, which investigated the problem of doctoral attrition for women veterans, relates to Weiner's 1986 attribution theory since it sought to discover how women veterans and doctoral students interpreted their educational experiences and how these interpretations influenced their ability to persist. Lovitts (1996) revealed that struggling doctoral students often viewed their peers as more capable and believed their lack of academic knowledge caused their difficulties. While self-blame attributions are often false, these perceptions contribute significantly to the doctoral student's likelihood to drop out (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 1996; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts, 2005). Although, when students are aware of shared attributions and experiences, they feel exempted and empowered by their new perspective (Lovitts, 2001). Thus, this study sought to discover women student veterans' attributions and share these interpretations to help other women veterans currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Consequently, this study may potentially advance the use of Weiner's attribution theory to identify the principles governing attributions of another discrete student population, namely women veterans.

Related Literature

This section will synthesize the current literature on the phenomena of doctorate attrition for women veterans. Specifically, this process will identify what is and is not known and distinguish potential areas of disagreement. Also, this overview will present the research gaps that require further investigation and the benefits and needs of this study for doctoral student veteran attrition.

Veterans

The experience of serving within the military differs significantly when compared to other civilian occupations (Arminio et al., 2015). Thus, understanding the process of becoming a soldier, the effects of military service, and the experiences of transiting back to civilian society was critical knowledge for meeting the needs of women student veterans (Arminio et al., 2015; Moore, 2017). With this said, this section will begin by providing a review of the literature, highlighting what is and is not known for all veterans. Following, this section will present the attributes of women student veterans through reviewing the literature for how they differ from men veterans. Then, student veterans will be examined through the definition of student veteran, degree motivation, college selection, major, academic performance, and programs and services.

All Veterans

Research suggests that a challenge for student veterans is navigating the differences between higher education culture and military culture (Livingston, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Thus, this section will provide a review of the literature, highlighting what is and is not known for the experiences of veterans as service members and students. Specifically, this overview will synthesize the available literature for initial training and socialization, combat experience, military separation, women veterans, and student veterans.

Initial Training and Socialization. Eligible recruits often commit to the military shortly after graduating from high school (Arminio et al., 2015). Afterward, the training process of becoming a service member varies depending on the branch of service and career path of either enlisted or officer; however, despite these differences, the overall purpose of the recruits' initial training is the same. Specifically, this goal is to convert civilian volunteers into professional service members who are disciplined, physically fit, specialized, and mission-ready (Marines, 2020; U.S. Department of the Army, 2019; U.S. Navy Academy Naval Service Training

Command, 2015). The literature widely agrees that the lived experiences of initial training and socialization into the military can significantly change the recruit's identity (Bartlett & Stankorb, 2017; Moore, 2017; Stevenson, 2020; Soeter et al., 2006; Vacchi, 2012; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Soeter et al. (2006) described initial training as unlearning the habits of one's youth during socialization into the military. Equivalently, Stevenson (2020) described initial training as a time of significant transition when recruits quickly learn the culture and norms of the military. Bartlett and Stankorb (2017) similarly defined this period in the trainee's life as a rigorous process when they gain the necessary skillset and physical fitness to transition into military service. According to Moore (2017) and Demers (2013), initial training also revolves around using authority and subordination to replace the recruits' existing behaviors and norms with military customs and values. Correspondingly, Howe and Hinderaker (2018) revealed that military instructors use their dominance to control recruits and facilitate the rapid transformation of their identity to fit military norms. In addition, Fairhurst (2011) concluded that the recruit's socialization during initial training often occurred through the instructor's stories, metaphors, and jargon. However, Knight (1990) asserted that socialization tactics are embedded throughout the recruit's training day to include the constant singing of military cadence, depicting acceptable values and norms.

Combat Experience. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars created many veterans with combat experience (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2019). A recent Pew Research Center survey determined that approximately 77% of post-9/11 veterans were deployed to a combat zone at least once, making them twice as likely to have experienced combat than pre-9/11 veterans (Parker et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2011). Likewise, Bryan et al. (2015) and Ness and Vroman (2014) determined that approximately 70% of student veterans have served in

combat. Consequently, an estimated 50% of post-911 veterans have encountered an emotionally traumatic event as a result of their military service (Parker et al., 2019). Parker et al. further concluded that 47% of these veterans find their readjustment to civilian society very difficult; however, two-thirds of these struggling veterans do not seek professional help to overcome their combat experiences and reintegrate into civilian society.

Military Separation. Prior to ending their military service, service members enroll in the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program or TAP (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the purpose of the program is to prepare service members for their transition back to civilian life through providing resources for separation services, employment, entrepreneurship, and college. Specifically, the TAP training program consists of a main module, Goals, Plans, and Success (GPS), and then three distinct learning paths for the service member to customize their training based on their post-transition goals. GPS training covers the following topics:

- Pre-transition counseling

- Resilient separations

- Military occupation

- Financial transition planning

- Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits

- Department of Labor policies and programs

- Creating an individual transition plan

- Final briefing and capstone (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015).

Next, the three distinct learning paths that the service member can select are higher education, technical training, and entrepreneurship (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). For student

veterans, the higher education learning path includes modules for financial aid, course registration, campus culture, and transferring military training to college credit (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015).

Overall, the literature presented recurring problems around content and delivery of TAP; namely, service members often lacked support, and services were not structured (Vogt et al., 2018; Moore, 2017; Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019). Moore revealed that in contrast to when recruits join the military, there is no extensive training program to reintegrate them; rather, discharged veterans readjust on their own. Equally, Shpeer and Howe (2020) emphasized the need to develop exit training similar to the service members' basic training, where they are transitioned back to civilians and can navigate the cultural, behavioral, and linguistical differences as separated veterans. Wilson-Smith and Corr comparably established that exit transition processes were flawed and caused ongoing difficulties for veterans, which often resulted in homelessness and unemployment. Likewise, Vogt et al. determined that exit transition programs commonly did not meet the needs of veterans since they lacked research and an understanding of their unique attributes as civilian veterans.

Another common theme in the literature is that service members do not automatically unlearn their military customs and orientation after they transition to civilian society; instead, they often retain their military identity and service-related values long after discharge (Soeter et al., 2006; Vacchi, 2012; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). According to Soeter et al., socialization continues after initial training and strengthens with years of military service. In short, an individual will likely be more socialized and have a greater military identity the longer they serve (Soeter et al., 2006). However, Soeter et al. also supplemented that veterans with limited service-related experience can develop a similar, lasting integration and identity. Vacchi

disagreed with this claim and emphasized that any socialization into the military, even initial training experiences, can influence an individual's maturity and identity. Further, the veteran's socialization is likely to increase with combat exposure (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

As a result of socialization, the service members' separation from the military is often complicated and problematic since it includes unlearning military customs and relearning civilian norms (Moore, 2017). Shpeer and Howe (2020) further remarked that exiting the military is often a difficult transition because recruits replace their self-identification as a civilian with the role of a military professional. However, Stevenson (2020) openly disagreed with this concept, concluding that a veteran's military service was not their entire identity; instead, it was only one part of themselves that often provided value within their later civilian experiences. Wilson-Smith and Corr (2019) suggested differently, noting that a consequence of leaving the military often involved a loss of identity since social-cultural bonds are left behind. Moreover, Keeling et al. (2019) concluded that the differences in military and civilian communication methods commonly led to social isolation, loss of identity, and reduced self-esteem for veterans. Likewise, Arminio et al. (2015) concluded that veterans frequently mourned the loss of their military identity and viewed their new civilian careers as less meaningful. Suter et al. (2006) also revealed that women veterans experienced similar difficulties returning to civilian life, particularly in conforming to traditional gender roles. As a result, women were more likely to encounter feelings of isolation and loneliness as they adjust to their civilian identity as women veterans (Suter et al., 2006).

In partial agreement, Stevenson (2020) observed that separating from the military is often characterized by a loss of identity, daily structure, community, and uncertainty about where they fit into civilian society. Likewise, Vogt et al. (2018) suggested that transition struggles were

often the result of leaving the very structured environment of the military for the openness of

civilian society. Comparably, Wolfe (2018) also concluded that the transition of navigating the

less structured civilian world was frequently tricky and overwhelming for veterans. However,

Stevenson acknowledged the need for researchers to focus on veterans' experiences outside of

their military service to understand their transition difficulties more fully. Wolfe equally

concluded that a veteran's civilian experiences were critical to their successful transition;

furthermore, given appropriate transition guidance, individuals could learn to navigate the

civilian world of employment with ease, transferring their military expertise to new

opportunities.

Women Veterans

Contrary to the military downsizing between 1973 and 2010, the number of women

service members grew during this time from roughly 42,000 to 167,000 (U.S. Department of

Defense, 2016). While fewer women serve overall in the military, women are about 3% more

likely to be a commissioned officer compared to men (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016). In

addition, women service members are more diverse in race and ethnicity than men (see Table 1).

Table 1

Race and Ethnicity of Women Service Members

Race/Ethnicity	Women	Men
White	53%	68%
Black	36%	22%
Asian	8%	7%
Other (American Indians, Alaska Natives, Pacific Islanders)	3%	3%

Hispanic	20%	17%
Not Hispanic	80%	83%

Note. Reprinted from "Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2016 Summary Report," by U.S. Department of Defense, 2016, pp. 36-41. Copyright 2016 by U.S. Department of Defense.

Women veterans also vary from men regarding their service in combat and exposure to combat-related death or wounded individuals. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2001), 12% of women have served in combat, and 24% were exposed to death or wounded persons during their war zone service, while 40% of men served in combat and 37% experienced exposure to death or injured people. Since the 1990s, combat exposure has risen about 5% for women service members as a result of ongoing changes, and more recently, the removal of gender policies that prevented women from serving in combat-related jobs (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2001). In addition to the occupation, demographic, and combat differences, women also vary from men in their experiences of adapting to the masculine military culture and balancing their identity as service members.

Culture originates from our life experiences (Geertz, 1973), and through our culture, we learn acceptable social behaviors, the value of ourselves and others, and what represents a person (Adler & McAdams, 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Although men and women enter the military with diverse cultures, they share the military culture through their initial training and socialization (Demers, 2013; Moore, 2017). Further, while the military is evolving to accept women better (Dunivin, 1994), the recruit's initial and ongoing professional training continues to be rooted in the goal of creating masculine warriors, rewarding attributes of self-control, forcefulness, risk-taking, aggression, and resolve (Arminio et al., 2015; Brooks, 2011; Green et

al., 2010; Higate, 2007; Shpeer & Howe, 2020). Therefore, a fundamental problem for women service members is the need to effectively navigate the masculine culture of the military (Arminio et al., 2015). Herbert (1998) surveyed roughly 300 women veterans and revealed that 49% of the participants were pressured to either act more masculine, feminine, or both. In addition, 60% of the women veterans were disciplined for being either too masculine or too feminine (Herbert, 1998). To navigate this pressure, Herbert concluded that 30% of the women used various gender management strategies to minimize both their masculine and feminine attributes.

Identity comprises several dimensions to include gender (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and happens through a person's social encounters, past events, political views, and culture (Weber, 1998). According to Acker (1990), the military is a gender-focused institution in which cultural impressions of gender encourage socialization. Likewise, Herbert (1998) concluded that initial training is not solely about turning civilians into mission-ready service members; rather, it is also to provide the recruit with a clear image of what it means to be a service member, and often these depictions are masculine. As of July 2020, women account for approximately 16% of enlisted service members and 19% of the officer corps (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). While these percentages have continued to increase since the 1970s, male gender dominance forces women to create strategies to be accepted as women service members (Demers, 2013). Often, to achieve this acceptance, women blend their masculine and feminine traits to appear capable but not overly masculine (Arminio et al., 2015; Barrett, 1996; Brooks, 2011; Green et al., 2010; Higate, 2007; Shpeer & Howe, 2020).

Overall, women used two methods to achieve this; they promote their femininity to ensure they are not a threat to men (Herbert, 1998), and they increase their masculinity to be *one*

of the guys (Dunivin, 1988). Comparably, Demers (2013) studied the experiences of 17 women combat veterans and determined that women service members commonly adjusted their actions to balance their level of masculine and feminine behaviors; however, this skill often manifested itself when women were in combat and openly acted more warrior-like. As a result, Demers concluded that combat created tensions between men and women, increased the harassment of women, generated a loss of trust for women, and questioned the identity of women as service members.

