

The Lived Experiences of Army Senior Enlisted Leaders 90 Days After

Retirement: A Phenomenological Study

Stephanie Francois

Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University

2023

The Lived Experiences of Army Senior Enlisted Leaders 90 Days After  
Retirement: A Phenomenological Study

Stephanie Francois

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences  
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA  
2023

Approved by:

Dr. Michael Howard, Ed.D, Committee Chair

Dr. William Townsend, Ed.D, Committee Member

### **Abstract**

The transition from army to civilian life is complicated for many veterans. Veterans must excel in multiple categories, including work, education, finances, health, and social relationships, for their transitions to be successful. Although many programs and services are designed to assist army veterans in transitioning to civilian life, many still experience transition challenges. This phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experiences of army senior enlisted leaders through retirement from active-duty service to reintegration into civilian life. The guiding theory of this study was Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory. Transition theory is a theory of adult development established primarily with counseling professionals in mind. This theory provides counseling professionals with information about the transition, the individual, and the environment likely to influence the magnitude of a particular change at a specific time. This study utilized web-based questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group to collect data from senior enlisted leaders regarding their transition experience as they retired from active service. The data was analyzed through coding and significant statements to describe the participants' lived experiences.

*Keywords:* Army, enlisted, senior enlisted, retirement, transition.

### **Dedication**

To my amazing parent, Serge and Claudette, my loving husband, Roy, and my beautiful daughter, Reign I dedicate this dissertation to you. Mom and dad, you have always supported and encouraged me throughout my educational journey. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices you made, your wisdom, words of encouragement, and countless prayers.

Roy, you are my rock. Your love, patience, and support has been a constant source of strength throughout this journey. The days I felt like giving up, you gently reminded me that if it were easy, everyone would do it. I am so blessed to have the opportunity to tackle life with you! I love and appreciate you more than words can express.

Reign, you bring me so much joy and I am absolutely honored to be your mom. Thank you for being so understanding during the “mommy is doing school work” moments. You officially have your mommy back! Love you Peanuts!

To all my close family and friends, who prayed for me, believed in me, and encouraged me, thank you. Your support meant more than you know. Finally, to the participants of this study and all those who have and continue to serve, thank you for your service and countless sacrifices to our country.

### **Acknowledgments**

To God be the glory; God, I thank you for your grace and mercy throughout this endeavor. I pray you give me the strength to continue to be obedient to You will. I would like to acknowledge my chair Dr. Howard and my committee Dr. Townsend; thank you both for your guidance, wisdom, and prayers throughout this journey. You created an environment that encouraged me to grow as a scholar and I am grateful for you both. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my cohort mates, thank you for your support and your prayers. We did it!

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Table of Contents .....	6
List of Tables .....	11
List of Abbreviations .....	12
Chapter One: Introduction .....	13
Overview .....	13
Background .....	13
Historical .....	14
Social .....	15
Theoretical .....	16
Situation to Self .....	18
Problem Statement .....	19
Purpose Statement .....	21
Significance of the Study .....	21
Research Questions .....	22
Definitions .....	23
Summary .....	24
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	26
Overview .....	26
Theoretical Framework .....	27
Schlossberg's 4 S Framework .....	29
Related Literature .....	30

Military Culture .....	30
Resiliency.....	33
Army Retirement Eligibility .....	36
Army Transition Programs .....	37
Transition Challenges .....	40
Spirituality/Religiosity.....	50
Family Transition.....	52
Reintegration.....	53
How Veterans Perceive the Transition Process .....	56
Summary .....	58
Chapter Three: Methods .....	60
Overview.....	60
Design .....	60
Research Questions.....	61
Setting .....	62
Participants.....	62
Procedures .....	63
Recruitment Plan.....	63
Researcher's Role .....	64
Philosophical Assumptions.....	65
Data Collection .....	66
Questionnaire Questions .....	67
Interviews.....	68

Interview Questions .....	69
Focus Group.....	71
Data Analysis .....	72
Textural Description .....	73
Structural Description .....	74
Composite Description.....	74
Trustworthiness .....	74
Credibility .....	75
Dependability and Confirmability .....	75
Transferability.....	75
Ethical Considerations .....	76
Summary .....	77
Chapter Four: Findings .....	78
Overview.....	78
Participants.....	78
Melanie .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Ren .....	80
Nancy .....	80
Janet .....	81
Marco .....	81
Lisa.....	82
Tala .....	82
Cody.....	83



Fred .....	83
Drew .....	83
Luca.....	84
Jake .....	84
Allen.....	85
John .....	85
Results.....	85
Theme Development.....	87
Summary .....	96
Chapter Five: Conclusion .....	97
Overview.....	97
Summary of Findings.....	97
Research Questions Addressed .....	97
Discussion .....	99
Empirical Implications.....	99
Theoretical Literature.....	100
Implications.....	102
Practical Implication .....	102
Theoretical Implication.....	103
Delimitations and Limitations.....	104
Delimitations.....	104
Limitations .....	104
Recommendations for Future Research .....	105

Summary .....	105
References .....	107
Appendix A: Figures .....	132
Appendix B: Recruitment: Verbal Script (Phone or In Person) .....	133
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer .....	134
Appendix D: Recruitment: Social Media .....	135
Appendix E: IRB Exemption .....	137
Appendix F: Interview Questions .....	139
Appendix G: Information Sheet .....	140
Appendix H: Questionnaire Questions .....	143

### **List of Tables**

Table 1. Demographic Information.....	79
Table 2. Themes and Subthemes .....	86

### **List of Abbreviations**

Command Sergeant Major (CSM)

Department of Defense (DoD)

Master Sergeant (MSG)

Resilience Strength Training (RST)

Sergeant First Class (SFC)

Sergeant Major (SGM)

Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Overview**

The transition from active military service to civilian life can be delicate and challenging for many veterans. Some veterans may find it difficult to transition from military culture to civilian life, while others may find it relatively simple. Transition failure can have a direct impact on physical, mental, and social health. Kukla et al. (2015) asserted that social networks, family, and friends mitigate the impact of transition for many career veterans returning to civilian life. This chapter offers an overview of the study background, including the study's historical, social, and theoretical context. This chapter discusses the situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, and the significance of the study. Finally, Chapter One includes definitions, the research questions that guided this study, and a summary of the information discussed.

### **Background**

Over the past 6 years, the U.S. Army has transitioned 61,000 soldiers annually (Prestigiacomio, 2021). A total of 55,274 active-duty soldiers transitioned out of the Army in fiscal year 2021 (Prestigiacomio). Of the average annual transition of soldiers, those that retired from the Army had earned an honorable or general (under honorable conditions) discharge (Prestigiacomio). The number of senior enlisted leaders between Sergeant First Class (SFC), Master Sergeant (MSG), and Sergeant Major (SGM) who retired each year averaged just over 6,000 soldiers (Prestigiacomio, 2021). Transitioning is an integral part of life, and for many service members, retirement marks a new phase and new experiences. With many senior enlisted service members retiring each year, it is crucial to consider the experiences and challenges that future veterans may face.

Service members experience a myriad of challenges as they transition from service. These challenges may include securing financial support, resolving conflicts in their identity after the military, and experiencing mental health challenges. Transitioning after periods of deployment can result in even more unique challenges entering civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2011). The discomfort experienced by some service members during the transition is expected. Hill et al. (2011) also asserted that it is normal for service members to feel a considerable change, stress, and ambivalence about leaving the military or in the transitional period.

### **Historical**

Active-duty service members are responsible for ensuring the country's freedom while living in a military culture that is vastly different from civilian culture (Baruch & Quick, 2009). As of 2020, the United States had 2.6 million post-9/11 military veterans (Morgan et al., 2020). While many veterans succeed in reintegrating into civilian life, some individuals have trouble due to various problems frequently connected to mental health (Morgan et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2015). A sizeable number of veterans report having trouble coping with a range of chronic stressors (Tsai et al., 2015). Secure employment; advanced education; legal, financial, and housing issues; persisting mental and physical health conditions; and social and interpersonal connection issues are some of the most-frequently reported active-duty-to-veteran transition challenges (Aronson et al., 2019). Inadequate transitions from active service to civilian life can inflict a substantial strain (Aronson et al., 2019) on veterans and their families over a long life span.

Veterans with mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are at a heightened risk for reintegration difficulty (Ahern et al., 2015). The

invisible wounds of war, such as substance abuse and suicidality, are also connected with the reintegration difficulties that veterans experience (Zivin et al., 2016). Additionally, family members frequently describe social and interpersonal issues, such as a lack of warmth and closeness, relationship tension, and parenting difficulties (Rossiter & Smith, 2014; Tinney & Gerlock, 2014) during the transition from service.

## **Social**

While attached to active-duty service, the social interactions of soldiers are regulated by Army regulations and the chain of command (Redmond et al., 2015). Military employees operate in environments differently from many civilian ones and have access to various distinctive aspects of the military workplace culture (Redmond et al.). Although the military workplace shares many fundamental ideas with the civilian workplaces, Redmond et al. (2015) asserted that the military workplace focuses on mission readiness, continuous training, structure, and discipline.

Family associations have historically been used to describe many aspects of military relationships since a soldier's ties with comrades are frequently compared to his or her interactions with family members (Ringel & Brandell, 2012). During or before deployments, soldiers might develop a network of relationships and experiences that may rival the significance of those within their own natural family structure (McAdams et al., 2018). While the bonds developed by soldiers vary greatly, they do share a significance that is similar to family bonds (Ringel & Brandell). People are connected through their nuclear and extended families in a way that transcends mere instrumental assistance (Ringel & Brandell). Soldiers are similarly invested in the nuclear and extended military units (Ringel & Brandell, 2012) to which they belong.

When soldiers leave active-duty service, research has suggested that they experience

adequate social connections as they reintegrate with their communities and families throughout the initial stages of their transition to civilian life (Tsai et al., 2015). Shue et al. (2021) suggested that relationships are crucial to the transition process. The researchers found that for many veterans, having a solid support network was the most crucial factor in navigating it effectively. Some veterans reported that their families gave them a degree of unwavering support that helped them through the transition. In contrast, however, Shue et al. (2021) suggested that other veterans reported that the veteran community and their fellow veterans supported and guided them, which helped foster a connected feeling during the transition.

Research has also suggested that the initial feelings of connectedness may be short-lived (Tsai et al., 2015). Reintegration is commonly viewed as a beneficial sequence of events; it may also be a period of personal stress and struggle for military veterans (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Veterans and their families frequently describe social and interpersonal issues (Tinney & Gerlock, 2014), such as a lack of warmth and closeness, strained relationships, and parenting challenges during the reintegration period.

## **Theoretical**

To investigate veteran reintegration procedures, various transition-focused theoretical frameworks have been introduced in the literature (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Schlossberg's transition theory suggested that the individual veteran's situation, self, support, and strategies either enable or hinder a successful transition out of active-duty service (Robertson, 2013).

"Situation" describes how people perceive change and their feeling of control over what is happening (Anderson et al., 2012; Browne et al., 2018). This factor raises concerns about whether the change is viewed as permanent or temporary, whether the shift is viewed favorably or unfavorably, and whether additional stressors exist that exacerbate the transitional challenge



(Anderson et al., 2012). Stressors and transitional factors, such as family transition, mental health struggles, and employment, contribute to the challenges. Additionally, veterans may experience delays in their benefits that may contribute to their perception of the transition situation (Elnitsky et al., 2017).

The factor, "self," relates to the internal and personal characteristics that influence coping (Anderson et al., 2012). The two dimensions of this factor are personal characteristics and psychological resources (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Some people are more adept at transitions than others due to personal factors, like age, gender, and socioeconomic status, which can affect how they manage change (Anderson et al.). Psychological resources refer to a person's personality traits and internal conditions that can influence how they manage transitions (Anderson et al.; Browne et al., 2018). Transition theory emphasized the role of explanatory style, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, values, and commitments in this process (Anderson et al., 2012; Browne et al., 2018), noting that results are more likely to be favorable when there is a greater sense of control and favorable evaluations of the circumstances.

According to Anderson et al. (2012), "support" refers to available resources or assistance to continue a transition. In the present study, support was related to the process of becoming an Army veteran and civilian community member (Browne et al., 2018). For this factor to positively affect transition, veterans must have access to personal support networks, quality support networks, and strong institutional support (Browne et al.). It is also vital that the networks of support are accessible and appropriate to the veteran's needs (Browne et al., 2018).

The strategy, "factor," refers to the capacity to manage transitions through individual behaviors (Browne et al., 2018). There are three types of coping responses: modifying the situation, controlling the problem's meaning, and coping with stress after the transition (Browne

et al.). Veterans can employ four distinct coping strategies in this factor. These coping strategies include seeking information, direct action, a reserve of action, and intrapsychic coping (Browne et al., 2018). Research has suggested that the seeking information coping mechanism is used during moments of uncertainty (Petersen et al., 2021). A life-changing event, such as transition out of service, may trigger veterans to gather information on many factors associated with the transition. The second approach to coping may be direct action or problem solving. This strategy attempts to react to a threat with the goal of eliminating the threat (Fortes-Ferreira et al., 2006).

In contrast to the problem-solving coping strategy, some veterans may employ a reserve of action or avoidant coping strategy. This coping strategy is characterized by efforts to deny, diminish, and avoid a given stressor (Vervoordt et al., 2022). Finally, veterans may employ intrapsychic coping strategies during the transition period. Intrapsychic coping strategies include perception, thought, and imagination, as well as all motivational-emotional processes (Wimmer et al., 2002) to cope with stressful events. Veterans must be adaptable and employ many strategies, even if these strategies are individually practical (Browne et al., 2018). Soemantri et al. (2023) found that participating in a community of practice and establishing a career trajectory were examples of the factors that fell under strategies relating to active involvement in continuing professional development.