Student Veterans

The literature did not provide a standard definition for a *student veteran*. In fact, few researchers attempted to define the term. However, the Social Security Administration (2020) described a *veteran* as a person who has served beyond their initial training requirement within any branch of the military and was not separated under dishonorable conditions. In short, meeting the requirements of this definition legally determines a person's eligibility for veteran benefits at the government level. Unfortunately, this legal definition does not provide a comprehensive definition for higher education to discuss student veterans and to understand the unique needs of these learners (Vacchi, 2012).

Holder (2011) defined a student veteran as a person who has served on active duty within any branch of the military. Radford (2009) otherwise described student veterans as *military undergraduates* who have served on active duty. However, Vacchi and Berger (2014) disagreed with these definitions, noting that part-time service members within the National Guard and Reserves were missing from this description. While the term *active duty* may have the same meaning as in the government definition of a veteran or indicates that the person has served beyond their initial training (Social Security Administration, 2020), this clarification was missing

from Holder and Radford. Thus, Vacchi (2012) modified the legal definition of a veteran and created an all-inclusive means to define a *student veteran* clearly; precisely, this description consists of either former or current members of any military branch, regardless of their legal veteran standing, discharge, combat experience, or use of military educational benefits.

Student veterans attend college for similar reasons as non-veterans; they are motivated to pursue personal growth and self-improvement (71%), expand career opportunities (86%), improve expertise (31%), and obtain career advancement (56%; Zoli et al., 2015). In addition, veterans are also interested in attending college when they qualify for military financial aid programs such as tuition assistance and GI Bill, which reduces or eliminates their costs (Morris et al., 2019; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Likewise, student veterans do not equally attend all types of universities (Cate et al., 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014); rather, Cate et al. revealed that student veterans mostly attend public colleges (58.7%) and for-profit colleges (26.4%; see Table 2). Cate et al. further concluded that student veterans largely majored in Business (27.0%), STEM (14.4%), Healthcare (10.4%), Liberal Arts or General Studies (9.8%), and Homeland Security, Law Enforcement, Firefighting, and Related Protective Services (9.6%).

Table 2

Distribution of Student Veterans

Type	2-year	4-year	Total
Public	34.2%	24.5%	58.7%
Private	0.1%	14.8%	14.9%
For-Profit	0.7%	25.7%	26.4%
Total	34.9%	65.1%	100.0%

Note. Reprinted from "National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill," by C. Cate et al., 2017, p. 33. Copyright 2017 by Student Veterans of America.

According to a study involving 1,853 military veterans, Taylor et al. (2011) revealed that 82% of women joined the military for educational benefits. Moreover, the gender distribution of student veterans is approximately 73% men and 27% women, which is the opposite of the civilian learner population that is 35% men and 65% women (Falkey, 2016). Despite their significantly lower presence within the military and higher education, women veterans makeup roughly 27% of all student veterans (Holder, 2011) and are more likely to obtain their bachelor's (7%) and advanced degree (5%) than non-veteran women (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011) and are about 5% more likely to graduate with their bachelor's and advance degree than men veterans (Aponte et al., 2017). Although, on average, women veterans obtain their educational goals at an older age, or between 35 and 64, while other women completed their degree before the age of 34 (Aponte et al., 2017).

According to Cate et al. (2017), the six-year success rate for student veterans is approximately 72%, while the success rate of non-veteran students is roughly 52% (Shapiro et al., 2016). A comparison of GPA between student veterans and non-veterans further discovered that veterans academically outperform non-veteran students, averaging a 3.34 (Cate et al., 2017), while non-veterans earned a 2.94 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Comparable to other nontraditional learners, student veterans often have breaks in their enrollment due to family and work responsibilities (Cate et al., 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). However, student veteran time to degree is similar to non-veteran traditional learners. Specifically, student veterans average between 9 and 11 semesters to complete a 4-year degree

(Cate et al., 2017), while non-veterans comparably graduate with a bachelor's in 10 semesters (Shapiro et al., 2016).

The literature commonly agrees that military programs can impact the persistence of student veterans (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Livingston & Bauman, 2013; McBain et al., 2012; Moore, 2017). Moreover, these suggestions similarly identified the need for military programs and services to consider the unique needs of veterans as nontraditional students (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Livingston & Bauman, 2013; McBain et al., 2012). Although McBain et al. and Lang & O'Donnell (2018) further identified the most common difficulty for student veterans as the delayed receipt of VA educational benefits and recommended modified financial aid services.

Women Student Veterans

Literature suggests that women student veterans encounter similar challenges as nonveteran women while pursuing their educational goals, such as childcare, mental health, and life balance (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Mattocks et al., 2012; Street et al., 2009). However, Demer (2013) and Foster and Vince (2009) concluded that combat exposure singled out women veterans, making them more likely to experience feelings of isolation than other women students. Heineman (2017) equally determined that women student veterans were unique from other women learners, although this distinction existed without combat experience and comparably distinguished them from men student veterans. Studying the exit transition of 19 women veterans into higher education, Heineman observed that women student veterans differed from other learners because their gender-related experiences significantly influenced them during their service.

As described earlier in this chapter, women service members use gender management strategies to fit into the male-dominated ranks of the military. Although this ability is essential for women during their military service, it often creates problems for women veterans as they transition back to civilian society, where they are expected to be more feminine (Demers, 2013; Heineman, 2017). Consequently, Demers concluded that women veterans struggle to determine what it means to be a woman, resulting in society being unsure whether to treat them like women or *one of the guys*. Despite these unique challenges related to their service, women student veterans graduate at higher rates than nonveteran women and men veterans (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011). However, given that most military studies have generally focused on all veterans and included few women as participants (Persky & Oliver, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012), the experiences of these unique learners are mostly not known aside from the 2017 qualitative study by Heineman.

As such, Heineman (2017) observed several unique attributes of women veterans when compared to other first-year nonveteran community college students. Specifically, women veterans were more mature than their nonveterans peers, independent, and determined to persist (Heineman, 2017). Conversely, the research identifies the entire population of student veterans by these characteristics, concluding that their military experiences and learned behaviors result from these qualities (Barry et al., 2012; Brown & Gross, 2011; Jenner, 2017; Vacchi, 2012). In addition, Heineman further noticed that women veterans differed because they internally struggled to find their new gender identity as women student veterans; as such, they purposely isolated themselves from other students and were more likely to rely on family and friends for support. However, in contradiction to their behaviors with other students, women veterans did

not hesitate to seek out their professors and other university staff for help to ensure they succeeded (Heineman, 2017).

Graduate Student Veterans

The literature agrees that graduate student veterans differ from nonveteran learners (Mentzer et al., 2015; Phillips, 2016), although these conclusions fluctuate between studies. Most common, researchers remark that graduate student veterans have unique financial aid needs associated with their military benefits (Mentzer et al., 2015; Mikelson & Saunders, 2013; Phillips, 2016). Phillips also recognized that graduate student veterans were different as a result of their multiple identities and misunderstood military experiences. According to Phillips, veterans commonly maintain identities associated with graduate school, race, gender, marriage, parenthood, military branch, rank, and combat experience. Phillips further concluded that veterans differed because they were inaccurately stereotyped as broken or less capable than nonveteran learners, creating frustration and isolation for student veterans. Notwithstanding, graduate student veterans persist at higher rates than nonveteran graduate students (Cate et al., 2017) and have a strong sense of duty to help undergraduate student veterans to persist (Phillips, 2016). However, given that most military studies have focused on undergraduate student veterans (Barry et al., 2012; Brown & Gross, 2011; Jenner, 2017; Kato et al., 2016; Volk et al., 2020), the experiences of these unique learners are mostly not known.

Controversies in Veteran Research

It is well-known that more women are entering the military than ever before, and the literature expects this trend to continue (Aponte et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2011), growing to nearly 20% by 2040 (Aponte et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential to note that this surge of women enlisting into the military will similarly create an increased population of women student

veterans, given that 82% of women join the military for educational benefits (Taylor et al., 2011). Historically, there have been few studies that focused on women veterans, and while this practice is starting to change with an increase of healthcare-related research, women student veterans are missing from the literature and considerably understudied when compared to men veterans and non-veteran women. Specifically, among the available literature, a mere 2.6% focused on women veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2004), while other military studies (Currier et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2016; Sullivan & Yoon, 2020) generally focused on the experiences of all veterans and incorporated few women into their poll of participants. Consequently, other than Heineman (2017), who studied first-year community college women veterans, the most closely related studies that could be located for women student veterans were Demers (2013) and Suter et al. (2006), which studied the military exit transition of women combat veterans.

Women service members have unique differences when compared to men, but these variances are often hidden. Early in their service, women learn to conceal these differences through their experiences of initial training as they de-feminize themselves to fit the cultural norms of the military. As their service continues, women further obtain the skill of regulating their masculine and feminine behaviors to be accepted by men and avoid disciplinary actions related to appearing too feminine or too masculine. Given these concealed differences of women service members, it also likely that women experience the transition back to civilian society differently than men. Consequently, the knowledge of how women navigate military service and transiting back to civilian society is significant for the understanding of the unique experiences of women student veterans.

Another shortcoming of the literature is the availability of credible military studies with empirical data. Instead, it is an easier task to locate generalized assumptions about student veterans, as found in the publications by Borsari et al. (2017), DiRamio (2017), Kelly et al. (2013), and Moore (2017). More damaging, DiRamio and Kelly et al. depicted the student veteran as broken and less capable than non-veteran learners, adding to the negative stereotype of student veterans within higher education. For example, Kelly et al. concluded that student veterans were 20% more likely to drop out when compared to non-veteran students. However, according to Cate et al. (2017), the success rate for student veterans is approximately 72%, while the success rate of non-veteran students is lower or roughly 60% (Shapiro et al., 2016). Kelly et al. comparably concluded that women student veterans would be uncomfortable around men veterans and likely conceal their military experiences. While this assumption might be valid for some women veterans, the authors did not cite a source to support their claim with empirical data.

The literature similarly provides many generalized recommendations for student veteran programs and improvements for the military exit transition without conducting research, gathering quality empirical data, or citing other data-based literature (e.g., Borsari et al., 2017; DiRamio, 2017; Moore, 2017; Moore et al., 2017). Specifically, Moore expressed that programs created with the belief that service members are superior to their civilian peers negatively result in division and integration issues for veterans. On the other hand, veterans were more successful at universities that seek to expand their programs to create a military-friendly campus (Moore, 2017). Comparably, to increase the retention of military students, Borsari et al. recommended the creation of programs that focused on effectively integrating veterans into campus life socially and academically. Likewise, DiRamio also posited that veterans were more likely to persist when

they felt socially integrated and accepted. While these recommendations seem credible, further research is required to offer evidence that these claims merit implementation by college campuses.

Becoming a service member and later separating from the military is different from the career tasks that non-veterans experience. Rather, a veteran's process of completing initial training transforms their identity, culture, and maturity (Soeters et al., 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Later, veterans also discover that their separation from the military can be equally life-changing as it often includes a loss of identity, purpose, financial security, and established networks. As students, veterans typically persist at higher rates than non-veterans (Cate et al., 2017); however, because post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have witnessed combat than prior generations of student veterans, they are also more likely, but not guaranteed to have ongoing adjustment problems than prior generations of student veterans. Given these unique attributes of veterans as nontraditional learners, literature would benefit significantly by filling the identified gaps with an examination into the military and educational experiences of student veterans.

College Persistence

Awareness of the veteran population and their unique needs is a challenge for most higher education institutions. This section will provide a review of the literature, highlighting what is and is not known for higher education attrition. Specifically, this overview will synthesize the available literature for undergraduate and doctoral programs.

Undergraduate Programs

Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) determined that dating back to the 1970s, undergraduate dropout rates have been a concern for universities and generate loan debt without increased income and a loss of time and effort for students (Kolodner & Butrymowicz, 2017;

Torpey, 2018). Consequently, the amount of research focused on the problem of undergraduate persistence and student retention is vast (Lake et al., 2018; Seidman, 2005). According to Chen (2012), graduation rates have not significantly improved within the United States over the last four decades. Moreover, national studies have consistently identified that these rates are further influenced by the students' attributions of being either a traditional or nontraditional learner.

According to U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (1996), a traditional student is defined as enrolling immediately after completing high school and attending full-time. While a nontraditional student has one or more of the following attributes: delayed enrollment, attends part-time, works full-time, financially independent, has dependents, or earned a nontraditional high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Approximately one-third of the undergraduate students enrolled in 2020 are defined as nontraditional students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), with these rates expected to increase (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). However, the 6-year success rate for nontraditional students is roughly 30%, while 52% of traditional students complete their degree (Shapiro et al., 2016). Despite this, women veterans, which are often nontraditional students, are approximately 7% more likely to reach their dream of a 4-year degree than non-veteran students (Aponte et al., 2017). The cause of the lower graduation rates for nontraditional learners varies in the literature, similar to the mixed research investigating persistence factors for all undergraduate students.

Titus (2004) asserts that despite the efforts of many scholars, the causes of student attrition are mixed because many followed Tinto's methods and studied student attributes more often than other potential causes such as university characteristics, including the availability of

attentive programs and services. As a result of this widespread research practice, academic ability is the most common factor attributed to undergraduate persistence for both traditional and nontraditional students (Campbell & Mislevy, 2013; Hu & John, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2006; Tinto 2017; Titus, 2004). Specifically, the literature frequently concludes that retention rates are the result of a students' low GPA and admission test scores (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Ryan, 2004; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2012). Moreover, student demographics and university admission standards are also extensively examined and concluded as causing dropouts within the literature (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2017). In contrast, as another potential cause, Tinto also noted the students' social and academic integration into their university were key factors for persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Cross (1981) similarly determined that nontraditional students were influenced by their inadequate social and academic integration. However, Cross differed from Tinto in that his theory also focused on potential university factors as the cause of attrition; namely, these barriers for nontraditional students were situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers included the student's work and personal responsibilities (Cross, 1981; Kazis et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011), institutional barriers consisted of insufficient university programs for nontraditional students (Cross, 1981; Hagedorn, 2015; Kazis et al., 2007; Kezar et al., 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011), and dispositional barriers related to the learners' perception of their academic ability (Cross, 1981). However, Bean and Metzner (1985) suggested that academic inclusion was more significant for the attrition of nontraditional students, while Berger and Lyon (2005) determined that social integration contributed more to traditional student retention.

Doctoral Programs

While doctoral education is on the rise in the United States, attrition rates remain high (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020) and often vary based on the graduate program format (Ames et al., 2018). In the traditional classroom setting, doctoral attrition averages between 40 and 60% (Ames et al., 2018; Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Okahana et al., 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), while online doctoral programs range from 60 to 80% (Ames et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Rovai, 2003; Rovai, 2014; Terrell, 2002; Terrell, 2005). Although women veterans are approximately 5% more likely to reach their dream of a doctorate than non-veteran students, whether enrolled within a traditional or online format (Aponte et al., 2017).

The impact of more than half of all doctoral learners dropping out is significant; according to the literature, students, universities, and societies can be affected by these consequences (Breitenbach, 2019; Caruth, 2015; Cassuto, 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). To start, dropouts experience the outcome of wasting a considerable amount of money, time, and energy on their failed doctoral dream (Cassuto, 2013). Further, the decision to drop out often causes the student feelings of depression, anger, humiliation, and remorse (Caruth, 2015; Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Similarly, as concluded by Gardner, universities also experience a loss of time and energy related to doctoral attrition. However, universities can experience more harmful outcomes, such as being forced to eliminate underperforming doctoral programs (Lovitts, 2001).

Doctoral Student Persistence

The reason that students give up on their dream of a doctorate is a crucial component of understanding the phenomenon of doctoral attrition (Castello et al., 2017). Accordingly, the

literature has attempted to identify the factors for doctoral persistence numerous times (Devos et al., 2017). As a result, scholars widely agree that doctoral students rarely decide to give up on their degree because of one unfavorable event; instead, the decision to withdraw is often the result of many factors (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Olive, 2019). This section will examine the doctoral persistence factors commonly referenced in the literature to include isolation, socialization, life balance, and available resources.

     Isolation. The first cause in the literature that explains doctoral attrition is student isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Lewis et al., 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Throughout the literature, many doctoral students have reported feeling isolated and alone as they faced the demands of obtaining their doctorate (Lewis et al., 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). While the literature commonly captures this learner experience (Lewis et al., 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), the underlying causes of feeling isolated often varied. Ali and Kohun concluded that isolation was the result of the student's initial expectations of doctoral education and demonstrated their limited knowledge of the challenges and time commitment of pursuing a doctorate. Castello et al. (2017) suggested that isolation can also surface at various stages of the student's doctoral journey and result from other causes, such as a new student struggling to understand their role or a student halfway through their program feeling they are not making enough progress. Smith et al. (2006) agreed that doctoral students could experience isolation at any time to include their final step of the thesis defense when they feel unprepared. Comparably, Lovitts also revealed that isolation could occur at any stage of the doctoral journey, specifically when students do not fully understand expectations and fail to please their professors or dissertation chair. On the other

hand, Golde (2005) noted that program mismatch could also cause students to experience feelings of isolation, a lack of motivation, and an inability to persist.

      Inadequate Socialization. In the literature, the second cause describing why doctoral students drop out is inadequate socialization (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Smith et al., 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Research often concludes that students are more likely to persist when they are actively involved within their doctoral community (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), procuring academic, professional, and social integration (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Smith et al., 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In short, engaged doctoral students are more motivated and less likely to withdraw from their program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

      While the literature frequently captured socialization as a cause for attrition in doctoral education, the causes are less agreed upon, resulting in various explanations and potential changes to increase student retention (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Smith et al., 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The most widely mentioned cause for inadequate socialization is the student's integration into their program (de Valero, 2001; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Smith et al., 2006; Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005; Zeng et al., 2013). Lovitts prioritized the student's integration with their professors, dissertation chair, and peers, suggesting that the cohort model of creating integration significantly increased persistence. Comparably, while exclusively considering the dissertation phase, Tinto and de Valero recommended that socialization would likely combat isolation and increase doctoral retention. Focusing their efforts similarly on the dissertation phase, Smith et al. also agreed that the integration between the student and their chair was important. Explicitly, this influence could easily create the difference between students graduating and dropping out of their doctoral

programs (Smith et al., 2006). Equally assured, Rovai (2002) established that socialization during the dissertation phase increased student retention since it fostered feelings of belonging, shared beliefs, trust, and devotion. However, other researchers point out the need for reoccurring, quality meetings between the doctoral student and their dissertation chair to foster integration and create a supportive climate focused on helping students obtain their dream of a doctorate (Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005; Zeng et al., 2013).

Another cause of inadequate socialization commonly focuses on program attributes such as the delivery format of online or in the classroom (Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Terrell et al., 2009). Lovitts, concentrating her efforts on the increased retention of cohort programs, revealed that online programs often lacked the means to integrate students. Comparably, Terrell et al. agreed with Lovitts, concluding that the cause of higher attrition rates for online programs was often the result of limited integration and a lack of motivation. In contrast, many other studies looked beyond the delivery format of either online or in-classroom and point to the specific design flaws of doctoral coursework and criticized programs for the lack of team projects and opportunities to solve real-world problems with more experienced researchers, as such neglecting to facilitate the development of the students' identity as new researchers within their field (Allan & Dory, 2001; Bain et al., 2010; Gardner, 2006; Haworth & Bair, 2000; McAlpine et al., 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Weidman, 2010).

The literature also examines doctoral students' ability to proactively create relationships as another possible cause of inadequate socialization (Pyhalto & Keskinen, 2012; McAlpine et al., 2012). In this regard, Pyhalto and Keskinen revealed that becoming engaged in their program required doctoral students to network and develop relationships within their new community

proactively; moreover, if students were passive and failed to achieve this level of socialization, they would be less interested in their studies, experience more negative emotions, and were less likely to persist. McAlpine et al. similarly agreed with attrition research and highlighted the significance of doctoral students developing networks within their community to support their socialization. Although McAlpine et al. varied slightly in his conclusions and called on universities to promote and facilitate a means for connecting students, concluding it was an essential task for facilitating the creation of students' identity as researchers.

Life Balance. The third cause regularly identified in the literature for doctoral attrition is the student's ability to achieve life balance between the demands of their doctoral education and other personal responsibilities such as career, family, and community obligations (Allan & Dory, 2001; Gardner, 2009; Manathunga, 2005; McAlpine et al. 2012; Smith et al., 2006). McApline et al. observed that some doctoral students dropped out of their program because they were not able to balance their existing responsibilities with the demands of earning a doctorate, while others simply refused to sacrifice deprioritizing their personal life. Comparably, Allan and Dory and Smith et al. agreed that some students intentionally withdrew from their programs because they ranked their time with family and friends as more important than completing their doctorate. Gardner revealed that students are more likely to balance their doctoral coursework and personal life when they share common values with their chair, department, and university.

Lack of Available Resources. The fourth common cause of doctoral attrition is a lack of available personal resources (Gaff, 2002; Gardner, 2009, Lovitts, 2001; Smith et al., 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), such as limited time and money (Gardner, 2009; Smith et al., 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). These findings often varied, suggesting that students employed by universities were more likely to drop out (Gaff, 2002; Lovitts, 2001).

Although, other literature disagreed with this claim and concluded that attrition was higher for students who were either unemployed or not employed by a university (Castello et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) and Tinto (1993) determined that a lack of financial resources rather than employment type played a fundamental role in the student's ability to persist. Specifically, Wao and Onwuegbuzie described this influence as the degree that universities help to meet the financial needs of doctoral students. Earl-Norvell (2006) further concluded that doctoral students who paid for their tuition out-of-pocket were less likely to persist. In a study of former doctoral students, Lovitts similarly determined that approximately 20% cited financial hardship as their leading influence for withdrawing, while the most common causes were the social and cultural structures of doctoral programs.

Controversies in College Persistence Research

A limitation of the literature for college persistence is the overuse of the research process presented by Tinto and the need to investigate other potential factors for attrition rates that are not related to student attributes, such as university influences. In addition, while there is a significant amount of scholarship which captures the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate students, there are fewer studies focused on persistence factors as demonstrated in the publications by Bergman et al. (2014), Gigliotti and Huff (1995), Metzner and Bean (1987), and Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005). Doctoral programs were also studied significantly less when compared with undergraduate research, warranting the need for further study. Likewise, the available knowledge for online doctoral programs was less than traditional doctoral programs, despite the higher attrition rates for online programs. In addition, women student veterans were missing from the current research; although, few studies focused broadly on all veterans for persistence (Currier et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2016; Sullivan & Yoon, 2020).

As a gap for doctoral research, the literature commonly investigates the same topics repeatedly, namely inadequate socialization and dissertation supervision. Moreover, there was only one study located for student veterans as doctoral learners (Ross, 2019), although the experiences of women veterans were limited and recommended as further study. Comparably, many other researchers overemphasized one factor for doctoral persistence over other potential causes, such as dissertation supervision (Gearity & Mertz, 2012), inadequate socialization (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001), or student motivation (Pauley et al., 1999), creating fragmented literature with limited or incomplete empirical data.

The amount of literature investigating the problem of college persistence is substantial, dating back to the 1930s. Given this massive effort by nearly a century of scholars, it seems likely that dropout causes would have already been identified and retention rates improved; however, this is not the present-day reality for universities and students. Tinto's theory of student retention continues to be an influential theory within the field; however, the application of motivational theories over the last ten years has created many new and fascinating perspectives, not observed when using Tinto's model. Experts have shown a significant interest in the attribution theory to gain the learners' perspective and understand why some persist and others do not. Following this new, exciting perspective in the research, this study sought to understand how the viewpoint of women veterans influenced their motivation and ability to persist as doctoral students.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed account of the literature to investigate the lived experiences of women veterans as doctoral students. To start, this overview examined the theoretical framework that guided this study, namely Weiner's 1986 attributional theory of

achievement, motivation, and emotion. Using this theory, this discussion conceptualized the multidimensional process that doctoral students use to judge their successes and failures and how these perceptions influence their motivation to persist.