### **Situation to Self**

This researcher was an active-duty army soldier. She was an enlisted senior leader with the rank of SFC. She had served proudly in the Army for 13 years at the time of this study. She was married to a former Army senior enlisted leader. She observed her spouse during his transition out of service. This researcher recalled several challenges her spouse encountered as he

reintegrated into the civilian culture. Although she had maintained her active-duty status, she understood that retirement was in her near future.

Army senior enlisted leaders are the bridge between junior enlisted soldiers and Army officers (Maurer, 2014; TC 7.22.7, 2020). Army enlisted seniors are advisors to officers at various levels of responsibility. The SFC could serve as the platoon Sergeant in charge of several soldiers. That SFC would also be paired with an Army Lieutenant, serving as the platoon leader (TC 7.22.7). The SFC would serve as the bridge between the junior enlisted soldiers and the platoon leader (TC 7.22.7). The SFC would also serve as the senior advisor to the Lieutenant, ensuring that soldiers are trained, and missions are accomplished (TC 7.22.7, 2020). Army senior enlisted leaders take care of many soldiers and leaders (TC 7.22.7). This researcher was interested in understanding how senior enlisted leaders cope with the responsibility of caring for many soldiers and leaders. This researcher was also interested in understanding how army programs assist during the transition from army service.

### **Problem Statement**

Transitioning service members experience several risk factors associated with the transition process. The attachment to military service may introduce anxiety and depression once service members are discharged or disconnected from Army service. Ahern et al. (2015) found that a lack of structure, a sense of disconnection, alienation within civilian life, and a loss of purpose were among the feelings experienced by transitioning service members. In addition to issues of disconnection, many veterans leave service with a number of mental health diagnoses. Research has suggested that roughly 14% to 16% of U.S. service members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have depression or PTSD (Inoue et al., 2023). Although depression and

PTSD are highlighted, other issues, such as substance use, traumatic brain injuries, or suicide, are also harmful to this population (Inoue et al., 2023).

While service members who experience combat or deployments are associated with an increased risk of mental health conditions, general military service can also cause mental health issues and difficulties (Inoue et al., 2023). The nature of the military and the missions expose service members to challenging situations. There are particularly stressful moments for military members and families (Inoue et al., 2023), such as deployment during frequent wars, travel, or prolonged separation from family (Romero et al., 2020). Research has shown that 76.6% of veterans recognize that they have current mental health issues (Randles & Finnegan, 2022). Additionally, screening of veterans in the United States showed that 72% positively screened for a mental health disorder (Randles & Finnegan, 2022).

As senior enlisted leaders retire from the Army, they are required to attend courses on financial education, interviewing techniques, and civilian business attire (United States Army, 2022). Additionally, as part of the retirement process, service members are required to complete a physical health screening to address physical issues prior to retirement (Army Recruitment Services, 2019). However, there are no requirements to screen service members or educate them on mental health problems that may arise after retirement (Army Retirement Services, 2019). The problem is that there is a gap in the literature attempting to understand the mental health impact during the first 90 days post-retirement from Army service.

Specifically, there have been no studies on the experiences of senior enlisted leaders during the first 90 days after retirement. This is a problem that is far-reaching due to the large number of service members who retire each year (Prestigiacomio, 2021). It is important to view this phenomenon from the leader's perspective so that there can be a more-accurate

understanding of the impacts on retirement regulation, programs, and systems. This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study that provided a dense, rich, and in-depth look into this phenomenon, which had so many variables impacting and influencing retirement system.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days after they have retired from Army service. This study sought to describe mental health concerns and helpful coping strategies after military service. This study also sought to understand the strategies that Army senior enlisted leaders employ for adjusting to civilian life within the 90 days after retirement. The theory guiding this study was Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory. People shift from a preoccupation with the transition to integrating it into their lives; the time required for successful integration depends on the individual (Patton et al., 2016). The mental health phenomenon of 90 days after retirement of Army senior enlisted leaders had not been widely explored. The exploration of this phenomenon contributed to the literature as well as informed Army retirement program developers.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a significant number of service members who retire from service each year (Prestigiacomio, 2021). Although many studies have focused on transition, the lived experiences of U.S. Army enlisted senior leaders have rarely been explored. The lived experiences of retired enlisted seniors offered new perspectives on the available literature on Army transitions. This study provided data on the lived experiences regarding the possible barriers to services or programs related to Army transitions and enlisted senior leader retirement. Morgan et al. (2020) found that the vast majority of programs for veterans did not offer barrier-reducing features. For

a program to be effective, developers should consider using documented best practices (Morgan et al., 2020).

In addition to barriers, veterans experience several mental health challenges associated with transition and reintegration (Hoge et al., 2004). Unique factors contribute to a veteran's or a soldier's reluctance to seek mental health care in the military, including concern about how peers and superiors will perceive him or her (Hoge et al.). Those with the greatest need for mental health services are disproportionately most concerned about stigmatization (Hoge et al., 2004). This study explored the perspectives of senior enlisted leaders as they relate to seeking mental health assistance as they retire from active service. The findings of this study added to the literature and informed program developers about any stigma that exists regarding veterans seeking mental health services.

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological study sought to explore how U.S. Army senior enlisted leaders describe their mental health during the first 90 days after retirement. There are many challenges related to transitioning out of the Army. Although there are many programs that assist service members with the transition process (United States Army, 2022), there seemed to be a gap in the discussion of mental health the first 90 days after transition. Thus, this study explored the phenomenon of increased mental health symptoms during this transitional period and coping strategies that are beneficial during this period. The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

**RQ1:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their mental health during the first 90 days after service retirement?

**RQ2:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to adjust to civilian life?

**RQ3:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their coping ability after retirement?

**RQ4:** What transitional supports were helpful during the first 90 days after retirement?

### **Definitions**

1. *Active duty* - Full-time employment in the United States' current military service. The term active duty encompasses attendance at a school designated as a service school by legislation or by the secretary of the relevant military department while serving in the active military service. It also includes full-time training duty and annual training duty. Such a period excludes full-time National Guard service forces (Legal Information Institute, 2014).
2. *Army retirement* - Soldiers who have completed at least 20 years but fewer than 30 years of federally required active duty and have fulfilled all the service requirements are qualified but not entitled to retire immediately (Department of the Army, 2021).
3. *Enlisted member* - An individual in an enlisted grade in the armed forces (Legal Information Institute, 2014).
4. *Military transition* - The process of veterans reintegrating into civilian life; successful military transition can include finding adequate employment, gaining a sense of purpose in civilian society, and using social and psychological support services (Loughran, 2014).
5. *Rank* - The hierarchical chain of command among members of the armed forces (Legal Information Institute, 2014)
6. *Reintegration* - Transitioning back into civilian life after separating or retiring from military service (Hawkins et al., 2015).
7. *Resilience* - The capabilities, characteristics, and personal resources that people use to function or adapt successfully in the face of adversity or disruption in their lives;

resilience can help veterans meet the challenges of reintegration, reducing the adverse outcomes associated with transition experiences (Lee et al., 2013).

8. *Retirement* - To resign from a job or official post; to stop doing something in order to have more free time or leisure (Denton & Spencer, 2009).
9. *Transition* - An event or non-event that causes change and affects relationships, routines, assumptions, and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2012).
10. *Veteran* - Frequently used to refer to people who have left the armed forces when used to describe a military community, but the precise qualifying traits may differ (Burdett et al., 2013).

### **Summary**

Army senior enlisted leaders who retire from active-duty service may face challenges as they reintegrate into civilian culture and community. On average, approximately 6,000 senior enlisted leaders transition from active-duty service each year (Prestigiacomo, 2021). According to research, when soldiers leave active-duty service, they maintain enough social bonds as they reintegrate with their communities and families during the early phases of their transition to civilian life (Tsai et al., 2015). Shue et al. (2021) suggested that relationships and these bonds are crucial to the transition process. Transition theory was used to frame the understanding of this study. Schlossberg's transition theory suggested that the individual veteran's situation, self, support, and strategies enable or hinder a successful transition out of active-duty service (Robertson, 2013).

Veterans with mental health issues, such as depression and PTSD, are at a greater risk for reintegration challenges (Ahern et al., 2015). In addition to these challenges, Ahern et al. (2015) found that a lack of structure, a sense of disconnection, and a loss of purpose were among the



feelings experienced by transitioning veterans. The current study focused on exploring the mental health impact experienced by Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days post-retirement. Although there have been many studies that explore military service transitions, the research has been limited on understanding the mental health impact of retired Army senior enlisted leaders. The findings of this study added to the literature and informed program developers, regulations, and retirement systems on the mental health needs of senior enlisted leaders.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

People enlist in the military for various reasons, including educational benefits, professional and personal growth, the promotion of democracy and freedom, or possibly a desire to leave the world a better place. Every military force is formed to be a cohesive system intended to destroy, even though they may not be able to engage in actual conflict because of their various planned and expected duties (Adler et al., 2011) or present geo-political influences. Whether soon after joining the service or after reaching retirement age, every military service member must eventually return to civilian life and reintegrate into society. An increasing body of studies has indicated that transitioning from the military to civilian life for service members can be challenging on a range of psychological, social, familial, economic, and administrative dimensions (Adler et al., 2011; Blackburn, 2016; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015).

Transitions are a part of life. Many service members leave the military every year (Ainspan et al., 2018). On average, the U.S. Army has transitioned 61,000 soldiers annually during the past 6 years (Prestigiacomio, 2021). This chapter discusses the pertinent literature on transition and, more specifically, military personnel transition. This chapter's first section examines Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. The following sections discuss the related literature to provide an overview of relevant literature for military transitions. The related literature, which includes military culture, resilience, Army retirement eligibility, Army transition programs, transition challenges, financial support, identity conflicts, life satisfaction, family transition, and how veterans view the transition process, is summarized in this section.

The last section of this literature review discusses the gaps in the literature as they relate to the lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders during the first 90 days after retirement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The transition theory by Nancy Schlossberg was a theory of adult development (Anderson et al., 2012) primarily developed with counseling professionals in mind (Goodman et al., 2006). This theory offered counseling professionals details about the transition, the individual, and the environment likely to impact how much a certain transition will have at a particular moment (Goodman et al., 2006). Theorists have defined transitions as a challenge to personal change and growth and a critical component of human development (Anderson et al.). An event or non-event that causes change and affects relationships, routines, assumptions, and responsibilities is referred to as a transition, according to Anderson et al. (2012). Depending on the person, assessments and observations of a transition differ. Some may experience the transition as a crisis or as a positive experience, while others may be wrestling with a non-event or an event (Anderson & Goodman, 2014) that was anticipated but did not occur.

Bridges (2003) discussed the differences between a person going through a transition and a person going through change. Change is a situational phenomenon, whereas transition is more psychological. To elaborate, people typically go through a three-phase process during the transition as they internalize and accept the circumstances and the changes that are occurring as a result of the transition (Bridges, 2003).

The three-phase process described by Bridges (2003), as portrayed in Figure A1, involves first, people letting go of the old ways and the old identity they have held. During this initial stage of transition, which is an ending, people need assistance in coming to terms with their losses. In this initial stage, transitioning service members may also experience grief of the loss

(Bridges). Zizzo et al. (2020) found that grief coupled with transitioning is a dynamic process; it begins with the decision to move, followed by arriving, settling in, and adapting or maladapting to new life. The experiences of loss and grief involved both tangible and intangible losses, which were physical and psychosocial (Zizzo et al., 2020). The second phase involves people experiencing a transitional period where the old is gone, but the new is not fully functional (Bridges). Bridges called this the “neutral zone,” in which crucial psychological realignments and repatterning occur. The third and final phase involves emerging out of the transition and creating a new beginning. During this phase, Bridges (2003) explained that people develop new identities, experience new energy, and find a new sense of purpose that enables change to start working.

When the transition is anticipated to start, the person must come to terms with the foreseeable losses that will inevitably occur (Bridges, 2003). At this point, the resources and support meant to help service members through this process will concentrate on the changes that will happen during the early stage of transitioning and help them in uncovering the losses they may experience. During the transition, Bridges (2003) asserted that people react to the losses rather than the changes.

The primary goal of Schlossberg’s (1984) theory was to offer a framework that would help counseling professionals understand individuals going through transitions and assist them in getting the support they need to deal with both ordinary and extraordinary parts of life (Goodman et al., 2006). Schlossberg’s *Overwhelmed: Coping with Life’s Ups and Downs* (1989), integrated substantial changes to transition theory. Within the second element, Schlossberg introduced the 4 S’s (as illustrated in Figure A2)—situation, self, support, and strategies—as a revision of the earlier discussion of coping resources (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1989).

### **Schlossberg's 4 S Framework**

Within the element of self, establishing the individual's demographic and personal characteristics can suggest their view and response to transitions (Whitworth et al., 2020). This element includes intrinsic motivations and is found to be the prominent factor (Soemantri et al., 2023) in establishing one's professional identity. In the current study, self was identified by the veterans' internal and mental health struggles and experiences. The element of self was also present in the veterans' ability to cope or use internal coping mechanisms to deal with their transition out of active Army service. The individual's family, community, friends, and institutions are included in the element of support (Whitworth et al., 2020). Each of these elements have strengths and weaknesses that might help or hinder an individual's ability to transition successfully (Patton et al., 2016).

Situation describes the individual's triggers, timing, level of control, role changes, duration, previous comparable experiences, concurrent stressors, and subjective assessment of the transition (Whitworth et al., 2020). The situation element considers all past and present experiences that may have an influence on the transition. Strategies include ways to address stress related to the change, as well as coping mechanisms to improve the circumstances or the meaning of the transition (Patton et al., 2016). In the present study, the role of Army senior enlisted leaders was a factor in determining the transition situation and strategies employed to cope with transition challenges.

According to Schlossberg's transition theory, the 4 S's are identified as the principal element influencing one's coping ability (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Considering the transition model, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) found that institutional agents and veterans expressed the importance of professionals and services understanding and meeting veterans' unique needs and

concerns during the transition. While a transition may be triggered by a single event or non-event, Patton et al. (2016) noted the following about the transition process:

While a transition may be precipitated by a single event or non-event, dealing with a transition is a process that extends over time. Essentially, individuals move from a preoccupation with the transition to an integration of the transition. The time needed to achieve successful integration varies with the person and the transition. Transitions may lead to growth, but the decline is also a possible outcome, and individuals experiencing transition may view them with ambivalence. (p. 47)

Although military members are no strangers to the transition process, transitioning out of service brings different challenges. Transition theory is significant in this study. It helps identify the stages that veterans go through when adjusting to life after the military. According to transition appropriate programs, counselors and transition strategies should provide those transitioning with adequate support for adjustment. Many studies regarding veterans have utilized Schlossberg's transition model (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lewis & Wu, 2021). These studies offered careful consideration of the resources required and the challenges encountered, which assisted in identifying the system and policy reforms required (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) to improve favorable transition outcomes.

## **Related Literature**

### **Military Culture**

New military recruits are forced to "separate" from civilian life through basic training to develop a strong connection with the military structure and culture (Godfrey et al., 2012). Organizational socialization is deliberate and takes place during basic training; recruits undergo training to produce disciplined individuals capable of engaging in military labor and war

(Godfrey et al.). Because of the military's mission, the culture is based on a rigid code of conduct that recruits must immediately assimilate to (Godfrey et al., 2012). As a result, the civilian is integrated into the military organization and imbued with specific cultural values (Bergman et al., 2014). These values include loyalty, integrity, courage, honor, and devotion to duty (Bergman et al., 2014).

Recruits must be indoctrinated into the military culture as part of basic training; it is not optional. As an alternative, service members might choose to leave before finishing training or they may be forced to depart due to disciplinary issues (Cooper et al., 2016). Often, a service member's identity is primarily shaped by the values and ideas that define their military culture, which immediately impacts how they see themselves, others, and society (Cooper et al.). Therefore, it is vital to understand military organizations and their personnel (Cooper et al., 2016).

Military identities are formed in relation to space and location, such as frequently hostile and challenging locations and situations in which soldiering duties are carried out (Cooper et al., 2018). Woodward and Jenkins (2011) asserted that the identities of military personnel are embedded in the everyday practices in military settings. Training is a transformative process whereby new skills and identities are acquired and grounded into military capabilities (Woodward & Jenkins, 2011). Wearing a uniform, being subjected to military discipline, being sorted by ranks, saluting, using acronyms and military terminology, learning to operate a weapon, and living in a communal lifestyle are all strange to new soldiers, even to those who are familiar with the military and come from military families (Bergman et al., 2014).

Additionally, strict rank structures play a significant role in military identity development and culture. Service members learn the differences in rank and the courtesies rendered to each

one (Department of the Army, 2019b). Unprofessional relationships between officers and enlisted and between enlisted and junior enlisted ranks are prohibited (Department of the Army, 2020). To maintain good order and discipline, commanders are responsible for ensuring that they address fraternization and inappropriate relationships within their organizations (Department of the Army, 2020). Identities convey a social standing within the organization based on capabilities and discipline since military culture regards excellent symbolic value to competency in such skills and aptitudes (Cooper et al., 2016).

The shared experiences of military members create cohesion between its members and the units. The U.S. military prioritizes mission accomplishment, which demands service members to function efficiently as a unit and fosters strong unit cohesiveness through traumatic events encountered while serving in the military (Grady et al., 2018). Because of the everyday experiences of military life, military community members can provide one another with exceptionally beneficial support and camaraderie (DeGraff et al., 2016). According to research, the well-being of military soldiers and their families is significantly influenced by more extensive community networks and networks inside the military community (Bowen et al., 2016; DeGraff et al., 2016). In addition to the community, as defined by relationships and associations, there is a significant geographic or structural component of the community (O'Neal et al., 2020).

Living close to military facilities may increase attendance at military-sponsored events, military-sponsored programs, and general socialization with other military families, making active-duty military members and their civilian spouses particularly immersed in military culture (O'Neal et al., 2020). According to the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN; 2019), a housing survey found that the highest percentage of soldiers who occupy post housing are enlisted soldiers between the ranks of E1 to E6. The report also suggested that 70% of military



families live in communities outside of military installations (MFAN, 2019). Although military members and families have access to all installation programs and services, it is also important for surrounding communities to be supportive to the needs of military members (National Military Family Association [NMFA], 2011). Military families may feel an intense sense of solidarity and camaraderie due to these regular interactions and the shared characteristics of military culture (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011).

During interviews with service members, Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) found that military friendships were a recurrent theme in coping with the fear, misery, boredom, and tedium of deployment. The service members discussed the connections as a "brotherhood," "bonds of war," or "camaraderie"; they all developed close, often intimate, friendships during deployment. These connections helped service members with challenging situations by providing a sense of humor, emotional support during homesickness, or a shoulder to cry on following the dread of an enemy battle (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Cohesion is an integral part of military culture and serves as a foundation to assure mission success.

Hall (2011) discussed the importance of understanding military culture. Challenges are associated while working with service members, including understanding assumptions and beliefs, rank grade and structure, and military acronyms. Military lifestyle habits and boundaries are also essential to consider. Finally, the characteristics of military culture are worth exploring and understanding. Hall (2011) identified these characteristics as regular moves and relocations, consistent mission-first focus, and security of a system and family adaptations to rigidity.

### **Resiliency**

Military service members may be exposed to difficult circumstances because of their job. The unique characteristics of military life increase the likelihood of occupational stress and

psychological dysfunction among service personnel (Romero et al., 2020). Because service members are expected to perform under stressful situations, resiliency may be a helpful tool for coping. Britt et al. (2017) found that positive, emotion-focused coping protects soldiers from the harmful effects of combat exposure. These same researchers found that self-blame is linked to more significant PTSD symptoms in a combat environment (Britt et al., 2017). Perales et al. (2012) found a 64.7% prevalence of childhood trauma among soldiers who have attempted suicide. The most commonly reported childhood trauma for this population was abuse or family issues (Perales et al., 2012). Wang et al. (2023) asserted that the level of resilience soldiers develop varies based on the degree of childhood trauma they experienced. All of these factors add to the need to focus on resilient military service members.

At its foundation, resilience training is intended to teach individuals mental health-promoting techniques to prevent the development of symptoms and adjustment difficulties and to improve adaptation (Adler et al., 2015). In addition to resilience training, Resilience Strength Training (RST) was developed in 2017 as a peer-cofacilitated moral injury program (Barth et al., 2020). This training utilized the military's squad model to inspire and facilitate the trust and bonding characteristics of military culture (Barth et al.). The 60-hour training is a multidisciplinary approach that teaches strategies for handling potential problems (Barth et al., 2020).

Military duty is a demanding profession, including the strain of deployment and battle during a war, frequent or extensive travel, or extended separation from family (Romero et al., 2020). The uniqueness of the military requires service members to have optimal mental capabilities to make rational decisions in highly unpredictable situations (Borowicz & Sokołowski, 2015). One of the needs for maintaining a balance between health and the efforts

required to meet environmental requirements is the capacity to make wise decisions at the appropriate moment. Strong coherence and carefully chosen stress-coping techniques appear crucial for completing tasks that require exceptional resilience tools and skills in military members (Borowicz & Sokołowski, 2015).

The military culture places value on its members being emotionally fit and resilient, particularly in stressful circumstances (Botero et al., 2020). As a result, many veterans fear that since they have mental conditions, people will think less of them or that they are selfish. Veterans may also be reluctant to seek services out of concern that a history of mental illness may have detrimental effects on their careers. Some veterans may internalize these ideas and hold a poor picture of themselves for having a mental illness (Botero et al., 2020).

Resilience training may fill the gap between service members not seeking mental health services and learning coping strategies. Adler et al. (2015) found that brief resilience training may have some advantages in supporting mental health in soldiers. Research has suggested that resilience training improves morale, and the training process and content predict reduced physical violence (Foran et al., 2012). After attending RST training, Barth et al. (2020) found that RST helped reduce thoughts and feelings related to self-destruction and stress, facilitating pro-social actions like trust, boosting self-worth, and generating more optimistic outlooks on the future.

Additionally, there are varying relationships between the training process, content, and expected outcomes; the training process indicated more improvements in personal morale than training content, which predicted fewer alcohol-related problems (Foran et al., 2012). In contrast, the training process anticipated a decline in symptoms related to physical health (Foran et al., 2012). The master resilience training course content was perceived to be helpful and showed a

relationship with self-reported changes in resilience (Griffith & West, 2013; Polusny et al., 2017). Specifically, study participants found that the training module that provided instruction in the relationship of activating events, beliefs, and consequences was more helpful in building coping skills (Griffith & West, 2013).

Finally, resilience may not directly affect the risk of mental health symptoms but may impact a person's ability to continue functioning in the face of mental health issues (Hourani et al., 2012). Hourani et al. (2012) also found that post-separation stress was found to be the strongest predictor of both new and recurring mental health issues, with high-stress levels associated with nearly five times the likelihood of both a new case of mental illness compared to mental health problem-free status and four times the likelihood of having a recurring mental illness.

### **Army Retirement Eligibility**

For Army enlisted soldiers to retire or request retirement from the Army, they must be eligible for retirement under title 10 U.S.C. section 3925 and Army Regulation 635-200. Soldiers who have completed at least 20 years but fewer than 30 years of federally required active duty and who have fulfilled all the service requirements are qualified but not entitled to retire immediately (Department of the Army, 2021). According to title 10 U.S.C. section 3925:

- (a) For the purpose of determining whether an enlisted member of the Army may be retired under section 3914 or 3917 of this title, his years of service are computed by adding all active service in the armed forces and service computed under section 36831 of this title. (b) Time required to be made up under section 972 (a) of this title may not be counted in determining years of service under subsection (a).

Title 10 U.S.C. sections 3914 and 3917 stated:

Under regulations to be prescribed by the Secretary of the Army, an enlisted member of the Army who has at least 20, but less than 30, years of service computed under section 3925 of this title may, upon his request, be retired.

Once the service member is considered to be eligible for retirement under title 10 U.S.C. sections 3925, 3914, and 3917 and Army Regulation 635-200, the next phase in the retirement process is to submit a request for retirement from active duty through the Department of the Army (2021) using Form 2339. Soldiers may request retirement within 12 months of their requested retirement date. Active-duty soldiers must submit the request through their chain of command and appropriate retirement authority. The service member must then wait for the request to be approved before they begin the transition process (Department of the Army, 2021).

### **Army Transition Programs**

Among the transition programs available to service members are the Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2) and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The AW2 has been formally changed to Army Recovery Care Program (ARCP), and according to the official military benefits website of the United States Army (2022): “The Army Recovery Care Program transitions soldiers back to the force and/or to Veteran status through a comprehensive program of medical care/rehabilitation management, professional development, and achievement of personal goals.”

There are 14 Soldier Recovery Units (SRUs) nationwide, in which the United States Army (2023) provides policy oversight. In addition to providing advocacy for families and caregivers of service members in SRU, the program oversees the recovery of wounded, ill, and injured soldiers who require complicated care (United States Army, 2023). The soldier recovery units have a substantial number of soldiers who suffer from psychological issues that limit their

ability to perform military duties (Woodruff et al., 2018; Wooten et al., 2019). Using a mood tracker, Bush et al. (2014) found positive experiences with participants during their recovery units. Although the stay in these units is designed to be temporary, Wooten et al. (2019) found that a large majority of the soldiers were in the program for almost a year. Since the ARCP's start in 2007, more than 80,000 soldiers have received assistance, and over 40% return to duty (United States Army, 2023).

The recovery care units assist injured soldiers; in contrast, TAP is a requirement for all soldiers who transition. According to the official military benefits website of the United States Army (2022), “The Army Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is the Army's Transition Program responsible for providing Soldiers with the counseling, employment, and educational workshops and seminars required to achieve the law and policy Career Readiness Standards (CRS) mandated compliance.”

All soldiers must initiate the TAP procedure within 365 days before their projected separation date from active duty (United States Army, 2022). During an in-depth study of the program, Ziencik (2020) found that TAP is a 5-day workshop encompassing three steps focused on transition. The program is mandatory for all members transitioning through retirement or discharge (Ziencik). The military has recognized the need for improvement of military programs. Thus, TAP has successfully assisted service members with transition since 2011 (Whitworth et al., 2020). Ziencik (2020) found that through TAP, higher education track observations, and document reviews, service members face obstacles during their transition but are better positioned to make educated decisions for their transition after completing TAP. The program offers classes, such as “Dress for Success,” which covers clothing suitable for the civilian workforce, including the characteristics of the business suit and business attire (United States

Army, 2022). Soldiers may also attend “Interview Techniques,” which includes the characteristics of interviews, and how to prepare for, execute, and follow up on an interview (United States Army, 2022).