Next, this chapter synthesized the existing knowledge for veterans, college persistence, and doctoral student persistence, identifying the controversies and distinguishing gaps in the literature that warrant further research. This process revealed many unknowns for the experiences of all veterans, women veterans, and student veterans. Despite the gaps, this review determined that becoming a service member and later separating from the military is vastly different from the experiences of non-veterans as they navigate career changes. Likewise, it was also discovered that post-9/11 student veterans are more likely to have adjustment problems since they are more likely to have witnessed combat than prior generations of student veterans. Although despite this possibility and negative stereotypes, student veterans were found to be exceedingly capable within their higher education pursuits, persisting more often than non-veterans. Further, women veterans were more likely to persist than non-veteran women and men veterans at all academic levels. This process also revealed that college and doctoral persistence had been extensively researched in an attempt to lower dropout rates, although rates have not improved. Although, while examining these numerous studies, a new perspective occurred over the last decade. Specifically, these scholars adjusted their focus from student attributes and sought to understand the student's perception, motivation, and goal-setting abilities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States. The experiences of women as doctoral student veterans are unexplored. Thus, this chapter presents a detailed account of the study's research design, procedures, and analysis. This chapter also describes the setting, participants, my role as the researcher, data collection, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations to provide a means for replicating this study.

Design

This section identifies the planned research type and design for the study, detailing the use of qualitative research and phenomenological design. Following, this summary further discusses the application of the hermeneutic phenomenological design; as such, it presents an overview of the method, brief history, and relevance for the study.

Qualitative Research

This study could have used either the qualitative or quantitative approach to investigate women student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015); therefore, the identification of a methodology required considering the available literature for women student veterans, research problem, my research experiences, and the audience of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the nature of qualitative research includes creating explanations for the occurrence of social phenomena, and the purpose is to understand the world we live in, determine why things occur, identify the role of social influences, and answer questions related to behavior and opinions. In addition, some identifiable characteristics of qualitative research include the use of how, why, and what questions, multiple

data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and action research, and researchers serving as an instrument for data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consequently, I applied the following attributes of qualitative research identified by Creswell and Creswell and Creswell and Poth to this study:

- Focus on a single social phenomenon or understanding what it means to live in the world as a doctoral student and woman veteran.

- Answer behavior questions related to why some are able to persist and others are not and gather opinions for how this experience can be improved for women student veterans.

- Use open-ended questions during the focus group and interviews to facilitate conversational discussions.

- Use multiple data collection methods for triangulation.

- Serve as an instrument for this study, given my similar experiences of being a woman veteran and doctoral student.

As concluded earlier, the experiences of women enrolled as doctoral student veterans were absent in the literature. Although a common challenge for all student veterans is navigating the cultural differences between the military and higher education (Soeters et al., 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014), given that the cultural differences between the military and higher education are vast and further increase at the doctoral level, it is likely that department culture presents unique challenges for student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs. Thus, the goal of this study was to apply a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of women student veterans while enrolled in doctoral programs, as such examining potential issues and strengths that can be further investigated using quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phenomenological Research Design

Qualitative research has several types of designs: phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological research design explains a lived event or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In short, researchers use this method to understand and describe experiences from their participants' viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Dating back to the early 1900s, Husserl developed the phenomenology research method, emphasizing the focus on *eidos* or the essence of human experience (Laverty, 2003). More recently, Dukes (1984) further clarified that the goal of phenomenology research is to understand, while other research methods offer explanations. I decided on the phenomenology research design for this study because it enabled me to focus on understanding the experience of being a woman veteran and doctoral student from the participants' viewpoint (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Design

Van Manen (2001) defined *hermeneutic phenomenology* as the effort to build a complete interpretive narrative of a lived event while being mindful that human experiences are always more complicated. Consequently, the hermeneutic approach varies from other designs in that it strives to obtain insightful descriptions of human experience without taxonomizing, categorizing, or conceptualizing them (van Manen, 1997); as such, the fundamental assumption is that our immediate experiences of the world are significant or full of meaning (van Manen, 1997). In short, the emphasis is to reveal the seemingly insignificant, often overlooked details in everyday life (van Manen, 1997). At the heart of the approach, an individual's consciousness and experience are interconnected and unable to occur independently (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). This relationship is essential because it offers a central significance that facilitates

understanding the essence of human experience (van Manen, 1997). Subsequently, often called the non-foundationalist approach (Allen, 1996), van Manen (1997) concluded that hermeneutic phenomenological research seeks to discover what it means to be a woman, man, or child with unique cultural and historical traditions and to live in the world.

Hermeneutic phenomenology dates to the 1600s; during these early years, the design was primarily used for interpreting biblical texts (McManus Holroyd, 2007). Over the following three hundred years, hermeneutic phenomenology underwent many modifications (McManus Holroyd, 2007). Within this pool of contributors, Martin Heidegger made contributions throughout the twentieth century and became one of the more well-known researchers (Laverty, 2003). According to Laverty, Heidegger taught at the same university as the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and quickly become his apprentice. Husserl guaranteed Heidegger the succession to his professorship; although once established as his predecessor, Heidegger quickly distanced himself from Husserl and focused his efforts on hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger gained his recognition within the field by introducing the idea that human consciousness and lived experience were not separate (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1997). Proceeding Heidegger, the hermeneutic phenomenological design continued to develop through the contributions of many other researchers during the 1980s and 1990s (Dowling, 2007). Specifically, in 1997, van Manen further grew the hermeneutic design through the publication of his book, *Researching Lived Experiences: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Most notably, Manen provided guidance for writing hermeneutic research, modified the process for interpreting life experiences, and focused heavily on the pre-reflective study of the world (Dowling, 2007).

Aligned to hermeneutic phenomenological research, this study's purpose and corresponding research questions strived to understand the experiences of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs. Also, the data collection procedures were aligned with the hermeneutic phenomenological design because they consisted of conversational interviews and focus groups, where the data served as a means for gathering narrative content and developing a deeper interpretation of experience (van Manen, 1997). As such, the focus group and interview questions began by encouraging the participants to think about a specific situation and advanced into exploring the full experience (van Manen, 1997). To promote reflection and serve as another data source, this study also gathered the experiences of women student veterans through hermeneutic protocol writing as outline by van Manen.

While other phenomenological designs would also fit the needs of this study, my similar experiences of being a woman veteran and enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States led me to select the hermeneutic approach. With this said, other phenomenological researchers must bracket their knowledge about the phenomenon and place it outside of their view (van Manen, 1997). Although, as concluded by van Manen, this task is often difficult for researchers to achieve because their opinions and prior knowledge can resurface. Consequently, the hermeneutic phenomenological design was determined to be better suited for this study because it gathered the lived experiences of women veterans in doctoral programs and enabled my similar experiences to be captured within reflections and interpretations. In particular, the use of the hermeneutic research design provided a structured approach for me to discover what it means to be a woman, veteran, and doctoral student.

Research Questions

Next, this section restates the research questions drawn from the problem and purpose statements. This list includes the central research question and sub-questions for this study.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs?

Sub Question One

Why do women veterans pursue doctoral degrees?

Sub Question Two

What do women doctoral student veterans articulate as obstacles to their success as doctoral students?

Sub Question Three

How do women doctoral student veterans describe their socialization to the academic profession as a result of their doctoral coursework, research, and relationships with faculty?

Setting

The research setting should have an ample quantity of potential participants, the probability of building participant trust, and the ability to gain credible data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Men have historically dominated all branches of the military (Arminio et al., 2015; Barrett, 1996; Brooks, 2011; Green et al., 2010; Higate, 2007; Shpeer & Howe, 2020); while this is slowly changing, women currently make up a mere 16% of enlisted service members and 19% of the officer corps (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). As a result, women veterans are a small subgroup of all student veterans (Cate et al., 2017; Falkey, 2016), consisting of approximately 73% men and 27% women (Falkey, 2016). With roughly eight percent of student veterans pursuing graduate degrees (Holder, 2011) and a small percentage of those being

at the doctoral level, limiting this study to a single institution, or a small handful of institutions, would have precluded me from identifying sufficient participants to conduct a qualitative study. Therefore, the setting for this study was any US-based university with a residential doctoral program, increasing the likelihood of finding interested participants.

Participants

This section describes the sample size, sample pool, sample type, and sampling procedures for this study. The demographic information to include the age, gender, and ethnicity of the participants is also presented. In addition, the published demographics survey is provided, detailing the development and piloting procedures for the face and content validity.

Sample Size, Pool, and Demographic Data

The number of participants for qualitative research often varies based on the phenomena studied and commonly ranges between five and 25 (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), although Moustakas (1994) recommended between 10 and 25 participants for the phenomenological design. Given that women veterans make up a small subgroup of all doctoral student veterans (Cate et al., 2017; Falkey, 2016), this study had few participant qualifications other than gender, military service, and doctoral experience. As such, the 10 purposefully selected participants for this study shared the characteristics of being a woman, current or former doctoral student, had attended a diversity of degree programs, and had served in any branch of the military either in full or part-time status, but had no other military-related requirements to qualify for the study, such as service dates, combat experience, discharge type, or rank. Similarly, there were no age requirements for the participants. This study also sought to recruit a participant pool similar to the demographics of women in the military as identified by U.S. Department of Defense (2016). This target consisted of 25% African American, 15% Hispanic,

and 60% White.

Sampling Type and Procedures

A convenience sample involves locating research participants based on their interests and availability (Patton, 2015). Women account for approximately 16% of the military and 9.4% of veterans, resulting in fewer women veterans (Aponte et al., 2017; Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Furthermore, a mere 8% of student veterans are grouped together as advanced students enrolled as either graduate or doctoral students and about 14,000 of these learners are women (Holder, 2011; Phillips, 2016; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2019). An analysis of the Million Records Report published by Student Veterans of America (Cate, 2014; Cate et al., 2017) indicates that a mere 1.6% of the degrees conferred were a result of doctoral or post-doctoral studies, offering roughly 2,500 women veterans with earned doctorates between 2010 and 2015. With these numbers as estimates, the probability of finding a sufficient number of women veterans that are either current or former doctoral students for this qualitative study was low. Consequently, I sought to create a convenience sample pool of participants by searching with the keywords: *woman veteran* and *doctorate* on LinkedIn; after identifying interested individuals, I used snowball sampling to determine if they know any other women veterans and current or former doctoral students and asked them to share my invitation to participate. To attract interested individuals, I developed a flyer (Appendix B). In addition to sharing my flyer on LinkedIn through a post and connection requests, I also distributed it within my veteran network of friends and colleagues on Facebook. Once I identified 15 interested women veterans, I emailed the Survey Monkey link for them to access and complete the demographics survey (Appendix C), enabling me to identify whether they qualify for the study and to gather demographic information from the qualified participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the

survey results were obtained, I examined the data and identified the pool of 10 participants for the study.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, I identified the participant pool with convenience and snowball sampling. Using LinkedIn and Facebook, current or former women veterans and doctoral students were identified and emailed to invite them to participate in the study. Subsequently, the qualified participants received another email containing the consent form within SignNow. After the signed consent forms were returned, I emailed the participants the data collection schedule using Calendly to determine their availability for the online interview and focus group. After the scheduling was established, the data collection began with individual interviews in WebEx. Afterward, I emailed the participants the advice letter instructions and timelines, requesting them to complete the task within one week. Next, I conducted two focus groups in WebEx, creating groups of five participants. After all the data was collected, I used the qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (2013), as such organizing the data, using micro coding to create phases, chunking the phrases, and creating clusters. After data analysis, I emailed the participants the results to provide them an opportunity to agreed or disagreed, and I completed the analysis and conclusion sections of the study.

The Researcher's Role

As a doctoral student and woman veteran, my goal of this study included becoming an instrument for the analysis and understanding the experiences of women veterans in doctoral programs. Moreover, I further hoped to discover how the experiences of women student veterans could be improved in doctoral programs. As recommended by van Manen (1997), the first step to become an instrument was to acknowledge my similar lived experiences as a woman, veteran,

and doctoral student. Therefore, this section will thoroughly explain my relationship with the participants and my role in the setting and collecting and analyzing the data.