Part of TAP is the Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP). This program is available to soldiers virtually, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Additionally, the program is available in over 50 locations worldwide (Army Retirement Services, 2019). As part of SFL-TAP, transition counselors provide retiring service members with support tailored to their unique needs. The programs can be initiated 1 year before they are eligible for retirement. The services offered by SFL-TAP include self-assessment, initial counseling, individual transition planning, and pre-separation counseling, where they learn about transition programs, services, and transition benefits. Other services include Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits and services briefings, Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshops, and the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Crosswalk. These services offer information on benefits, job searches, and resume writing (Army Retirement Services, 2019).

The MOS Crosswalk assists service members with identifying areas of their military occupation that could be beneficial to civilian employment (Army Retirement Services, 2019). Then, SFL-TAP provides service members with financial planning seminars designed to offer the knowledge and resources necessary to establish the first financial commitments, responsibilities, and goals throughout the transition period. Finally, the services of SFL-TAP include educational training, vocational training, employment assistance, and entrepreneurship. This includes workshops on Boots2Business, which is an entrepreneurship career track course. Workshops are provided for service members to learn the basics of small company owners and

business ideas, as well as the tools and resources accessible to veterans who decide to open their own small businesses (Army Retirement Services, 2019).

According to the Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program (PSTAP) assessment outcome study, approximately 50% of veterans who took part in TAP expressed contentment with their overall quality of life (VA, 2022). Similarly, the same percentage of veterans felt fulfilled with their accomplishments in life. Moreover, the PSTAP report found that roughly half of the veterans who participated in TAP expressed satisfaction with their future financial stability (VA, 2022).

Psychosocial issues have become a priority for our country because of the substantial number of service personnel who leave the military each year and the magnitude and scope of the potential psychological harm caused by poor transitions (Ainspan et al., 2018). Available transitional programs to assist veterans with career counseling and career transitions do not always focus on applying theory to support veterans; it is important to integrate theory for the most effective assistance (Buzzetta et al., 2017).

Veterans may struggle with their transitions and find it challenging to adapt to the diverse culture of the civilian world in which they now find themselves. Although there have been improvements to TAP, the focus continues to be on helping service members with post-employment benefits and education (Whitworth et al., 2020). This program does not focus on preparing transitioning members for challenges, general well-being, financial needs, or supporting their families through the complexity of transitioning (Whitworth et al., 2020).

### **Transition Challenges**

As previously mentioned, when service members transition out of service, they may face many challenges. Service members may experience a stigma associated with seeking assistance;



this stigma may significantly negatively impact planning and preparing for transition (Robertson & Brott, 2013). When planning for military transition support, stigma is perhaps a deeply ingrained component of military culture that may need to be addressed (Shue et al., 2021).

Ahern et al. (2015) identified several themes regarding the transition of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans to civilian life. Among these themes were feelings of alienation within civilian life, the lack of structure they had become accustomed to, a sense of disconnection from family and friends, and a loss of purpose. Additionally, service members viewed the military as a caretaker institution, considering the military a safety net that made life comfortable (Ahern et al., 2015). In a study with over 7,000 veterans, Borowski et al. (2022) found that 15% reported suicidal ideation during the first year post-separation. The results showed many significant predictors of veterans' suicidal ideation during this time, including depression and other mental health disorders and critical facets of psychosocial well-being (Borowski et al., 2022).

The military does an excellent job of integrating its members into the service; leaders and programs are in place to assist them with the integration process. The military offers structure, a mission, and a sense of purpose during integration. Returning to civilian life may not be as smooth; transition challenges arise from the lack of strategies to manage stress from the professional/educational, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains (Koenig et al., 2014). Veterans may experience challenges (Lisle et al., 2020) with financial support, physical health, and psychological factors. The following sections will explore these challenges that may affect transitioning veterans.

### ***Financial Support***

As soldiers consider the transition or retirement phase, it is crucial to identify their source of financial support. Robertson (2013) conducted a study to examine the experiences of service

members transitioning to a second occupation. Regarding income support, the researcher found that longer transitions may result in lower household income, while shorter transitions may result in higher household income. Financial planning and resources may benefit transitioning service members; this information should be available through transition counselors and transition services (Robertson, 2013).

The consideration of finances should begin early in the transition phase. Carlson et al. (2015) conducted a study investigating the variables connected to a composite indicator of soldiers' financial conduct. The findings showed that soldiers who considered themselves as having more financial understanding displayed better financial conduct. The researchers also found that soldiers with higher self-mastery more frequently reported better financial practices than those with lower self-mastery (Carlson et al., 2015).

Parker et al. (2019) found that 22% of veterans claimed to have secured a civilian job before leaving the military. About 48% reported not having a job lined up but immediately began their search, while 21% looked for employment but not immediately, and only 5% did not seek employment after retirement. Financial hardship during the transition may present additional challenges for service members as they leave the service (Parker et al., 2019).

Carlson et al. (2015) reported that soldiers with higher degrees of financial anxiety were more likely to report engaging in poorer financial practices than those with lower levels of financial concern. Transitioning to the workforce can be difficult for veterans due to various factors, such as adapting to new social settings, dealing with emotional and psychological health concerns, and moving from a military to a civilian way of life (Shepherd et al., 2021). Veterans who cannot secure employment face financial challenges that may contribute to stress (Hoffmire

et al., 2023). Many may rely on their service benefits to bridge the financial gap (Hoffmire et al., 2023).

Many veterans opt out of transitioning into the civilian workforce for the pursuit of entrepreneurship. Veterans are more likely to start and run their own businesses than their civilian peers (Murphy et al., 2022), prompting a surge in veteran entrepreneurship programs. The 2021 National Survey of Military-Affiliated Entrepreneurs survey of more than 2,000 veterans found that approximately 82% of the participants were currently engaged in business ownership, self-employment, freelance or contract work, or some form of self-employment; additionally, 86% of the participants identified themselves as entrepreneurs (Murphy et al.). Of the surveyed participants, 45% achieved the rank of senior enlisted during their military service. With regard to transition and entrepreneurship, 56% of the participants found it helpful and easier to transition as an entrepreneur, reporting that it gave them back the sense of purpose lost after transition (Murphy et al., 2022). Financial planning is an integral part of the transition; it is crucial for service members to be fully aware of their benefit options, employment, and entrepreneurship programs to assist in smooth transition out of service.

Employment is a considerable challenge that is concerning for transitioning veterans. Although there are available employment programs, these programs are four times more likely to be used by officers who have transitioned out of service (Perkins et al., 2022). In particular, the use of online job databases, career fairs, resume writing assistance, job training, and certification programs is much more frequent among veterans from more senior enlisted and officer pay grades than among veterans from lower pay grades for enlisted personnel (Aronson et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2022; Perkins et al., 2022). Hourani et al. (2012) found that while interpersonal stress distinguished employees with mental health issues and functional impairment from those

without, financial and unemployment stress were the two significant sources of stress for all outcome veterans in the transition process.

In addition to the lack of program utilization, military veterans frequently struggle to find employment while being praised by the public as noble heroes (Shepherd et al., 2019). Research has suggested that civilian companies consider veterans more suitable for positions requiring less emotional capacity (Shepherd et al.). Shepherd et al. noted that veterans face employment barriers, such as being seen as cold, rigid, and lacking tact and interpersonal skills. The lack of knowledge of veterans' history and familiarity results in employers holding incorrect views of the skills and abilities veterans offer to the workforce (Stone & Stone, 2015). Therefore, even if veterans are hired, they may be gradually pushed toward jobs that require low feelings (Shepherd et al., 2019).

Veterans may also struggle due to the difference in military-civilian culture. Changes in the work environment and work ethic may alienate and frustrate veterans (Keeling et al., 2019). Military cultural norms may conflict with civilian norms and become problems in the workplace (Keeling et al.). Keeling et al. also found that veterans reported a perception of discrimination in the workplace, which may contribute to the challenges faced with employment. Veterans expressed that looking ahead made them feel generally better equipped to address barriers (Bond et al., 2022; Keeling et al.). Additionally, the benefit of planning and having veteran connections appeared to help veterans adjust to cultural differences in the civilian world and establish ties that, in some circumstances, resulted in employment (Keeling et al., 2019).

Many programs are available to transitioning service members; however, hurdles, such as educational requirements and acceptable degree transfers, exist (Allen et al., 2014). Much of the coursework service members pursue satisfies military academic requirements for promotion

(Allen et al.). Although these credits may be from accredited schools, they may not be recognized by higher education institutions and, therefore, lack transferability (Allen et al., 2014).

### ***Physical Health***

Physical health is another critical challenge experienced by veterans during the transitional period. Mathewson-Chapman and Chapman (2019) found that veterans who served in combat may encounter difficulties in their post-deployment reintegration. These issues may follow them into the transition from military service. To promote healthy reintegration, early detection of combat injuries is essential to the impacted veteran, their family, and their community (Resnik & Reiber, 2012). Transitioning into the retirement phase of adulthood may lead to a decrease in daily activity. Particularly for service members, changes may include a lack of physical fitness training, decreased interaction with others, or decreased community activities. Shan et al. (2022) found that a change in daily activity was associated with an onset of depressive symptoms in participants without depressive symptoms at baseline.

The VA provides a range of services and benefits to veterans and their families to help reduce these health challenges that veterans face (Casner, 2017). The Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the National Cemetery Administration make up the VA (2019), one of the President's cabinet-level executive departments since 1988. These programs provide former service members of all branches with health care, benefits, and detention services (VA, 2019). Service members feel the negative consequences when benefits are delayed or the appeals processes are lengthy (Casner, 2017). Addressing wait times can potentially reduce the negative consequences of disability benefits.

### ***Psychological Factors***

There are also many psychological factors related to transition challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and distress (Paul & Moser, 2009). Veterans at risk of PTSD, anxiety, and depression are more likely to hide their needs and avoid seeking services (Resnik & Reiber, 2012). Depression, PTSD, and anxiety are among the major mental health issues that veterans who served in combat may face, specifically amid the veterans who served in the Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) period (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Nir et al., 2013; Soltani et al., 2014). While veterans with extensive combat experiences may suffer from PTSD, a veteran's transition period may be adversely affected by additional mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, as well as emotional disorders (Yan et al., 2013).

Mental health challenges may cause issues with veteran's reintegration into civilian culture, as well as cause isolation due to undiagnosed or untreated mental health symptoms (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Stanton et al., 2017). These challenges may also impair a veteran's social functioning; as a result, this may lead to problems with family transitions or maintaining employment (Stanton, 2017). Paul and Moser (2009) found that the loss of a job had a negative association with changes in mental health. These findings suggested that unemployment is a cause for mental distress, not just a correlation due to improvement once reemployed (Paul & Moser, 2009).

With the prevalence of mental health challenges that veterans face, in addition to coping with the stigma attached to mental illness, it may become difficult for veterans to seek assistance. There are many barriers associated with accessing the care needed to address symptoms (Strong et al., 2017). Researchers have found that when a community's goal includes helping veterans

understand their mental health, this can tremendously help veterans to have a healthy transition (Ahern, 2015; Resnik et al., 2012).

**Identity Conflict.** Service members learn to work as a team for mission completion through basic training. The time spent together often leads to a sense of comradeship (Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). During the transition from service, Guthrie-Gower and Wilson-Menzfeld found that ex-military members are at risk of social isolation and loneliness. They experience a sense of loss after the military and an inability or difficulty connecting with civilian communities (Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). The challenges may be a result of identity conflicts. Integrating cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations from various cultures into one internal, unified cultural identity can be challenging and lead to cultural and internal conflicts (Rahim et al., 2021). The challenges may show up in opposing expectations and unpredictable behavior, resulting in a decreased sense of connectedness to a cultural group (Rahim et al., 2021).

Binks and Cambridge (2018) found that United Kingdom veterans experienced identity conflicts when attempting to reintegrate into civilian life. Those who had internalized a strong military sense of self often struggled the most following discharge (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). Similarly, Thompson et al. (2019) speculated that Canadian veterans who belong to multiple social groups and maintain a military identity alongside their new civilian identity might be more likely to experience fewer difficulties when transitioning to civilian life. Thompson et al. (2019) found that weak social group identity among Canadian veterans was associated with difficulty adjusting to civilian life and mental health challenges.

Social identities give people essential psychological foundations to stand on since they define who people are and give people meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging (Jetten et al.,

2017). When people are presented with identity threats and challenges, the foundation of their social identity becomes vital because it provides strength and stability to endure or fight back (Jetten et al., 2017).

Identity conflicts may appear in many forms for veterans once they have transitioned. Some conflicts may show up in talents, interests, and vocational goals. Vocational identities and interests are often lost due to employment barriers (Stevenson et al., 2021). Changes in careers and goals after transition may create conflicts in moving forward and cause questions on the value of the new vocational goal. In addition to the conflicts that may arise from varying values, Carminati and Héliot (2022) suggested that conflicts may also result from interpersonal micro-processes, such as the emotional and cognitive perspectives of the individual. Different values and emotions associated with individual responses can trigger underlying microprocesses. The individual's overall experiences of competing identity values offer benefits, from learning and gaining knowledge to growing and experiencing personal growth (Carminati & Héliot, 2022).