Researcher and Participant Relationship

My role was to provide a safe place where my participants felt comfortable reliving their experience as a woman veteran and doctoral student. To achieve this, I used the following mannerisms recommended by Creswell (2007) to build rapport with the participants and improve the quality of my data:

- Introduced myself and share common ground of being a woman veteran and doctoral student without providing any specifics about my experiences.

- Used small talk or ice breaker questions to start conversations.

- Communicated that there are no right or wrong responses.

- Was mindful of my body language.

- Dressed appropriately to meet with student veterans and other doctoral professionals.

- Showed a genuine interest in the data collection.

Researcher's Role in the Setting

The setting for this study consisted of any US-based university with a doctoral program. Onsite observations were not possible for this national study; as such, I did not visit any university campus. Moreover, I also did not hold a role at the universities or the doctoral programs investigated. Although I shared commonalities with the participants to include my gender, doctoral program enrollment, and military experiences.

Researcher's Role in Collecting and Analyzing Data

My role was to gather, analyze, and interpret the experiences of my participants. As explained by van Manen (1997), I began this task by strongly questioning the meaning of the

experience of being a woman veteran and doctoral student. Specifically, this questioning used my experiences to create personal descriptions, concentrating on specific situations (van Manen, 1997). Moreover, my accounts were direct or did not include generalized explanations (van Manen, 1997); for example, instead of concluding that doctoral students often learn their new role as a doctoral candidate in their first term, I reflected on what it was like to be a woman student veteran enrolled in my first semester, recalling what it felt like to pass my first two courses realizing that I could persist with increased effort. Also, my goal was to consider that my experiences could, but may not be, shared by others and to collect my knowledge as a data source for the study (van Manen, 1997). Following as a qualitative researcher, I also used my research questions to gather additional data about the experiences of my participants. These methods included a focus group, conversational interviews, and advice letters. Afterward, my role was to analyze the collected data, consisting of a systematic approach of moving from a narrow to a boarded view (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

When discussing my role in collecting and analyzing data, it was also important to address my assumptions that could bias my findings. As noted by van Manen (1997), the difficulty of phenomenological research is not that we know nothing about the lived experience; instead, it is that we are too familiar with it. Therefore, as recommended by van Manen, I openly acknowledged my presumptions and experiences during analysis and set them aside through bracketing, not to forget them but to consider the participants' experiences more clearly. I used my personal experiences to facilitate a clearer understanding of, or description of, my participants experiences. Additionally, my assumptions of the participants' accounts were rooted in social constructivism. This expectation included being aware that the participants' meanings

were varied and subjective to their life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As concluded by Creswell and Poth, I also strived to find the complexity of my participants' accounts.

<center>**Data Collection**</center>

Qualitative research requires thoroughness and the use of many data collection methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following this rigorous process, this study began with a self-reflection of my similar experiences and prior knowledge as a woman veteran and doctoral student. Subsequently, the participants attended an individual interview to share their experiences of being a woman veteran and doctoral student and afterward wrote a letter of advice to their younger self. Finally, the participants attended a focus group to provide their final input about their experiences.

Conversational Interview

I interviewed the participants individually in WebEx, using recorded online video conferencing and automatic transcribing as a means of data collection. The purpose of a hermeneutic phenomenological interview is to serve as a means to create a conversation that explores and obtains narrative data about the participants' experiences (van Manen, 1997). Specifically, the interviews for this study sought to create a conversation with the participants about what it means to be a woman, veteran, and doctoral student. As concluded by van Manen, it is not possible to develop a ready-made list of questions for a conversational interview. Rather, the focus should be to use concrete questions and to redirect generalized accounts (van Manen, 1997). Table 3 and Appendix D lists the questions that I used to direct the discussions and to avoid generalized responses.

Table 3

Interview Questions

Opening Questions
1. Why did you join the military?
2. What was your military career like?

Doctoral Program Experiences
3. How did the idea of getting a doctorate first surface?
4. How did you tell your family or friends?
5. Why did you choose your university and program of study?
6. What was your prior knowledge about the commitment of being a doctoral student?
7. What was your prior knowledge about your university and doctoral program?
8. Tell me about the challenges you experienced during the coursework phase of your doctoral program?
9. Describe your positive experiences during the coursework phase of your doctoral program?
10. Tell me about the challenges you experienced during the dissertation phase of your doctoral program?
11. Describe your positive experiences during the dissertation phase of your doctoral program?
12. Tell me about your interactions with faculty and other students during your coursework phase.
13. Describe your interactions with your chair and other students during your dissertation phase?
14. Describe your transition from the coursework to the dissertation phase of your doctoral program.
15. How did you feel about your university's veterans services?
16. If you could change anything about your university's veterans services, what would you change and why?
17. Describe your integration into the doctoral community and higher education.
18. Describe your sense of belonging within academic research.
19. What are your future research goals?
20. How has your experiences as a doctoral student influenced you professionally?
21. How has your experiences as a doctoral student influenced you personally?

Closing Questions
22. Would you like to share anything else about your experience of being a woman veteran and doctoral student?

Questions one and two were designed to be non-threatening and to build rapport with the

participants (Patton, 2015). Van Manen (1997) suggests that hermeneutic researchers must keep

conversational interviews focused on the lived experience. To achieve this, van Manen

recommends the use of concrete questions and asking individuals to recall a specific occasion, person, event, or situation. Following, once the individual is focused, I was able to fully explore the experience of being a woman veteran and doctoral student (van Manen, 1997). As a result, questions three through 21 were designed to be very concrete with the goal of encouraging the participants to reflect on a specific circumstance of their lived experience as a woman veteran and doctoral student. Question 22 closed the interview, returning the role of expert to myself and providing the participant a final opportunity to offer insight (Patton, 2015).

Advice Letter

Advice letters are a form of written communication that enables participants to reflect on their past experiences and generates original data (van Manen, 1997). To create a structured response, the participants were asked to consider what advice they needed but did not receive before enrolling in their doctoral program. Then, the following writing topics were provided for the participants to consider while drafting the letter to their younger self:

1. How does military service and separation influence woman veterans as doctoral students?

2. What are the academic expectations of doctoral programs, and how do these differ from graduate programs?

3. What is the time commitment of pursuing a doctoral degree?

4. How do you obtain life balance as a doctoral student?

5. Is it common to struggle as a doctoral student?

6. Do the expectations differ for the coursework and dissertation phases?

7. How do you persist and maintain motivation during challenging situations?

Heineman (2017) observed that the gender-related experiences of women veterans continued to influence them as student veterans and often resulted in an internal struggle to determine their

identity and self-imposed isolation. Demer (2013) and Foster and Vince (2009) comparably concluded that combat exposure increased feelings of isolation for women student veterans. Despite these findings, women veterans are more likely to graduate than men veterans and non-veteran women (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011). Thus, writing prompt one was designed to identify potential challenges or advantages related to the participant's military service. As suggested by van Manen, the writing topics two through seven for this task encouraged the participants to consider specific situations or persons from their experience as a doctoral student. Following, the perceived event guided their advice letter to their younger self (van Manen, 1997). As the second form of data collection, I emailed the advice letter writing prompt and instructions to the participants (Appendix E). To complete this task, the participants either composed their letters using Microsoft Word or email.

Focus Group

Next, I conducted three focus groups with five participants in WebEx, using recorded online video conferencing and automatic transcribing as a means of data collection. The purpose of a focus group is to encourage open conversation between the participants about their similar lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). During the focus groups, I acted as the facilitator to keep the discussion on the topic and encouraged interaction, and the participants served as the experts on the topic of doctoral attrition for women veterans (Creswell, 2007). To begin the focus groups, I introduced myself, discussed the topic and guidelines, and asked the opening question. Following, the participants openly shared their lived experiences. While it was not realistic to create a list of questions that would lead the entire conversation (van Manen, 1997), I used a set of predetermined guidelines, topics, and questions to direct the discussion and to avoid generalized explanations (Table 4 and Appendix F).

Table 4

Focus Group Questions

Topics
• What is it like to be a woman veteran enrolled in a doctoral program?
• How can this experience be improved for women student veterans?

Doctoral Experiences
1. How have you learned to write academically as opposed to the way the military taught us with business writing or in bullet points?
2. What were your positive experiences as a doctoral student?
3. What were your negative experiences as a doctoral student?
4. Describe your interactions with professors.
5. Describe your relationship with your dissertation chair.
6. Describe your interactions with non-veteran students.
7. Describe your military experiences that helped you as a woman veteran and doctoral student.
8. Describe your military experiences that hindered you as a woman veteran and doctoral student.
9. If you could change any aspect of your doctoral program experience, what would you change, and why?
10. Describe your experiences of using military financial aid as a doctoral student.

Question one served as an icebreaker or non-threatening question to build rapport and start the group conversation (Patton, 2015). Van Manen (1997) concludes that staying close to the topic and avoiding generalized responses are imperative when conducting a conversational interview. Van Manen further suggests the use of concrete and redirection questions to achieve this during interviews. As a result, questions two through 10 encouraged the participants to reflect on a specific event, instance, or person during their experience as a woman student veteran and doctoral student. Once the participants were focused, I guided the discussion to explore their full experiences while limiting off-topic and generalized comments.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the analysis or making sense of qualitative data is comparable to peeling an onion one layer at a time. Furthermore, qualitative analysis

differs from other research methods because it does not require an organized, step-by-step

process; instead, in most cases, analysis processes are organic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For

this study, I used the qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (2013). This

process involved four basic steps: data management, data reduction, data interpretation, and data

representation (Miles & Huberman, 2013). After data collection was complete, I started my

analysis with data management by cleaning up the data and using micro coding to create one or

two-word phrases for each sentence of the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 2013). Next, I

completed the data reduction, which involved reading the transcripts many times, writing notes

in the margins of the transcripts, chunking the phrases into groups, setting aside outliners or

contrasting phrases, and creating clusters or initial codes by combining similar groups (Miles &

Huberman, 2013).

      Afterward, as a part of data interpretation, I sought to understand the data by continuing

to immerse myself through additional chunking and creating clusters or axial codes (Miles &

Huberman, 2013). Likewise, I also focused on identifying and interpreting the themes within the

data, looking for the meaning of being a woman student veteran and residential doctoral student.

Through this process, I produced textual representations of the data to include listing the themes

for the phenomena. After the data analysis was complete, the participants received an email

detailing the results to understand whether they agreed or disagreed and to provide a means of

member checks for the study.

<p align="center">Trustworthiness</p>

      Trustworthiness is the means that a researcher checks for the accuracy of their findings

by using specific procedures and identifying whether their approach is consistent among the

literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This section will provide an overview of this process,

addressing the credibility of the findings, dependability and confirmability of the findings, and transferability of the findings.

Credibility

Credibility represents the probability of whether the collected data and research findings are accurate. To achieve credibility, I began by using three sources to triangulate the collected data for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, my bias related to being a woman veteran and a doctoral student was clarified in reflective journaling and thoroughly bracketed throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the theme descriptions that were created to explain what it means to be a woman veteran and doctoral student were realistic, rich, and present contrary themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As suggested by Creswell and Creswell, I also used member checks to identify whether the participants agree with my interpretation of their lived experiences.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability can include auditing interview notes and transcripts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, this study achieved this by recording virtual interviews using video web conferencing software. Afterward, the MP4 files were automatically converted to text using the meeting application. Later, these transcripts were compared to the video to ensure accuracy. Lastly, as noted by Creswell and Creswell, this study further created dependability and confirmability through providing detailed, thick descriptions of themes identified during analysis, incorporating member-checks to verify the findings, and creating a reflective journal to capture my experiences.