Adjusting to civilian life might be difficult for those who adopt particularly salient military identities (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020; Thompson et al., 2019). The military's dynamic organizational structure and group differ from civilian communities' structure. Veterans who identify and associate with social groups may find it less difficult to adjust to civilian life (Thompson et al., 2019). The multiple identities an individual identifies with may benefit the growth and legitimacy of changes in their lives (Horton & Wanderley, 2018). Greenaway et al. (2015) found that group identification improves well-being by enhancing the individual's perceived personal control. Identifying the multiple affiliations that make up our identities may be helpful. Often, the affiliations, organizations, and groups we associate with carry their values and beliefs, which may create conflicts (Gibson et al., 2021). Furthermore, social identities and



resiliency improve stress management and well-being (Kim et al., 2022; Van Dick et al., 2017). These two factors are essential to maintaining life satisfaction through the transitional period and beyond (Van Dick et al., 2017). Conflicts in identity become a problem when there is an elevated level of discord when the role requirements cannot be satisfied (Gibson et al.). Improving group experiences can be facilitated when the tensions and conflicts are understood (Gibson et al., 2021).

**Life Satisfaction.** Transitioning from the military to civilian life is often problematic and may involve identity complications, feelings of loss, and disconnection from the military and society (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). How individuals adapt to their careers can provide helpful information on their life meaning and satisfaction during a career transition (Ramos & Lopez, 2018). The more secure the individual, the more adaptability they possess to making career adjustments (Ramos & Lopez, 2018).

Reintegration stress has a distinctive effect on suicidal ideation over and above PTSD and depression symptoms (Haller et al., 2016). Reintegration stress interacts with substance abuse to predict suicidal ideation (Haller et al., 2016). Many veterans have PTSD; therefore, reintegration into civilian life can affect the mental capacity of retired service members. Readiness and motivation are often used to describe service members; exploring readiness and motivation may be essential for assessing life satisfaction. Robertson and Brott (2014) explored five transition variables (readiness, confidence, control, support, and decision independence) and found the most robust relationship between confidence and life happiness. They found motivation to be the second-highest link between readiness and life satisfaction. The connection between happiness, support, control, and choice independence was statistically significant but less substantial (Robertson & Brott, 2014).

To determine whether soldiers feel excited due to deployment, enemy contact, or active duty, it is critical to look at the consequences for them (Senecal et al., 2019). These variables could result in a looming void and an emotional loss for the soldier leaving active duty (Senecal et al.). Soldiers may also experience the loss of day-to-day activities, routines, careers, and behaviors, which can lead to low life satisfaction (Senecal et al., 2019; Shue et al., 2021). In addition, mental health diagnosis may play a role in the sense of loss and low life satisfaction. Hashemi Dezaki et al. (2021) found that cognitive flexibility had a significant association with the level of life satisfaction among veterans diagnosed with PTSD. They concluded that people are protected against adverse outcomes by cognitive flexibility. The more adaptable a person is and the more they can view challenging circumstances as manageable, the more options they will have for reasoning when faced with unforeseen events and other people's actions. They will be better equipped to take charge in challenging circumstances (Hashemi Dezaki et al., 2021).

Veterans believe that preparation for their post-military career is essential to a smooth transition and life satisfaction (Robertson & Brott, 2013). In Robertson and Brott's research, veterans reported having more life satisfaction when concentrating on new careers post-transition or serving others after military service. Veterans who are separating from their past military profession may find that this emphasis helps them cope with their feelings of loss and grief (Robertson & Brott, 2013).

### **Spirituality and Religiosity**

During the transitional phase, a veteran's spirituality and religiosity may play a significant role in how they experience the transition out of Army service. Nir et al. (2013) asserted that religious attitudes and national sensibility were the most significant factors in helping veterans overcome mental health disorders and cope with life events. Researchers have

also noted that veterans diagnosed with PTSD due to war-related trauma experienced a decrease in symptoms when their existential spiritual well-being improved (Berkel et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2012). Tran et al. (2012) found that more severe PTSD and depressive symptoms were associated with a more pessimistic view of God, whereas less severe depressive symptoms were associated with a more optimistic view of God. This is due to the entanglement of coping and one's own conception of God.

As veterans experience transitions, research has suggested that they may experience a loss of purpose (Ahern et al., 2015). Researchers have highlighted the implication of spirituality in facilitating self-actualization and self-transcendence. The ultimate objective of spirituality is to attain a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Ai et al., 2013). This sense of meaning has a profound impact on life satisfaction and well-being, as spirituality positively affects one's self-esteem and psychological health, thereby improving everyday relationships (Tran et al., 2012). Veterans are more likely to value religion's inherent structure because they can cling to it during periods of chaos (Ahern et al., 2015). In the chaos of reintegration, church family and community signify a source of support and structure that can assist veterans to recover some sense of calm (Berkel et al., 2019; Koenig, 2014; Tran, 2012).

Taking part in activities that support spiritual needs serves as a protective factor for veterans facing difficulties with reintegration (Koenig, 2014). Berkel et al. (2019) suggested that whether the experiences are good or bad, faith plays a significant role in some service members' identities and worldviews. Although soldiers may identify with different religions, many focus on a general belief in God or a higher power (Berkel et al., 2019; Koenig, 2014) rather than focus on religion.

## Family Transition

Just as the service member transitions, the family also transitions out of the military environment to which they are accustomed. During the transitional period, paying attention to the adverse effects on relationships is essential. Career and financial changes may challenge a marital relationship or family dynamics. Brisini et al. (2018) asserted that retirement transition was associated with the highest levels of relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relationship turbulence. Additionally, they found retirement transition to be one of the transition categories associated with the lowest reports of the transition processing activities, such as feeling connected, increasing interaction, increasing confidence, and feeling situated (Brisini et al., 2018).

Military spouses are familiar with transitions through the process of frequent moves to different states and abroad with their active-duty service members (Elliott, 2020). They transition between experiencing deployment, moving homes, and reestablishing their places in new communities. Military children are also affected by the transitions of service members. According to a 2021 Demographics Report by the Department of Defense (DoD), around 950,953 children have at least one parent serving on active duty. Within this group of military children, 713,311 fall into the K–12 age range of 5–18 years old (DoD, 2021). Military children typically relocate and switch schools between six to nine times during their academic journey from kindergarten to high school completion, relocating every 1 to 4 years; which is three times more frequently than their civilian peers (Astor, 2011; Berg, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Additionally, the impact of military service on children's transition to adulthood can vary based on factors, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation of the service member (Kelty et al., 2010). While the military provides a support system to aid the transition, unique risks

associated with the service can also pose challenges (Kelty et al., 2010). It is crucial to recognize and address the difficulties that come with multiple school transitions in order to provide proper support for this student community.

As transitions and deployments take place, the family moves forward as an "altered family" unit, taking on new roles and responsibilities, while also attempting to connect with the deployed family member and find support from other military families in a comparable situation (Yablonsky et al., 2016). Yablonsky et al. (2016) found that in order to "remain engaged" with the military mission in a foreign area, the service member forms a surrogate family with other deployed servicemembers and concurrently and tries to preserve connection with the family at home, resulting in each service member undergoing the deployment transition individually (Brockman et al., 2016).

Role transitions, absences, stress, and trauma frequently challenge military families (Brockman et al., 2016). While some families are less able to do so, some remain unwavering in the face of these challenges to successfully renegotiate and realign connections that support healthy family functioning and family members' adaptation (Brockman et al.). A family-centered approach may benefit all members through the transition period (Beardslee et al., 2013). For military service members and their families to effectively respond to the difficulties faced during post-deployment reintegration, experiencing avoidance may be a factor (Brockman et al., 2016).

### **Reintegration**

The word "transition" may not fully cover the ambiguity of leaving military service and the military community to reintegrate into civilian society. Life may not adequately capture the ambiguity of leaving military duty and the military community to reintegrate into civilian life (Grimell, 2017). Studies on the transition from military to civilian life have revealed the

complexity of the processes (Grimell, 2017). Approximately 50% of post-9/11 veterans have faced difficulties while readjusting to civilian life (Igielnik, 2019). Even though 73% of all veterans found it to be a somewhat easy transition, around 26% (Igielnik, 2019) of them experienced at least some level of difficulty in this transition.

According to a Forbes report (Trulia, 2014), veterans are not commonly found in large urban areas. In fact, they make up only 6.4% of the adult population in such cities, while accounting for 11.2% in smaller towns and rural locations. The report asserted that veterans are likely to reside near military bases and regions with active-duty residents (Trulia, 2014), which is particularly true for Gulf War veterans.

Flack and Kite (2021) suggested that interventions considering various aspects of military identity while promoting more comprehensive social relationships may be remarkably successful. In other words, encouraging the social links between ex-service members, veteran groups, and other social groups may aid in both improving mental health outcomes and assist in the adjustment to the non-centrality of military life (Flack & Kite, 2021).

For those service members who transition through retirement, they may find that retirement is a process. This process in people's lives, rather than a specific, one-off event, can be regarded as having three phases: the first is imagining the possibility of one's future life during retirement, the second is evaluating the past to help determine when to retire, and the third is the transition to retirement or acting on one's retirement plans (Beehr, 2014). Each stage involves psychological activities that many employees will likely experience concerning retirement (Beehr). These stages can come so rapidly that they can blend into one another (Beehr, 2014).

Reintegrating into the home and society is not always an easy transition, even though many veterans return from deployment without a severe health or psychological condition (Freytes et al., 2017). Successful reintegration into civilian life depends on access to resources, community involvement, and peer support (Olenick et al., 2015). Freytes et al. (2017) explored reintegration through the point of view of couples who stayed together for many years. The researchers found that despite the challenges, learning new coping skills and commitment to their relationships appeared to be most prominent for the sustainment of many of the relationships. Although some couples struggled for years after their deployment, most indicated a solid commitment to their relationships, and all reported some improvement over the first post-deployment period (Freytes et al., 2017).

Relationships and support are essential during the transitional phase of life. Community events designed to facilitate success in the integration process are worth exploring for both the community and the veteran (Mamon et al., 2020). Community events that focus on integrating veterans can potentially decrease shame or the stigma related to mental health challenges, social isolation, and difficult life transitions (Mamon et al.). Additionally, community events help educate civilians on military culture, creating a community that fosters education and acceptance (Mamon et al.). Gorman et al. (2018) demonstrated the significant impact of community support as veterans seek to reintegrate into their civilian communities. Veterans who attend social community events gain a sense of empowerment, support, and the ability to integrate into their civilian communities successfully (Gorman et al., 2018). Studies have shown that support is vital to reintegrating veterans' value of community and family support (Gettings et al., 2019; Mamon et al., 2020). Gettings et al. (2019) suggested that perceived acceptance positively related to

persuasiveness, emotions, and relational impact, whereas perceived autonomy support was positively associated with emotions and identity management outcomes.

### **How Veterans Perceive the Transition Process**

The transition process may be extensive and bring about many challenges for service members. People may frequently find conflict in the military transition process; being fully immersed in the military culture may bring about feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, and disappointment due to service termination (Grimell, 2017). The transition may be deemed challenging if self-identity takes a back seat to their military identity (Grimell, 2017).

Additionally, many veterans have expressed a lack of readiness as a source of conflict for transition (Robertson & Brott, 2014). Readiness and motivation are often used to describe service members's feelings; exploring readiness and motivation may be essential, particularly for separations out of the individual's control (Robertson & Brott, 2014). Transitional issues take time to process and may be difficult for veterans; even when new identities, jobs, and lives are eventually found and shaped within a civilian context and society, military duties may continue to exist and act within the self (Grimell, 2017).

Like many things in the Army, retirement, and transition come with their own processes. Kukla et al. (2015) conducted a mixed-method research study to understand how veterans perceived the transition process and their ability to obtain productive employment. The researchers utilized 40 veterans receiving mental health services from the Veterans Administration Medical Center in the Midwest. They compared the combat group ( $n = 21$ ) with the non-combat group ( $n = 19$ ) using quantitative data analysis in SPSS. The study was open to veterans with PTSD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia spectrum disorder, and major depressive disorder. The researchers utilized open-ended interviews and a self-reported survey to collect



data. The demographic information covered sex, ethnicity, marital status, education, mental illness, handicap, past service in the military, and employment history. The findings of this study suggested that greater difficulty with work reintegration was experienced by veterans who believed their separation from the military to be premature or under circumstances that made them feel underprepared to transition into civilian life; this was frequently concealed by a shaky self-concept and a weak sense of control over one's professional destiny (Kukla et al., 2015).

In addition to the difficulties with securing employment, Mael et al. (2022) explored the key to success as experienced by veterans. The researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with 124 hiring managers, human resource directors, and 164 veterans who work for these organizations. The study revealed a few themes. In the conversations with veterans, the researchers found that although the norm is 3 months or less to prepare for the transition, some participants stated that at least 6 months are required to prepare for such a significant life change. Other study participants noted that 18 months (about 1.5 years) was necessary for a meticulous transition (Mael et al.). Another theme that arose from this study stemmed from the preparedness of the service member; most noted that transitioning services members should understand that military tenure would not last forever and that one should prepare for inevitable civilian work and civilian life (Mael et al., 2022; Shue et al., 2021).

Mael et al. (2022) also found that the adjustment period was most difficult for veterans who had served as military leaders since they immediately felt ready to assume leadership positions in the private sector. Success in a civilian setting frequently requires the capacity to disassociate oneself from one's prior levels and prestige in the military. As a whole, the military may encourage soldiers to prepare early for transition, separation, or the next career move;

however, the research has suggested that the soldier's leaders may convey the opposite message and discourage such actions (Mael et al., 2022).

In one study, Shue et al. (2021) found that a majority of participants talked about how leaders' lack of support hindered preparation for the transition process. In addition to their perception of support from leadership, veterans indicated that unconditional support from family members is a beneficial tool for the transition process (Shue et al.). Other veterans talked about getting assistance and guidance from the veteran community and their fellow veterans, facilitating a feeling of community and the transition process (Shue et al., 2021). Veterans in a study by Robertson and Brott (2013) also strongly emphasized that planning is important and is associated with a successful career change.

### **Summary**

As service members transition out of service, they may face many transition challenges. Among the challenges, veterans may find difficulties securing employment, assuring successful family transition, and addressing physical and mental health issues. Transitioning veterans may become overwhelmed by this life stage (Ahern et al., 2015). Although programs are available to service members, many are under-utilized and lack a foundation of theory (Buzzetta et al., 2017). The military does an excellent job of integrating its members into the service; leaders and programs are in place to assist them with the integration process. The military offers structure, a mission, and a sense of purpose during integration. Returning to civilian life may not be as smooth; transition challenges arise from the lack of strategies to manage stress from the professional/educational, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains (Koenig et al., 2014).

Successful reintegration into civilian life depends on access to resources, community involvement, and peer support (Olenick et al., 2015). Transitioning from the military to civilian

life is often problematic and may involve identity complications, feelings of loss, and disconnection from the military and society (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). Veterans who transitioned as entrepreneurs reported regaining a sense of purpose and identity loss after transition (Murphy et al., 2022).

The existing literature has focused on the challenges veterans face after transitioning from service. However, it fell short in describing the lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders who have transitioned through retirement. Understanding the lived experiences had implications for structuring programs that would address many of the challenges this population of veterans encounters. This study sought to understand how Army senior enlisted leaders describe their mental health and their ability to cope during the first 90 days after service retirement. Finally, this study explored Army senior enlisted leaders' ability to adjust to civilian communities and assistance that was helpful during the transitional period.

## **Chapter Three: Methods**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences of U.S. Army senior enlisted leaders between the ranks of Sergeant First Class (SFC), Master Sergeant (MSG), and Sergeant Major (SGM; E-7, E-8, and E-9) during the first 90 days after retirement. This chapter addresses the methods that were used in this study. The research design and the research questions that guided this study are discussed. This chapter discusses the participants, how they were recruited, and the procedures that guided this study. Data collecting methods, the analysis of that data, the establishment of trustworthiness, and the researcher's role are presented to complete the chapter.

### **Design**

This study was conducted using the phenomenological qualitative research method. This method begins with one or more broad questions that can be modified repeatedly as the research is conducted to focus on the goal or objective of the study (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). The naturalistic, evidence-based style of qualitative research allows for direct observation of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By posing the why question, qualitative research offers structured and unstructured insight and knowledge into the participants' experiences, unlike quantitative research, which aims to quantify an issue and provide illustrations in statistics (Creswell & Poth). The qualitative research method offers many techniques, such as interviews, field notes, and focus groups, to gather information (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denny & Weckesser, 2022) and capture the fundamental nature of the participants' experiences.

In qualitative research, participants are observed in their natural environment while the researcher attempts to grasp the phenomenon and the meanings attributed to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this reason, the qualitative phenomenological methodology was adapted for this study. By taking on a person-centered position and empathically listening to subjects without interrogating or passing judgment, the phenomenological technique aims to record experiences, ideas, and feelings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Phenomenology seeks to identify the core of the shared or universal characteristics described by the study participants (Chance et al., 2020). This method allows the researcher to understand the human experience of a given phenomenon.

The phenomenological method was appropriate for this study because the researcher was seeking to explore the lived experiences of veterans as they transitioned from active-duty Army to civilian life through retirement. This research design included interviews and focus groups with participants. This method's exploratory nature allowed the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge (Heppner et al., 2016) of the transition experiences.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe changes in their mood and emotional health over the first 90 days after retirement?

**RQ2:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to adjust to civilian culture within the first 90 days after retirement?

**RQ3:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to cope within the first 90-days after retirement?

**RQ4:** What mental health transitional supports were helpful during the first 90 days after retirement?

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a U.S. Army installation, Fort Green (pseudonym), located in the western part of the United States. The installation had a population of approximately 20,000 active-duty service members and 8,000 veterans and employees. Fort Green was also within 30 miles of a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) facility. The VFW provides various support and assistance to veterans in the local community. Fort Green was selected because of the large population of veterans. Additionally, the installation had a transition office and offered the Soldier for Life transition program to service members leaving military service.

### **Participants**

This study aimed for 12–15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to adhere to a phenomenological research method and ended up with 14 participants. The participants in this study were veterans who served in the U.S. Army and had earned retirement. Heppner et al. (2016) asserted that criteria-based sampling is commonly utilized in a phenomenological study to choose individuals who satisfy the study requirements. In addition to selecting participants based on standard criteria, such as gender, age, race, and socioeconomic status (Creswell & Poth, 2018), participants also had to have experienced the study phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2016) and had to have the ability to convey or communicate their lived experiences.

The current study's participants had to have earned retirement from the U.S. Army. Participants had to have served a minimum of 20 years and qualified for retirement under the guidelines of Army Regulation 635-200 (Department of the Army, 2021). Prior to retirement, participants had to have earned one of the three senior enlisted ranks of the Army—SFC (E-7), MSG/1SG (E-8), or CSM/SGM (E-9)—in accordance with Army Regulation 600–8–19 (Department of the Army, 2019). In addition to the rank requirement, participants had to be

retired for a minimum of 90 days and no longer than 5 years. Participants could have been male or female; combat experience was not a requirement for this study. Finally, taking part in this research project was voluntary, and participants could have chosen to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Procedures**

The researcher first submitted a request through the institutional review board (IRB) and obtained approval for conducting the current study. Once approval was granted, the researcher began to recruit participants for the study. The researcher was purposeful in selecting the study participants. The participants had to meet all criteria to participate.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Participants were recruited through the Army's Soldier for Life transition assistance program and the Army transition offices from Fort Green (see Appendix B). Additionally, the researcher had contact with the president of the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association high desert chapter. The chapter president had offered to disseminate the project flyer (see Appendix C) and research information request for volunteers across several association chapters. Finally, participants were recruited through social networks (see Appendix D), including:

- LinkedIn
- RallyPoint
- Liberty University Doctoral Cohort (private Facebook group)
- Liberty University Community Care and Counseling EdD Cohort (private Facebook group)
- Veteran 2 Veteran Info (private Facebook group)
- Veteran's Business Networking Together (public Facebook group)

- US Army Veteran (community Facebook group)
- United States Military (Active, Retired, and Veterans) Support Group (private Facebook group)

All recruitment efforts for this study took place post-IRB approval (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to take a brief web-based questionnaire. This questionnaire allowed the researcher to screen each participant to ensure they met the current study's criteria. Participants were also asked to review and sign a consent document prior to a scheduled interview. In addition to a consent document, participants' records were kept private. Published reports did not include any information that made it possible to identify a participant. Participant responses were kept confidential using pseudonyms and codes to protect their identity. All research records were stored securely, and only the researcher had access to the records.

### **Researcher's Role**

As a co-analyst in a phenomenological design, the researcher had a special responsibility. The interpretation of the participants' experiences was influenced by the researcher's personal experience with the phenomenon. As a result, the researcher had to share her understanding of the phenomenon. As an active-duty soldier, the researcher understood some difficulties and fears associated with transitioning out of the Army. The researcher met several senior enlisted leaders who were excited to transition. The researcher wanted to understand if that sentiment carried over to when they ultimately transitioned out of the Army. The researcher had built professional personal relationships and social networks with her fellow soldiers due to their unique culture, connection, and emotional struggles. The researcher was interested in speaking with those with whom she had had professional relationships during their time in the Army.



The researcher's bias in this study came from her experience with seeing how her husband transitioned out of the Army. He was an SFC (E7) with dreams of earning the rank of Command SGM. His career did not take him that far, and his transition period was full of dark moments. The researcher stood by as her husband struggled with anxiety, depression, and feelings of rejection. His experiences with the transition process prompted the researcher to reflect on the transition process and how our service members are affected or cope during this significant life transition. Unable to assist her spouse, the researcher journaled her thoughts and evaluated her assumptions about the transition process for Army-enlisted senior leaders. Throughout this study, the researcher was conscious of her thoughts and personal and professional perceptions.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed three philosophical assumptions used in qualitative research—epistemological, ontological, and axiological. These three theoretical assumptions had an impact on the data collection and analysis methods the researcher used in the current study. The researcher's belief system guided her approach to undertaking this study and how this study will be viewed by others.

#### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that the epistemological assumption relates to the need to get close to the study participants. This assumption seeks to answer the questions: What counts as knowledge? How are knowledge claims justified? What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's epistemological assumption was based on her experiences as a senior enlisted leader currently serving in the U.S. Army. She had known veterans who struggled with the transition out of services. The researcher

was mindful to bracket her experience and preconceived notions on the topic of veteran transitions.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the ontological assumption is characterized by numerous views and the nature of realities. As the researcher gathered multiple perspectives from the participants on their transitional experiences, she was mindful to understand the different views and how the participants viewed the research topic. The participants' views guided the themes that developed from this study.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The axiological assumption describes the degree to which a qualitative researcher's values are known and brought into a research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher understood that her values could not have been the focus of this study in order to avoid a biased report. The researcher set aside her role as a senior enlisted leader and focused on the experiences of those leaders who had retired. The researcher understood that her values, based on her experience as a soldier, shaped the narrative or interpretation of the current study. The researcher understood that bracketing was necessary to maintain the accuracy of the participants' accounts and report the true phenomenon in the final report.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection methods for this study included a web-based questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a synthesis of varying data sources, methods, or theories to validate findings is known as triangulation. Triangulation of the data is a way qualitative researchers gain credibility in their studies (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021).

The web-based questionnaire was the first data collection method to obtain the participants' demographic information. Guise et al. (2010) found that web-based questionnaires were more likely to produce participants' responses than paper questionnaires. The web-based questionnaire was generated through Google Forms to obtain demographic information and to determine if participants met the research criteria. The questionnaire included eight questions and did not require the participants to disclose personally identifying information. The questionnaire asked participants to disclose an email address to establish a form of communication with the researcher. The responses to the questionnaires were emailed directly to the researcher at [REDACTED]@yahoo.com. The researcher protected all questionnaire questions on a sole-access, password-protected computer. The researcher was the only individual with access to this computer. Once participants had been identified via email and were eligible to take part in the study, the researcher assigned a code or pseudonym to each participant to protect their identity.

### **Questionnaire Questions**

\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender?

Female

Male

I choose not to disclose.

2. What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian/European American

African/African American

Spanish/Latino

Asian/Pacific Islander

Native American

Middle Eastern

Multiracial

3. Age range

18–20      21–29      30–39      40–49      50–59      60 or older

4. Did you serve in the Army?      Yes      No

5. Which senior enlisted rank did you earn?

E7 (SFC)      E8 (MSG/1SG)      E9 (SGM/CSM)      Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. Did you retire from the Army?      Yes      No

7. What year did you retire from the Army? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Would you like to participate in this study?      Yes      No

### **Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study as they assured the most genuine phenomenological approach by allowing participants to candidly describe their retirement and transition experiences that had meaning and relevance to them (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Each participant was interviewed in person, by telephone, or via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Google Docs' voice-to-text with the consent of each participant. Participants were interviewed multiple times if more information was required for data collection clarity. Interviews were scheduled for approximately 45 minutes, not to exceed 60 minutes, to allow in-depth answers to 11 open-ended questions. In addition to individual interviews, the researcher conducted a follow-up focus group interview with the participants. The goal of the follow-up focus group was to share early findings and collect input from study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although encouraged, participants were not required to participate in the focus group; however, all participants were asked to review the transcripts of their interview for accuracy.

The interview process elicited the participants' viewpoints to reveal their experiences' significance and meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The open-ended interview questions (see Appendix F) helped the participants focus on the current study and allowed the researcher to focus on understanding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study's records were stored on a password-protected computer. The researcher had sole access to this computer. In addition to sole access, the researcher kept participant information private and confidential by assigning codes or pseudonyms to each participant. All information that could be used to identify a participant was not included in published reports. Like the data, all research records were stored securely on a sole-access, password-protected computer. Participants were asked to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcripts for their interviews. Interviews were conducted in a location where others did not easily overhear the dialogue.

The data collected was saved on a password-protected computer and could be utilized in future presentations. The researcher recorded and transcribed all interviews and focus group interactions. Interview recordings will be saved on a password-protected computer for 1 year and then deleted. The researcher was and will be the only individual with access to these recordings.

Any information used or shared did not contain identifying information of participants; all identifying information, as applicable, was removed beforehand. The data collected in this study was stored on a password-protected computer and locked in a file cabinet. After 1 year, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.

## **Interview Questions**

### ***Opening Questions***

1. How would you describe your integration into the Army?
2. How did your transition into the Army affect you?

***Questions Related to Transition Experience***

3. What influenced your decision to retire from the Army?
4. What were your initial emotions when you made the decision to retire?
5. How did you prepare for retirement from the Army?
6. How did the Army transition process prepare you for retirement?

***Questions Related to Mental Health Experience***

7. Did you experience any significant changes to your mental health within the first 90 days after retirement?
8. Tell me about any mental health struggles you experienced as you prepared to retire.
9. Tell me about mental health support you received during the first 90 days after retirement.
10. Tell me about coping strategies you employed for mental health struggles during the first 90 days.
11. What resources were available to you during that time? Include both military and civilian resources, if any.

To ensure validity, semi-structured interview questions should be developed utilizing the study questions and the available literature (Castillo-Montoya, 2017). The semi-structured interview questions for this study were divided into three categories. The first category consisted of questions 1 and 2. The second category consisted of questions 3–6. The final and third category included Questions 7–10.