Transferability

Qualitative research differs from other methods because the goal is not to generalize findings; rather, it is to provide transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, transferability is the likelihood that the study will be relevant to other situations or populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study achieved transferability by providing rich descriptive accounts of the research methods, data analysis procedures, and findings. In addition, the analysis also included descriptive summaries of the identified themes and relevant participant data of the lived experience of being a woman veteran and doctoral student. This detailed content of the study provided future researchers with the necessary knowledge to apply these processes to their work. With this said, the participants' feedback of their lived experiences would be more relevant or transferable if their setting were also considered (Lodico et al., 2010), as such replicated studies should similarly investigate the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in United States doctoral programs.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study included obtaining IRB approval before data collection, obtaining participant consent, securely storing participant data, and maintaining the confidentiality of the participants using pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, I did not begin the data collection methods until authorized by the IRB (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similarly, the participants did not complete the focus group, interview, or letter writing tasks until they returned their signed consent form (Creswell & Poth, 2018). See Appendix G for the participant consent form. During the data collection process, I also securely stored the participants' demographics surveys, recorded virtual interviews, and advice letters on an external hard drive that was password-protected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Afterward five years, the data will be destroyed by deleting it from the external hard drive and recycle bin (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Lastly, I assigned the participants with a pseudonym and maintained them throughout the study. Real names were not mentioned nor recorded (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States. Specifically, this chapter provided the method considerations and selections for the study. This examination began with the relevance of using the qualitative method, noting that this study sought to create explanations for a lived phenomenon. In addition, the research questions, setting, and participant selections presented in this chapter reflected my goal of discovering the experiences of women veterans and doctoral students. Following the procedures, the researcher's role, data collection, and data analysis considerations and selections also illustrated these methods for replication of the study and to prove the validity of the results. Finally, this chapter presented the trustworthiness and ethical considerations to reveal how this study did not adversely harm the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs in the United States. The results of the data analysis for this study are presented. This chapter presents descriptions of the participants, themes, outliner data, and responses to the research questions.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 10 women student veterans who were either current doctoral students or graduates. Table 5 describes these individuals using pseudonyms.

Table 5

Participant Data

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Branch	Rank	Military Status	Degree	Degree Status
Anna	Hispanic	Woman	30-39	Air Force	Officer	Reserve/ National Guard	PhD	Research Phase
Bailey	Hispanic	Woman	30-39	Army	Enlisted	Discharged	PhD	Graduate
Charlotte	White	Woman	30-39	Army	Officer	Discharged	PhD	Research Phase
Diana	White	Woman	50-Older	Navy	Officer	Retired	PhD	Research Phase
Emma	White	Woman	50-Older	Army	Enlisted	Discharged	EdD	Graduate
Faith	Black	Woman	40-49	Army	Enlisted	Discharged	PhD	Research Phase
Gabriela	White	Woman	50-Older	Army	Officer	Retired	PhD	Research Phase

Helen	White	Woman	50-Older	Army	Enlisted	Discharged	PhD	Graduate
Irene	White	Woman	50-Older	Air Force	Officer	Retired	PhD	Research Phase
Jenny	Black	Woman	50-Older	Air Force	Officer	Discharged	PhD	Research Phase

Results

This section presents the themes and subthemes for this study. Using Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analysis to analyze my data, I found three themes. These themes were department culture, grit, and life balance.

Department Culture

This section explains the influence of department culture for women doctoral student veterans. The experiences associated with department culture occurred the most throughout the data. I created this theme by clustering the subthemes of faculty support, academic integration, social integration, and doctoral community integration.

Faculty Support

The subtheme of faculty support was the most common occurrence of department culture experienced by the participants, making up about 44% of the theme. It emerged when the participants discussed their interactions with professors, mentors, and dissertation committee members. With this said, the participants often described these experiences as either important to their ability to persist or barriers to overcome. For example, Anna said, "my mentor opened her guest house to me when I was struggling in my marriage … and another mentor let me cry in her office. Without mentors, I don't think I would have realized that I can do it [persist in my doctoral program]." Comparably, Emma revealed, "I was petrified of my writing skills … but one professor really sat down and helped me. It's hard to come out. You're afraid people will

judge you. I was really glad I did because I was met with kindness." Bailey, reflecting on her bad faculty experiences, said, "I wish I would have accepted things as they were and advocated for myself earlier." Similarly, Faith revealed that her chair left her dissertation committee without notice and with an autogenerated department email; although reflecting on this stressful experience, she referred to it as a "blessing in disguise" because it gave her an "extremely supportive" dissertation committee.

Several participants in their letter of advice to another woman veteran and doctoral student also noted the importance of faculty support. For example, Faith recommended using "a mentor or coach to confide in for those troubling times" and reaching out to your "chair when you get stuck" on your proposal. Comparably, Anna concluded that "the dissertation is new to us, we are on - personally - uncharted waters, but people have done this before. So, don't think you should do this alone. Seek out mentors." Diana further noted the importance of finding dissertation committee members who are "responsive" and "supportive of your research ideas," concluding "there's nothing worse than sending in a whole chapter and getting no feedback or response." Comparably, Charlotte, considering her struggles with non-veteran faculty approving her women veteran study, said, "it's sort of like dealing with a chain of command or shop giving you an answer you don't like. Don't take a 'no' from someone who doesn't have the authority to give you a 'yes'."

Academic Integration

The subtheme of academic integration surfaced when the participants discussed their prior knowledge of doctoral programs and understanding course and faculty expectations. For example, Faith concluded that doctoral programs do not have a "socialization process like basic training in that they don't tell you or warn you about these things [high academic expectations]."

Comparably, Bailey, reflecting on her prior knowledge of doctoral programs, revealed, "I thought it would be a breeze, so much so I completely ignored the scare tactics … about how difficult graduate school really is. Huge mistake. The program was grueling, challenging, irritating, and downright maddening." Most participants also agreed that picking their research topic early in the program was a best practice, although many did not realize this expectation. For example, Anna considering her coursework wished she had used these assignments for her dissertation; as such, they are only "sort of related". Comparably, Faith, reflecting on identifying her research population late in her program, concluded "it's causing me to do so much more reading because I didn't do that throughout the program." In contrast, Diana concluded, "one of the things that I was advised to do, and found very helpful, is to pick your study topic early."

Social Integration

The subtheme of social integration emerged when the participants discussed their interactions with peers. For example, Anna thinking of the many friendships she developed during her doctoral experiences, provided the following advice to another woman student veteran:

> "The student affairs staff should be able to refer you to affinity groups to meet others with a shared identity and develop friendships … and there are student groups outside of the institution as well, like Student Veterans of America and the Pat Tillman community. I have developed friends that way … Over time, we have validated each other … We ask each other questions, peer edit some papers, and generally support each other through everyday challenges."

Bailey stated, "find your people and use them! I would probably be extending my time in graduate school, or have quit completely, if not for my classmates." Similarly, Faith expressed

the need to "network with individuals that have your same interests." Charlotte also revealed, "there's nothing like a nice, weekly check-in with your peers to keep you motivated and on track – you can also ask one another questions and that's important." Diana comparably suggested in her advice letter to,

> "get to know the other students in your program. They can provide great feedback on what you want to study. Even if you don't think you have a lot in common at first if they are not veterans, they will often provide a source of support."

Community Integration

The subtheme of community integration emerged when the participants discussed their experiences of student teaching, journal publications, attending conferences, and their sense of belonging within their research field. For example, Anna said, "if your institution has working-groups, attend their talks and workshops, better yet - put on a talk or workshop … The feedback at the speaking events can be helpful for the discussion section of your work." Faith, reflecting on her experiences with her mentor, concluded, "I've published like four articles already, and I've presented it a number of conferences and stuff like that." Faith further provided the following advice to another women student veteran, "when you can, agree to work on things with others even if you have a small role, it gives you some exposure." Emma, considering how her life has changed since obtaining her doctorate, stated, "remember, once you receive your doctorate, career opportunities open up, your taken more seriously, and you can truly state that less than 1% of the global population has a doctorate."

Grit

This section explains the influence of grit for women doctoral student veterans. While department culture occurred the most and grit was the second, I found that about 47% of the time

department culture created the challenging situations which required the participants to use grit to persist within their programs. The theme of grit was created by clustering the subthemes of conscientiousness, courage, passion, perseverance, and resilience.

Conscientiousness

The subtheme of conscientiousness was the most common characteristic of grit used by the participants, making up about 54% of the theme. It emerged when participants discussed their ability to reflect on their experiences and use goal-related behaviors to persist within their doctoral program. With this said, the participants often described themselves as self-disciplined or hardworking. For example, Faith said, "the biggest thing that I brought with me from the military was my ability to be disciplined and get my homework done while working full time." Bailey reflecting on her upcoming graduation similarly contributed her success to "drive" and "motivation" obtained during her military service. Charlotte, reflecting on her commitment to her veteran research topic, concluded:

"Sometimes people [faculty and peers] without the veteran background have ideas about what we're like and what we experience, and they're very dismissive. Most people, who are very kind and supportive, they'll say it's probably not the issue you think it is, but I'm always like no, no, oh, no, it's an issue, and this is the hill I will die on!"

Anna further described her doctoral experiences as a "full-time job" that can "become difficult," but "it is imperative to identify the root causes of your struggle, find resources, and apply them." Likewise, Emma noted, "my mantra to get shit done helped me graduate but it made me hate group projects because there's always that one that doesn't do a darn thing, and in the military, you can't get away with that!" Diana reflected similarly on past group projects, noted, "I want to just do it and get it done and knock it out." Although, Faith, considering why

some of her peers do not like to work on projects with her, further revealed:

> "on the flip side having a lot of discipline does harm you because its intimidating to others. I get a lot of different people asking me all the time, how in the world did you get all that done? I tell them that I'm just doing what I know to do, to knock it out, get it done … So, it kind of backfires on me sometimes."

Resilience

The subtheme of resilience emerged when the participants discussed their ability to recover from difficulties or unexpected changes during their doctoral studies. During the focus group, Emma said, "being in the military, I was often the only woman in my field because of this I knew I had staying power or the ability to stick it out when shit got bad." With a laugh, Diana added, "if you can get through a yearlong or six month deployment you can get through a PhD program!" Bailey advised, "do not wait for someone to fix problems for you. Take the initiative before the problem becomes too big to solve." Charlotte said,

> "for me, it's like you have a vague idea of what you want me to accomplish, I'm going to try to accomplish it, and after I do you hate it. I'm just like, OK, I will knock it out. It's not like a soul crushing experience when I'm given the feedback of no, no, no, go back and fix it. I'm like, OK, well nobody screamed at me today, so it's all hunky dory."

Passion

The subtheme of passion emerged when the participants discussed their strong feelings to achieve their educational goals with continued direction and commitment. Charlotte revealed, "I was very angry and very vocal about why hasn't anyone researched this [veteran prenatal care] … It was the Perfect storm of events that made me start to think of going for a PhD." Similarly, Emma concluded, "for me, if it's a fire in the belly. If I have to crawl over it, under it, around it,

you know, I'm going to find a way." Diana, reflecting on her found research passion, suggested in her advice to another women student veteran,

> "be in love with your dissertation topic. You'll probably spend at least a year, if not more, of your life doing the study and writing the dissertation. You want it to be something that you are excited to work on, rather than drudgery."

Perseverance

The subtheme of perseverance emerged when the participants discussed their continued effort to achieve their educational goals despite delays, setbacks, or other difficulties. In their letters of advice, Emma concluded, "Stay the course, rewards will abound!" Comparably, Faith stated, "you are filled with the grit needed to push through and make it to the end. Do not allow their words to stop you from pursuing your goal." Anna similarly said, "you belong. There are others that have succeeded or on their path to succeed, just like you. You know you have something to say. So say it!" Charlotte, reflecting on her determination to improve military healthcare research, concluded a difficulty she continues to face is the stereotype that "all veterans are morally flawed and they're stupid … and deserve this [to be the research lab rats or a convenience sample]. And it's just like, fuck you."

Courage

The subtheme of courage emerged when the participants discussed not being afraid of failure but embraced it as means to improve. Faith, considering her struggles to be accepted in her program, said, "do not second guess yourself. Speak boldly about your thoughts when you share what you've read." Similarly, Anna provided the following advice when overcoming the challenges of writing your dissertation:

> "A paper is not an identity. A paper is a product. Products can be modified and are never

perfect. So accept criticism as a gift, someone - a reviewer, a listener in your talk, or a

reader - spent time on your work and used energy to give you ideas. Not everyone has

learned to do so in a polite and constructive way, so don't take any of it personal. Apply

the changes to your product, or don't. In any case, your paper is not YOU."

Charlotte, describing her courage to stand up to her non-veteran peers, revealed that she

commonly hears, "just because it's a problem for you doesn't mean it's a problem for other

women." In response, she replies, "I live my life in these circles. Believe me, if I say it's a

problem, I'm not just pulling it out of my ass."

Life Balance

This section explains the influence of life balance for women doctoral student veterans.