Questions 1 and 2 focused on the participants' experiences when they first entered the Army. These questions gave the researcher a sense of how the study participants integrated into military service. When soldiers join the military, they must complete training to prepare them for

military service. The goal of Initial Entry Training (IET) is designed to do just that (Canino et al., 2019). It prepares service members mentally and physically for the military environment and consequent training (Canino et al., 2019). In addition to understanding service member integration into the Army, these first two questions also created an opportunity for the researcher to explore the participants' feelings about the Army. Finally, this first category of questions created an opportunity to build rapport with the participants. Nash et al. (2016) found rapport building to be a fundamental skill for interviewing; additionally, this skill is important for developing the foundation of the interview. The opening questions offered the opportunity for the researcher to find common ground and to give the participants an introduction to the conversation.

The second category of questions explored the participants' experiences during their transition out of the Army. Questions 3–6 sought to understand how participants felt about retirement and the transition process. These questions focused on the decision to retire, what influenced the decision, and the preparedness for retirement (Shafer, 2000). The final category of questions focused on the lived mental health experience of the participants. Questions 7–10 asked the participants about any significant mental struggles during the first 90 days after transition in addition to coping strategies that were helpful. These questions also asked participants to recall any resources, through both military or civilian agencies, which were available to help during this transition period.

### **Focus Group**

Finally, the data collection process concluded with a focus group. The participants were asked to participate in an online focus group via MS Teams. Like the individual interviews, the focus group was recorded and transcribed using Google Docs' voice-to-text. The focus group

assisted in capturing the participants' experience in a social setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus group questions were developed through the emerging themes from the individual interviews (Creswell & Poth). This allowed the researcher to collect information on the shared themes experienced by all participants (Creswell & Poth). The researcher acted as the facilitator and moderator of the focus group to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to voice their opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher could not guarantee confidentiality in the focus group settings. Participants were encouraged to keep the information discussed in the focus groups confidential. The researcher discussed the importance of confidentiality with focus group participants and ensured that participants understood their option to opt out of the focus group. While it was not encouraged, other focus group members still could have discussed data and information from the focus group with people outside the group.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the researcher employed Moustakas' (1994) analysis steps to analyze the data. These steps included identifying important or significant statements, grouping related ideas, organizing themes, describing the structure and texture of the experience, providing a comprehensive description of the essence of the experience, and finally, providing a clearly articulated report (Moustakas, 1994). Developing themes allowed the researcher to look for similarities, patterns, and categories within the data. The patterns and similarities assisted the researcher in developing a foundation for the initial set of themes within the transcribed interviews. The themes were then synthesized and reduced to focus on and answer the research questions. Next, the researcher used coding to categorize the text collected from the interviews and focus groups. Coding involved grouping the text or visual data into manageable categories of information, looking for support for the codes in various



databases utilized in the study, and finally, giving the codes labels (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher also developed significant statements to analyze the data (Creswell & Poth). The researcher identified statements regarding how people are experiencing the topic, compiled a list of these critical statements, ensured the statements were weighted as equals, and attempted to create a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping assertions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By identifying significant statements, the researcher formulated meaning and theme clusters (Heppner et al., 2016). Detailed explanations help readers understand the essence of their experiences and serve as a unifying framework for a phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2016).

### **Textural Description**

In the phenomenological research method, Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the researchers must transcribe participants' interviews verbatim and create a description of the participants' experience. This process is called a textural description. The textural description aids the researcher in putting the participants' experiences into a comprehensive written report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before coding the data to create a complete textual description, the researcher first had the participants' accounts of their experiences during their retirement experience transcribed. The researcher:

- Reread the data thoroughly for a comprehensive understanding.
- Labeled the data.
- Created codes with different color ink.
- Created themes in different color ink.

The coding of important information assisted the researcher to highlight common experiences of the veterans. The researcher then employed member checking to evaluate the procedure, the validity of the tools, and the study questions, as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

### **Structural Description**

The textural and structural descriptions of the research offered the meaning and core of the participants' experience. It was crucial to write how the experience happened, known as the structural description, after producing a textural account of the individuals' experiences.

According to Moustakas (1994), the structural description provides a vivid representation of the participants' underlying dynamic experience. The participants' opinions toward their transition and their separation from the Army was also structurally described by the researcher, along with what they believed were beneficial resources to their transition and mental health.

### **Composite Description**

The final step of the data analysis was to compile all the data by writing a composite description of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The composite description was written in a way that described "what" they experienced and "how" the participants experienced it (Creswell & Poth). Using the composite description, researchers give a thorough picture of what they discovered to be the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The lived experience must be explained rather than interpreted in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the researcher compiled the themes that were evidenced during the analysis of participants' experiences to offer a picture of the mental health impact of Army senior enlisted veterans.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study is significant to the results or for the findings to be usable. The researcher is responsible for maintaining transparency in all facets of the study design, data collection, analysis, and findings reported (Patton, 2015). This study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were critical elements.

## **Credibility**

The degree to which the research findings adequately explain reality is referred to as research credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility in research strongly depends on the quality of the data the researcher has gathered and examined. Credibility was established using fundamental qualitative techniques. When researchers thoroughly examine data for diverging themes, developing patterns, and opposing explanations, their credibility rises (Patton, 2015). Through member checking, this study established credibility by triangulating the research method, data source, and investigator (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process allowed for transparency in the study and the data collected (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021; Connelly, 2016).

## **Dependability and Confirmability**

Korstjens and Moser (2018) mentioned that dependability refers to the stability of the findings over time. It involves an evaluation of the finding by the participants, along with their interpretation and recommendations of the study and all the supporting information from the participants (Korstjens & Moser). The dependability of the study increases the credibility of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confirmability is the extent to which additional researchers could validate the study's conclusions (Korstjens & Moser). Confirmability is concerned with proving that the data and interpretations of the findings are clearly drawn from the data, not just the inquirer's imagination (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This study utilized member checking and audit trails to ensure accuracy, dependability, and confirmability.

## **Transferability**

Research transferability assures that conclusions from one study and context can be applied to another study and situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability demonstrates how research validation findings apply to the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth asserted that

transferability sets the mark that allows research to transfer to other texts. Moreover, rich, comprehensive descriptions, more exhaustive participant sampling, consistency within findings, congruence to readers' experiences or earlier research, and relevant conclusions to other contexts all promote transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design of this study aligned with the theoretical framework of transition theory. This study used transcribed interviews and a focus group to develop detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the experiences and phenomenon. Finally, this study adhered to the fundamental qualitative requirements and utilized multiple sources for sampling.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers should consider the ethical ramifications and implications of all research projects. Researchers must also consider how the facts presented affect how well study participants are protected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This current study was clear and transparent in all aspects. All participants were provided an information sheet with details of the study. This study was completely voluntary, and the participants could have withdrawn their participation at any time. Approval from the IRB helped to ensure the protection of the participants. Participants were offered all information and transcripts of their interviews to ensure the accuracy of their responses. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to protect all participants and military installations. Finally, the researcher ensured that all data was stored on a password-protected electronic device. The researcher had sole access to the password. Finally, all collected participant information will be destroyed after 1 year by destroying electronic data and shredding all paper documents.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the methodological framework for conducting a phenomenological study to understand the transition experience of U.S. Army senior enlisted leaders between SFC, MSG, and SGM (E-7, E-8, and E-9). The phenomenological method was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of veterans as they transitioned from active-duty army to civilian life through retirement. The researcher used a short questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group to collect the data for this study. The data was analyzed using textual, structural, and composite descriptions. The researcher was responsible for maintaining transparency in all facets of the study design, data collection, analysis, and reported findings (Patton, 2015). This study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were critical elements.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Overview**

The aim of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of U.S. Army senior enlisted leaders between the ranks of Sergeant First Class (SFC), Master Sergeant (MSG), and Sergeant Major (SGM; E-7, E-8, and E-9) during the first 90 days after retirement.

Retirement is a significant life transition, and for many service members, this new phase marks new opportunities and new experiences. As many senior enlisted leaders depart each year, it was critical to anticipate the experiences and obstacles that future veterans may encounter. The results of this study are reported in this chapter. This chapter provides a description of participant demographics, along with an introduction to all individual participants. The researcher goes into detail on themes that developed during the study's individual interview answers, provides a reflective self-analysis, and presents the focus group findings.

### **Participants**

As part of the commitment to understand the lived experiences of senior enlisted leaders who have retired, 14 participants were interviewed for this study. With the approval of the institutional review board (IRB), the researcher followed all protocols for recruiting participants. Through several Facebook posts, potential participants were asked to complete a short eight-question questionnaire to determine eligibility. Although 30 personnel completed the questionnaire, only 14 participants responded to a request for individual interviews with the researcher. As part of the IRB approval, this study qualified for an exemption under category 2 as set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d) policy through the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations (see Appendix E). Due to this exemption, the participants of this study were not required to sign a consent form to participate

in the study. The researcher provided an information sheet (see Appendix G) that explained the purpose and foundation of the study. Each participant completed an interview through videoconferencing via Microsoft Teams. All interviews took place in the month of August 2023. Demographic information of participants was acquired through the short screening questionnaire (see Appendix H) and was also discussed at the beginning of each individual interview (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Rank	Years of Army Service	Retirement Year
Melanie	Female	50–59	SFC	23	2022
Ren	Male	40–49	MSG	23	2023
Nancy	Female	30–39	SFC	20	2019
Janet	Female	50–59	SGM	29	2021
Marco	Male	40–49	MSG	20	2023
Lisa	Female	40–49	MSG	20	2021
Tala	Female	40–49	SFC	20	2021
Cody	Male	40–49	SFC	20	2022
Fred	Male	40–49	SFC	23	2023
Drew	Male	40–49	MSG	21	2019
Luca	Male	40–49	SGM	24	2022
Jake	Male	40–49	SFC	22	2021
Allen	Male	50–59	SGM	23	2023
John	Male	40–49	SFC	20	2022

**Melanie**

Melanie served in the U.S. Army for 23 years. Melanie enlisted to provide a better life and opportunity for her children and herself. She worked her way up through the enlisted ranks, earning the senior enlisted rank of SFC 4 years prior to retirement. Melanie expressed that her decision to retire was influenced by an onset of a medical condition that left her with the inability to continue her Army service. Melanie described feeling devastated when she made the decision to retire. She was happy with her career as a human resources specialist and wanted to progress

to the rank of MSG. Melanie expressed that although she was devastated about having to retire, she focused on her health and moved into the retirement phase.

### **Ren**

Ren served in the U.S. Army for 23 years. He described his integration into the Army as a positive experience that influenced his decision to make a career of it. Ren worked his way up through the enlisted ranks, earning the senior enlisted rank of MSG 5 years prior to his retirement. Ren made the decision to retire for the stability of his family. He expressed that although he enjoyed his career as an automated logistical specialist, it was important to find stability because his children were getting older, and he no longer wanted to miss out on their daily activities and school functions. Additionally, Ren explained that he could no longer cope with the changes in the Army. He felt that the Army had become very political, which led to a lack of discipline in soldiers. Ren expressed that he became overwhelmed when he made the decision to retire. He explained that the decision was scary, and he became nervous about the unknowns. Despite his nerves, he moved into the retirement phase and began to integrate back into his family.

### **Nancy**

Nancy described her integration into the U.S. Army as a culture shock because she enlisted just 3 days after graduating from high school. Despite the difficulties she encountered as she adjusted to this culture change, Nancy had no desire to return home. She explained that although her integration was traumatic, the Army allowed her to become an independent and responsible adult. The decision to retire came easily for Nancy. She explained that after several overseas deployments, her eldest daughter started high school and needed some stability. Nancy described feeling excited to make the decision; however, once retirement was approved, she



quickly became nervous and panicked. She explained that the Army was all she knew for most of her adult life, and the thought of adjusting to civilian life was overwhelming.

### **Janet**

Janet served in the U.S. Army for 29 years. She grew up as an “army brat” and had been around the Army community all her life. Janet made the decision to enlist in the Army after she graduated college to secure employment and benefits for her young daughter. Janet described her integration into the Army as smooth; she understood the culture having been raised within it. She explained that she had great experiences and opportunities in her 29 years of service. Janet made the decision to retire based on chronic medical conditions that began to worsen. Additionally, Janet was being asked to move, and she no longer wanted to be separated from her family. Although the decision to retire did not come easily, Janet explained that she had mixed emotions about retiring. She feared being in one place for the rest of her life, as she explained that she had moved every 3 years her whole life and was not sure she could be happy in one location.

### **Marco**

Marco enlisted into the U.S. Army at the age of 25 years old. He described his integration as a culture shock. He explained that it was an easy transition because of his childhood; however, it was a very different environment to adapt to. Marco noted that his decision to retire was influenced by the changes in the Army. He felt that he was still young and was not interested in serving more than 20 years. Marco expressed that initially, he wondered if he was ready for this major life transition. He spoke with his adult children, who were also serving in the military; their support affirmed his decision, and he became comfortable with the choice to retire. Marco felt that the Army did not fully prepare him for this major life transition. He asserted that his

ability to advocate for himself and his mental health provider ensured he was ready for his transition.

### **Lisa**

Lisa served in the U.S. Army for 20 years. She described her integration as scary. She enlisted in the Army just before the unfortunate events of September 11, 2001. She explained that the unknowns of what had happened caused some stress for a new soldier. Although the integration was stressful, Lisa explained that she had a young son to support, which influenced her decision to stay in the Army. Lisa explained that her decision to retire was also because of her son. She explained that as a single mother, her Army career kept her away from her son a lot. She stated that the relationship with him was declining, and she was trying to buy his love. She realized that he needed her time. She promised her son that she would retire after 20 years of service. Lisa remembered feeling excitement about her decision to retire; however, her initial emotions after the approval were fear and stress. Lisa explained that she questioned her decision, wondering if she was emotionally and financially ready for this transition.