The experiences associated with life balance occurred the least throughout the data. I created this

theme by clustering the subthemes of balancing family life, doctoral obligations, employment,

and self-care.

Family Obligations

The subtheme of family obligations emerged when the participants discussed their ability

to balance their doctoral studies with their children and spouses. Anna said, "it's been nine years.

Was supposed to be five but between two kids and taking time off, here I am." Charlotte,

reflecting on the difficulties involving Covid 19, concluded, "the kids … trying to balance their

education with covid and what I'm doing has been the greatest challenge." During the focus

group, I asked the participants to describe their life balance; as a response, I got laugher from

everyone. Charlotte then interjected, "yeah, between school and kids there's not one." Faith

further revealed, "I don't really have a normal life because when you're off with your family to

dinner or something … you feel guilty because you feel like you should be doing something else, like reading and writing."

Doctoral Obligations

The subtheme of doctoral obligations emerged when the participants discussed their attempts to balance their competing doctoral assignments and research tasks. For example, Anna advised other women student veterans to

"figure out your A, B, C time. A time is when you feel most energetic, mentally clear, and focused. B time is when you have some energy, somewhat mentally clear, and somewhat focused. C time is when you feel even less so, but can still generally make sense of what you read, write, say… Once you find that A time - protect it … That time is your time, your meeting with yourself to do the work that will most impact your life, right now, the dissertation."

Bailey, considering her doctoral life balance, revealed that "I'm barely hanging on," and I try to "unburdening myself with extra stuff." Charlotte reminded others that "As for life balance – try to keep it in perspective that at least you're not deployed." Diana, reflecting on her experiences of juggle her doctoral studies said, "all right, so it'll take me about an extra semester … life happens." Faith, during the focus group, shared, "I try to put some balance in there and give myself a break every now and then. But my life isn't normal because it's filled with work or, you know, reading and research and doing all that."

Employment Obligations

The subtheme of employment obligations emerged when the participants discussed their attempts to balance their doctoral studies with their careers. For example, Anna stated, "I went back to boot camp. Second time I went to another military school … I had to take time off of the

degree." Comparably, Diana, thinking about her choice to pursue her doctorate after retirement, concluded that she found balance by "being able to juggle things and being able to say that there wasn't something in my military experience that was going to prevent me from or extend the process of getting my degree." Conversely, Charlotte revealed that she used her career obligations to balance her studies or provide a break,

> "I volunteer once a week so I can keep using my clinical license as a nurse practitioner … I'm taking care of this patient and this is where my focus is because when you're with the patient you can't think about the fact that, yes, I should be reading or writing or doing anything else."

Self-Care

The subtheme of self-care emerged when the participants discussed their attempts to balance their doctoral studies with their basic needs, such as exercising regularly. Bailey, within her letter of advice, concluded, "you will hear this phrase uttered A LOT and if you are anything like me it will annoy the hell out of you, "self-care." Do not fight it. Embrace it … I have missed out on so many opportunities to have cared for myself in the moment and avoided serious illness from exhaustion. It just seemed so petty to me at the time, and I had shit to do." Diana also said, "I do try to go for a walk or go for a run or do or work out." Emma, reliving her self-care experiences because of illness and heavy course loads, further stated, "my biggest challenge and my biggest enemy was myself." Faith similarly noted,

> "so I don't know that there is an adequate balance, except I'll do some self-care, like I'll go get a pedicure or something and that's only like an hour, but at least it's an hour away from school. And I had to come to that place. It took me a while to get there and get comfortable without being so anxious about reading."

Outlier Data and Findings

This section discusses the outlier data that was uncovered during this study. This unexpected theme was the program design of doctoral programs. I created this theme by clustering the subthemes of program delivery and career relevance.

Program Design

The subthemes of program delivery and career relevance emerged when the participants discussed why they selected their university and program of study. For example, Diana stated, "it's ideally supposed to be full time, which is what I was looking for." Comparably, Faith, reflecting on why she selected her program, concluded, "it was a program that I could do a lot online … it allows you to be able to do that, work full-time, and then you can kind of setup how you want to have your courses." Emma similarly revealed that "two classes was full time … And I was thrilled that it was close to my home." She went on to say, "I was also hoping to work as a psychologist." Comparably, Bailey noted,

> "I went through my undergraduate and built an interest in psychology. I recognized that stopping at a bachelor's or even a master's wouldn't quite get me to what I wanted and what I wanted to do, because all the jobs that I wanted, especially working with veterans … I needed a doctorate."

Research Question Responses

This section provides concise answers to the research questions that guided me throughout this study. This discussion begins by answering the central research question to explain the experiences of women doctoral student veterans. Then, it further describes their experiences using the three sub research questions for this study.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of women veterans enrolled in doctoral programs? The participants described many experiences from their doctoral programs. However, the most prominent themes were the experiences resulting from the cultural organization of doctoral education. These experiences were frustrating and helpful, with faculty support being the most influential. Although when these influences created challenges, the participants used the characteristics of grit to persist, relying mostly on their traits of conscientiousness. It was further found that the faculty members' influence increased considerably during the dissertation phase as participants formed and relied heavily on their dissertation committees for guidance and feedback. While this suggestion was echoed by most of the participants in their letter of advice to another woman student veteran, Diana stated, "find a chair and committee that you can work with. This is vitally important." Although the participants' experiences revealed that this recommendation is easier said than done, as most of them had to overcome changes to their dissertation committees or use grit to persist through unsupportive situations. For example, Faith endured many challenges with her department culture resulting in her chair removing her from his cohort with an autogenerated email, and even though she now refers to this as "blessing in disguise" and has found a "very supportive" replacement, she revealed, "I'm not going to lie. Every now and then, I get nervous thinking that he is going to come back and say, I can't do it." Although when the department culture is supportive, the participants' experiences with faculty were very different. For example, Anna revealed, "Without mentors, I don't think I would have realized that I can do it. Their support along with the support of campus resources is what gives me faith, hope, and a path."

Sub Question One

Why do women veterans pursue doctoral degrees? I found two primary reasons that the participants pursued their doctorate, namely, to continue their career and because they were driven by a passion for helping others. As such, many of the participants were pursuing careers that a doctorate was required, or strongly recommended, to include professions in higher education, psychology, and research. Consequently, I further found that the participants often selected these professions to help others, namely other veterans. While this sentiment was found in most of the participants' experiences, Charlotte revealed, "I was very angry and very vocal about why hasn't anyone researched this [veteran prenatal care]. So, I started to think about what can I do to position myself to help."

Sub Question Two

What do women doctoral student veterans articulate as obstacles to their success as doctoral students? The obstacles that participants experienced were often shared or endured by all. Predominately, these difficulties were centered around two challenges, department culture and life balance. Department culture involved obstacles that influenced the participants' ability to understand expectations and faculty support. For example, while all of the participants agreed that choosing your research topic early in your coursework phase was a best practice, many did not understand this implied expectation when it would have been useful. As such, Faith stated, "it's [not choosing my topic early] causing me to do so much more reading because I didn't do that throughout the program." In addition, Bailey, reflecting on her challenges involving faculty support during her dissertation phase, revealed, "I wish I would have accepted things as they were and advocated for myself earlier. Now, I know plenty of staff members who are willing to help me out and I know the ones who will not." The second challenge, or life balance, consisted of the participants' struggling to balance their doctoral responsibilities with other obligations. As

noted by Faith, considering her efforts to balance doctoral studies, full-time employment, and a family, she said, "oh, my gosh, it was so hard. I was so stressed out. I wanted to burst into tears all the time."

Sub Question Three

How do women doctoral student veterans describe their socialization to the academic profession as a result of their doctoral coursework, research, and relationships with faculty? These experiences were mixed for the participants, with some feeling integrated into the academic community and others unsure. For example, Anna, reflecting on her struggles to balance her family life, military career, and doctoral studies, stated, "I don't, and part of that is I think my own doing … I don't have time." Comparably, Faith concluded, "I'll go from the standpoint of being a woman and a person of color … I would say that there's not a lot of people that look like me … will people accept me?" While Diana said, "I feel pretty well integrated. I think my first couple of classes, I didn't so much… my life experience was all military… But now... I can talk a little bit more knowledgeably about higher education."

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Summary

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This chapter presented the results of the data analysis for this study. This overview included descriptions of the participants, themes, outliner data, and responses to the research questions. The themes for this study that sought to understand the experiences of women student veterans within residential doctoral programs were department culture, grit, and life balance. A significant finding was that the experiences of women student veterans were influenced mainly by the cultural organization of doctoral education, and when these influences created challenges for the participants, they used the characteristics of grit to persist. These experiences related to department culture were both frustrating and helpful, with faculty support being the most

influential. Consequently, the faculty members' influence increased considerably during the dissertation phase as the participants formed and relied heavily on their dissertation committees for guidance and feedback. Life balance was also an influence for women veterans, as they often struggled to balance families, employment, and doctoral studies. However, these challenges were similarly met with grit.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs in the United States. This chapter presents my interpretations of the findings and ideas resulting from the study. It also includes an interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, limitations and delimitations, theoretical and methodological implications, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section discusses the thematic findings from Chapter Four. This overview begins with my interpretation of the findings, the implications for policy and practice, and the theoretical and empirical implications. Then, it concludes with the study's limitations and delimitations and my recommendations for future research involving women student veterans.

Interpretation of Findings

This section offers a brief overview of the thematic findings from Chapter Four. This summary includes discussing the themes for this study or department culture, grit, and life balance. Afterward, it presents my interpretations for the study.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes for this study were department culture, grit, and life balance. The department culture experiences occurred the most and were frustrating and helpful, with faculty support being the most influential. While department culture was the most dominant theme, I found that it influenced the second most common theme of grit. In short, the participants' experiences primarily resulted from the cultural organization of doctoral education. When these influences

created challenges, they used the characteristics of grit to persist, mainly relying on their traits of conscientiousness. Life balance also influenced the participants' experiences, as they often struggled to balance families, employment, and doctoral studies. However, the participants met these challenges similarly with their grit.

      The Cultural Influence of Doctoral Education. The participants were found to be significantly influenced by the cultural organization of doctoral education. The literature widely concludes that a common challenge for all student veterans is navigating the cultural differences between the military and university life (e.g., Soeters et al., 2006; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Describing the military experiences that hindered her as a doctoral student, Bailey said, "to talk to people like normal and not like you're in the military." Likewise, Charlotte concluded, "Or you think you're being gentle and having somebody be like, OK, you need to tone it down with the Army right now. You are like, what are you even talking about?" Doctoral program culture, which is significantly different from military culture, has also been identified as a significant barrier for a doctoral student's ability to persist (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). According to similar doctoral research using the attribution theory by Gardner and Lovitts, department culture impacts the quality of instruction and support students receive to understand expectations, connect with faculty, and integrate into their new academic community. Comparably, the participants' experiences that were predominately influenced by their faculty support impacted their feelings of integration and ability to understand expectations. Charlotte reflecting on her integration into her program and ongoing struggles with military stereotypes involving her veteran study, noted, "it is interesting how sometimes people [faculty and peers] without the veteran background have ideas about what we're like and what we experience, and they're very dismissive even if they're very polite about it." Faith describing her lack of life balance and one

thing she would change, if possible, regretfully noted, "I guess the only thing for me is understanding which population I wanted to focus on, I discovered that too late."

Overcoming Obstacles Rather than Quitting. While the participants were significantly influenced by the cultural organization of doctoral education, similar to Gardner's (2009) and Lovitts (2001) studies, my findings differed in how the participants reacted to these associated obstacles. For example, Lovitts found that struggling students often used self-blame reasoning to understand their difficulties and eventually dropped out of their programs. Although this occurrence was not observed in this study; instead, the participants, when faced with challenges associated with their department culture, used their characteristics of grit, mainly relying on their traits of conscientiousness to reflect on their experiences and use goal-related behaviors to persist. For example, faith reflecting on her experience of losing her chair without notice recalled it as "pivotal because you feel like the floor was just opened up and you're like, what am I going to do?" Although instead of blaming herself or going with her first emotional reactions of anger and distress, Faith "talked to the chair of the department to understand how the decision was made" and immediately created a plan to find a replacement. Comparably, Charlotte, reflecting on her commitment to her veteran research topic and ability to use grit to push forward when faced with widespread military stereotypes, concluded, "most people, who are very kind and supportive, they'll say it's probably not the issue you think it is, but I'm always like no, no, oh, no, it's an issue, and this is the hill I will die on!" Throughout the data, the participants were found to react to difficult situations by "digging their heels in" rather than blaming themselves for shortcomings. As a perfect example of this demonstration of grit, Emma said, "if I have to crawl over it, under it, around it, you know, I'm going to find a way."

Implications for Policy and Practice

This section uses my interpretations for the study. It discusses the implications for policy and practice to improve the experiences of doctoral women student veterans enrolled in residential programs. This summary includes recommendations for doctoral departments, faculty, and universities.

Implications for Policy

There is a lot of energy focused on accommodating various aspects of diversity in higher education; however, this may fall short when considering the experiences of veterans. This policy requires some degree of professional development for faculty and staff that creates a baseline of cultural competency with veterans may be a wise policy decision. Further, the significant persistence of veterans in a doctoral culture, in which just over half of all doctoral students persist to degree attainment, suggests that policymakers at the institution level might consider developing programming that develops grit among entering doctoral students or might seek this as part of the admissions criteria.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice include creating solutions for the common student obstacles related to the cultural organization of doctoral programs. Thus, it is recommended to improve the student's experience and provide ongoing faculty support by creating a mentorship program; as such, the mentor will be assigned to the student during their first semester and will work with them throughout their studies to provide support, remove roadblocks, ensure they understand expectations, and plan for their research phase. It is further recommended to create formal and informal events for doctoral students to interact with their peers and faculty and to provide research opportunities for students before their dissertation as means to integrate them into their new academic community.

When universities experience high student attrition rates, researchers should also include their culture in assessing potential root causes. As demonstrated in this study, doctoral students are most often influenced by the culture of their departments. Thus, it is long overdue to move past the Tinto-based assumption that the causes of attrition are solely based on the students' academic abilities and low admission standards. It is further suggested to use focus groups or surveys to include the perspectives of current and former students in the root causes analysis to obtain all sides of the experience.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theoretical framework used for this study was Weiner's 1986 attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion. My study contributed to this framework by renewing the use of the theory through new doctoral research and extending it to study a new, more specific population of doctoral students: women veterans. In addition, my use of this framework further confirmed the previous research conducted by Lovitts (2001) and Gardner (2009), as my findings similarly found that the culture of their departments most often influenced doctoral students.

Given that other student veteran studies generally focused on all veterans and included few women (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2009; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012), the experiences of women student veterans mainly were not known aside from the 2017 qualitative study by Heineman, which sought to discover the experiences of women veterans enrolled in community college. Thus, the empirical implications for this study are that it sheds light on the previously unknown experiences of women veterans as doctoral students. An interesting outcome that I found using my methods was that women veterans were very eager to participate in my study, driven by a passion for helping other women veterans, including me. Furthermore, concerning my design, the focus group effortlessly created

an environment where the participants were engaged, relaxed, ready to laugh, and opened up to deep conversation. In short, they seemed to connect immediately using their shared experiences, as if they were old friends. The advice letters to another women student veteran were also a fantastic data collection tool, as they were well written, thoughtful, and captured their struggles and how they were able to persist.

My study might also shed light on why research indicates that women veterans are more likely to succeed in their higher education goals than men veterans and other non-veterans students (Aponte et al., 2017; Holder, 2011). In short, I found that the participants mainly relied on their personality trait of conscientiousness to overcome department culture challenges and life balance struggles. The use of the attributional theory guided me throughout my study, focusing on the participants' perspectives and how they perceived the causes of their doctoral experiences. However, other veteran-focused theoretical frameworks may have worked better, such as Vacchi's 2014 model of student veteran support.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitation of this study was that a small percentage of student veterans are women and current or former doctoral students. As such, a weakness was the sample size of 10 participants. The delimitations were my purposeful decisions to limit the study to include only women veterans with current or prior residential doctoral program enrollment. In addition, there was not a specific site or university used to recruit participants for this national study. Consequently, I selected these delimitations to understand the unique experiences of women student veterans to make locating this small percentage of student veterans easier.

Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendations for future research are to mirror this study for women veterans within online doctoral programs. This participant pool should also be larger than this study and reflect the current ethnic diversity of women service members. Although the design worked very well for this study, I recommend beginning with individual interviews, continue with advice letters, and end with focus groups. I further recommend studying how grit, namely the personality trait of conscientiousness, influences women student veterans to persist within doctoral programs. Researchers could similarly mirror this study to research other populations of women student veterans within community colleges and bachelor's programs. While this study sheds light on the experiences of women veterans as students, it is one study, and further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to understand the experiences of these unique learners fully.

Conclusion

The attributional theory of achievement, motivation, and emotion by Weiner (1986) created the theoretical foundation for this study, as I sought to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs. My goal was to shed light on the unknown experiences of women veterans as students and to create interest for future study. Using individual interviews, advice letters, and a focus group, the participants shared their experiences as women veterans and doctoral students, describing their challenges and successes. Afterward, my data analysis revealed three themes, namely department culture, grit, and life balance. As an important takeaway from this study and similar to other doctoral research, the participants were influenced mainly by the culture of their departments. Thus, when universities experience high student attrition rates, researchers should also include culture in their

assessments to identify potential root causes. It is long overdue to move past the Tinto-based

assumption that attrition results from the students' academic abilities or low admission standards.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 9, 2021

Heather Cody
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-481 A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN STUDENT VETERANS IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

Dear Heather Cody, David Vacchi:

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(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) 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(s) 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.

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

APPENDIX B: FLYER

Research Participants Needed

A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Doctoral Women Student Veterans in Residential Doctoral Programs

- Are you a woman?
- Are you a current or former member of the Armed Forces of the United States?
- Are you 18 years or older?
- Are you a current or former residential doctoral student?

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

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs within the United States. Participants will be asked to complete an online interview, write a letter of advice, attend an online focus group, and review their interview transcripts for accuracy. The interview and focus group will be video recorded. Benefits include potentially improving the experiences of women student veterans enrolled in residential doctoral programs and increasing the research interest of women student veterans.

The study is being conducted online using video conferencing at

Heather Cody, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study. **Please contact Heather Cody at (   ) for more information.**

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

Demographics Survey: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Doctoral Women Student Veterans in Residential Doctoral Programs

Questions:

1.   What is your gender?

2.   What is your age?

3.   What is your race?

4.   What branch of the military did you serve in?

5.   What is your military status?

6.   What was your ending rank?

7.   Are you a combat veteran?

8.   Did you attend an online or residential doctoral program?

9.   What was your doctorate?

10.   What field was your doctorate in?

11.   Did you graduate with your doctorate?

12.   Are you a current doctoral student?

APPENDIX D: CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW

Conversational Interview: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Doctoral Women Student Veterans in Residential Doctoral Programs

Time: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Questions:

1. How did the idea of getting a doctorate first surface?

2. How did you tell your family or friends?

3. How did you feel about this conversation?

4. Why did you choose your university and program of study?

5. What was your prior knowledge about the commitment of being a doctoral student?

6. What was your prior knowledge about your university and doctoral program?

7. How did you feel about doctoral studies before starting your program?

8. How did you feel about doctoral studies after starting your program?

9. How did you feel about your course work phase?

10. How did you feel about your dissertation phase?

11. What was the most challenging part of being a doctoral student?

12. What was the easiest part of being a doctoral student?

13. What was it like to discover that you were graduating/withdrawing/continuing to persist within your program?

14. Can you provide an example of a time when you considered dropping out? How did this experience make you feel?

15. How would you describe your social support as a woman veteran and doctoral student?

16. How would you describe your academic support as a woman veteran and doctoral student?

17. How did you feel about your university's military student services?

18. If you could change one thing about your university's military services, what would you change and why?

Redirection Questions for Generalized Explanations:

1. Can you provide an example of this experience?

2. What was this experience like?

3. What did this experience make you feel?

APPENDIX E: ADVICE LETTER

Advice Letter: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Doctoral Women Student Veterans in Residential Doctoral Programs

Email:

Hello, [Participant's Name]!

Now that you have completed the focus group and conversational interview, it is time for the last step or to write a letter of advice to another women veteran and doctoral student. The purpose of your letter will be to provide advice on how to persist within a doctoral program.

Directions
Think of a specific situation that you encountered during your doctoral program that was difficult. What was this experience like? How did this experience make you feel? What advice did you need to overcome this situation and persist? Drawing on your personal experiences, write a letter of advice to another woman veteran who is enrolled in her first semester as a doctoral student. To help you get started, view the following list of potential topics:

- Military Experiences and Values
- Motivation
- Goal Setting
- Time Management and Planning
- Life Balance
- Academic and Social Support
- Coursework Phase
- Dissertation Phase
- Your Secrets for Persisting

To compose your advice letter, you may use Microsoft Word or simply write an email. After completion, please email your letter to ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆ Please submit your letter by [Enter Date].

Thank you for your time and continued effort in this study.

Sincerely,
Heather-Cate Cody

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP

Focus Group: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Doctoral Women Student Veterans in Residential Doctoral Programs

Time: _____
Date: _____
Interviewer: _____
Attendees: _____

Guidelines:

1. There are no right or wrong answers. Rather, there are just different perspectives.

2. Actively listen.

3. Use first names.

4. One person talks at a time.

5. This interview will be recorded.

6. My role is to guide the conversation.

Topics:

- What is like to be a woman veteran enrolled in a doctoral program?

- How can this experience be improved for women student veterans?

Questions:

1. Describe your military experiences that helped or hindered you as a woman veteran and doctoral student.

2. What were your positive experiences as a doctoral student?

3. What were your negative experiences as a doctoral student?

4. Describe your experiences of using military financial aid as a doctoral student.

5. Describe your interactions with professors and other students.

6. Describe your relationship with your dissertation chair.

7. If you could change any aspect of your doctoral program experience, what would you change, and why?

Redirection Questions for Generalized Explanations:

1. Can you provide an example of this experience?

2. What was this experience like?

3. What did this experience make you feel?

APPENDIX G: CONSENT FORM

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.
- ☐ Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- ☐ Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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 those 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 email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Heather Cody. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, David Vacchi, ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆.

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.

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 researcher 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 video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX H: REFLECTIONS

4/19/21

Today, I completed my first interview. As Bailey talked about her experiences, I found it very hard not to speak or think about mine because they were so similar. Understanding this, I actively reminded myself to set aside my knowledge of being a woman veteran and doctoral student and focused on Bailey's experiences. Instead of telling a similar story, I found myself showing a genuine interest in what she said and nodding in agreement with a smile. I also found creating a question for how they felt about persisting if they were still enrolled was hard to articulate or reword on the spot. So, I will revise this before my next interview with a current student. Looking back in the transcript, I also said "so" before every question. I will try to be mindful of this prior to my next interview.

4/20/21

I had many delays with my scheduled interview today. To start, Emma didn't show on time because of our time zone differences. Then, we had technical issues with the WebEx audio. I might need to create a quick cheat sheet for participants unfamiliar with the application. Today's interview also felt very different. To my surprise, I didn't feel the need to tell any stories. Instead, I felt sadness and found that I was using my empathic listening skills as Emma shared her past experiences.

4/21/21

Today's interview with Diana went well. In fact, she answered most of my questions before I could even ask them. Her experiences were unique and valuable for what it means to be a woman veteran and doctoral student. Unfortunately, I'm moving

rather slow on the initial analysis front and hope to make better progress today and tomorrow.

4/22/21

Today, I made great progress on the initial analysis, finding similar themes from my chapter 2 literature to include socialization, isolation, program structure, and program culture. Although, I am very mindful to keep my biases separate from the analysis and be open to other possible themes.

4/23/21

The interviews are going great. Unfortunately, I didn't have time for analysis, but I hope to pick it back up tomorrow. I enjoyed my interview today because the participant was very open and honest about her experiences. While some of them mirrored my own, I was able to take a step back and view her unique perspective.

5/1/21

My data collection is complete. The focus group went very well today. I couldn't believe how comfortable the participants were with each other. This seems that their share experiences create this openness. I hope to conduct more group interviews with women veterans very soon! It was a lot of fun.