### **Tala**

Tala enlisted in the U.S. Army from a small town. She explained that her two eldest brothers were both serving in the military. She attributed her smooth integration to them preparing her for the culture change from civilian life to military life. Tala made the decision to retire because she felt like she could no longer keep up. She felt her health deteriorating, and she wanted to preserve some energy for her children. Tala enjoyed her career as a nutrition specialist and a senior leader. Although she understood the need for retirement, the initial emotions were anxiety, sadness, and nervousness. Tala explained that she was not ready to leave her troops and had to work through those emotions as she moved towards retirement.

**Cody**

Cody served in the U.S. Army for 23 years in the signal corps. He described his integration as strange because he enlisted into the Army on a whim and did not have any expectations. Cody described that it was a culture shock because he was an 18-year-old, doing whatever he wanted to do prior to the Army. Cody made the decision to retire for medical reasons. He described that after 23 years of service, he was injured and could no longer be mentally and physically available for his troops. The decision to retire brought about a roller coaster of emotions. He felt panicked, nervous, and anxious about the decision. Cody did not feel ready for retirement; he explained that he also did not feel the Army prepared him to retire.

**Fred**

Fred enlisted into the U.S. Army from the Virgin Islands. He described the change in culture to be significant. He recalled integration being tough; however, he believed that it made him tougher. Fred's decision to retire was influenced by a changing Army. He could not cope or understand the changes in the Army and decided it was his time to retire. Fred served for 23 years and enjoyed his job as a culinary specialist. Although he did not feel ready to retire, he utilized the resources the Army provided to assist him through this phase.

**Drew**

Drew enlisted in the Army to further his career as a culinary professional. He had been accepted into Le Cordon Bleu and, unfortunately, could not afford to attend. Drew took advantage of all the culinary opportunities the Army had to offer. He served in several unique organizations within the Army, which contributed to his dream of becoming a chef. Drew explained that his decision to retire was influenced by his family. He and his wife felt that it was time to find some stability and set a foundation for their children. Drew expressed that he was

happy about his decision to retire. He and his wife planned very well for their next phase, which made him excited about their new chapter.

### **Luca**

Luca served in the U.S. Army for 24 years. He explained that he was about 17 years old in basic training and completed high school after his initial training. Luca explained that the Army gave him structure and set the foundation for adulthood. The decision to retire did not come easy for Luca; although he enjoyed his career, he explained that his young daughters and very supportive wife needed some stability. Luca explained that he had spent a lot of time away from his family due to multiple trainings, overseas deployments, and military schooling. He understood that he and his family needed to do something different. Luca stated that his initial emotions were mixed. He was happy and looked forward to the change; however, doubt set in and created some anxiety about transition.

### **Jake**

Jake enlisted in the U.S. Army at the young age of 19 years old. He described his integration into the Army as seamless. He described that the Army had many checks and balances in place to ensure soldiers were well integrated in the culture. Jake believed that his transition into the Army helped him become the leader he is. He explained that the Army helped him grow and mature relatively fast, which he was grateful for. Jake explained that his decision to retire was influenced by the changes in the Army. He felt that there was a lack of discipline and a lack of compassion from some leaders. Although he did not appreciate the changes, Jake expressed that his initial emotion when he made the decision was sadness. He recalled thinking of how much he would miss the camaraderie and the military culture. Jake also explained that he was injured and knew he could not continue his military service.

**Allen**

Allen enlisted in the U.S. Army from a southern rural city at the age of 22 years old. He explained that his experiences with playing high school and college sports made integration into the Army easy. He did experience some racial difficulties at his first duty assignment; however, this experience did not set the foundation for his career. In his 23 years of service, Allen worked his way to the highest enlisted rank. His decision to retire was also influenced by how much the Army had changed. He stated he was tired of “babysitting” adults. Allen explained that his decision to retire was exciting but left him feeling confused. Allen reported feeling like a private and not knowing how to move forward to retirement.

**John**

John served in the U.S. Army for 20 years. He explained that he had a smooth integration, and all things considered, the Army had had a positive effect on him. He expressed that the Army provided the structure and discipline he continued to have in his adulthood. John made the decision to retire also based on the new Army directions. He felt that the Army had become very reactive as opposed to proactive in many situations. John recalled that his initial emotions about retirement started 3 years prior to his actual retirement. Once he began planning for retirement, he felt a wave of emotions and uncertainty about the process. John explained that there should be some measures in place to stabilize service members that are close to retirement, which would allow them the time to properly plan and prepare for retirement.

**Results**

The current researcher employed Moustakas’ (1994) analysis steps to analyze the data collected from the participants’ interviews and the focus group. These steps included identifying important or significant statements, grouping related ideas, organizing themes, describing the

structure and texture of the experience, providing a comprehensive description of the essence of the experience, and, finally, providing a clearly articulated report (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher developed themes from similarities, patterns, and categories within the data. The themes were then synthesized to answer this study's research questions.

The research questions for this study were:

**RQ1:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe changes in their mood and emotional health over the first 90 days after retirement?

**RQ2:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to adjust to civilian culture within the first 90 days after retirement?

**RQ3:** How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to cope within the first 90-days after retirement?

**RQ4:** What mental health transitional supports were helpful during the first 90 days after retirement?

The four themes that emerged during this data analysis included: *Significant Changes to Mood*, *Difficulty Adapting*, *Difficulty Coping*, and *Support is Necessary*. See Table 2 for the themes and subthemes.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Significant Mood Changes	Depressive Mood Increased Anxiety
Difficulty Adapting	Loss of Identify Lack of Purpose
Difficulty Coping	Use of substance/mediation Establishing Structure
Support is Necessary	

## Theme Development

### *Theme One: Significant Mood Changes*

In light of the challenges associated with retirement, each of the participants expressed the difficulties they experienced as they transitioned into retirement. These difficulties are described further in the following subthemes. Several of the participants described feeling sadness about retirement (Tala, Jake, and Ren). These participants noted that the sadness stemmed from leaving military culture. The Army is a way of life and not just a place of employment. They explained that the friendships and bonds they had established were difficult to walk away from. The participants noted that they missed the comradery with their peers.

**Depressive Mood.** The retired service members (Nancy, Melanie, Cody, Fred, Jake, Tala, Lisa, and Janet) expressed feeling depressed during the first 90 days of retirement. Many of the participants described feeling withdrawn due to the lack of daily routine and purpose (Tala, Fred, Jake, Cody and Nancy). Tala added:

But even like I mentioned before, the depression I was dealing, I was being seen and treated for depression. I'm on medication for depression. I don't have a, I didn't have a support group at the time. You know, we had our peers there to like oh you can... you got this... you good? You ok? I didn't have it now because everybody was still at Ft Irwin. I was back here in San Antonio, so my depression 10, it had got worse honestly.

The first few months after retirement were the most significant in terms of mood changes reported by the participants. They reported finding it difficult to adjust to the lack of schedule, structure, and purpose. Nancy added:

So the loneliness turned into depression umm because I didn't know what direction I was going. I didn't know what to do. Yes, I had and they give you like all this, these books

and stuff when you take SFL tap, they give you all these books in, but do you really want to sit down and read that?

Janet stated:

Umm, within that 90 days umm after retirement that uh sent me, sent my sent depression and my depression anxiety into over drive and it was at that point that I reached out to the VA umm for mental health services. Yeah.

The participants expressed several moments that were overwhelming during the 90 days post-retirement. Many of them were difficult to overcome. Fred noted:

I don't know if a lot of individuals that are in my life knew how important they were in that transition for me, but I did have three significant breakdowns. The Army doesn't prepare you for that. Damn, I'm getting sentimental thinking about it.

**Increased Anxiety.** In addition to the feelings of depression, many of the participants reported feeling an increase in anxiety (Janet, Nancy, Ren, Lisa, Cody, Jake, Allen, and Tala). The increase in anxiety for several of the participants began once they received an approved retirement and continued through the first 90 days (Ren, Nancy, Allen, Lisa, Tala, and Cody).

Ren explained:

Oh, and the, the biggest one was the, the, the anxiety. You know, if I didn't have then, I, I had it now so it, uh, it, it literally shot through the roof so the, the lack of sleep. I'm just up all night, you know, wondering. You know what's next? What's gonna happen? You know, am I gonna have cure for my family? The, the coverage, you know, medical, dental. You know, we're going to be able to pay these bills, you know? Are we going to be able to continue saving? So, like I said, the anxiety definitely shot. Through the roof. And it was due to so many unknowns.



Allen added:

Was just trying to figure out what I had to do, which I always make up a list. TTD's what I called things to do, and I just had my stuff outline of what I need to do at a certain time, but just that the closest time got anxiety got real bad and you just feel it just slipping away. Like what? What am I gonna do next? I think we've been worse. If I wasn't on that military base still it would probably be worse because I got to see some familiar faces.

John recalled seeking medical attention because the panic attacks were severe during this time.

He added:

So yeah, I ended up in a hospital, but it was... It was definitely something that that let me to know that, "Man, you're really, you're really, you're really stressing out, man. You need to chill out." You know? So yeah, damn near like panic attacks and anxiety. My, my heart rate was high and yeah. Yeah, I'm just like, man, what is going on? The doctor was like something ain't right.

Nancy recalled the moment she made the realization that her military career was ending and the moment that her anxiety began to increase:

OK, so I was fine up until my last day in uniform was like March 20th or something like that, and I and I did my retirement ceremony, and I was fine up until that day and then when I got dressed, when I realized, excuse me, that I was taking off my boots for the last time and I was putting on my service uniform for the last time. It was like ohh, sugar, this is real. This is real.

Many of the participants shared that the anxious and depressive moods continued past the retirement approval period, into the first 90 days, and 6 months after retirement (Melanie, Ren, and Luca). They shared that the changes in their moods included panic attacks and sleep issues

(Lisa, Jake, Ren, and Allen). When asked about these challenges, the participants shared: “All the issues that I’ve been through in the military, like it’s just. When I talk about it, I just lose control like I just feel like helpless” (Lisa), and “I have nowhere to go, I have no outlets to kind of like relieve some of this stress and anxiety” (Nancy).

### ***Theme Two: Difficulty Adapting***

During the interviews, the participants described the Army and being on active duty as a safety net. They had become accustomed to all their needs being addressed. Once the participants retired, they became responsible for securing their employment, financial care, healthcare, and housing. Consequently, the retired veterans in this study found that a lack of preparation made this transition difficult. The participants also explained that navigating civilian culture was “overwhelming” (Tala and Ren) and “scary” (Fred, Allen, Lisa, and Cody). Jake recalled, “I felt like it was a nightmare.” The adjustment period brought about feelings of identity conflict and a lack of purpose for several of the participants. Melanie recalled feeling a sense of emptiness questioning, “Is this for me? I tend, I tended to kind of like lose my way... Like, ok, so why do I even need to get up? Like, what am I gonna do?”

**Loss of Identity.** Several of the participants expressed a sense of identity loss after retirement from the military. They viewed this loss as an identity crisis that reflected their loss of self. Cody explained, “The first 90 days I completely went downhill, like, completely tanked. I, it felt like my world was crashing in instantly.” Fred shared, “It was no training, it was tomorrow you take off your uniform for the last time and you lose your identity.” When asked, Luca explained:

It felt like I was kind of giving up a part of my identity, you know, like, especially, you know, being a sergeant major in the Army. I mean, I not saying that to be big-headed, but

like, you know, OK, like, I, I worked really hard to achieve that, and then that's something I had and then you know after like a 30-minute ceremony it's hey, that's it.

You know, hey, high five thanks for your service, you know?

Many of the participants described the final moments, the final time they would wear the uniform, and the final retirement ceremonies and awards as the most difficult. They continued to explain feeling lost and not knowing their next steps. Many of the participants enlisted in the Army right after high school and explained that it took time to understand who they were outside of the Army.

**Loss of Purpose.** In addition to feeling a loss of identity, several of the participants report experiencing a loss of purpose. Melanie stated:

Uh, the purpose of being a leader, of being needed, of being of your position, of what you do for the military, especially at that rank... Uh, that was really hard to, to deal with.

Umm, it's, it's just like you... you just lost your whole purpose of... of what to do or who to be and who you are. Not saying that the military was, was all me, but I really didn't do anything outside of the military or outside of being a parent. So maybe if I had did something it would have been a little bit different, but I just never did for you know, whatever reasons. I never did anything really outside other than the military, so that was a struggle... Like, OK, I wake up in the morning and I don't have a purpose. Like what time I was supposed to wake up?

Many of the participants recalled the need to find purpose and structure in their daily lives. They felt the need to “create a mission” (Luca and Allen) and communicate with peers in effort to manage their loss of purpose (Lisa, Tasha, and Tala). Luca explained, “I would say like keeping in touch with those peers and, and finding purpose, like it's gonna sound funny, like

having a mission or something to keep me occupied.” Jake mentioned, “Like the structure was gone, like I was freaking out and still to this day. I freaked out because sometimes I walk in my classroom, and I’m like, what am I doing? No one tells me what I’m doing now.” Finally, Luca added:

I think that finding balance is important, like a routine and keeping a routine that when you get out like that structure for me, I don't know, maybe it's because I've known it my whole adult life, you know, like, hey, I'm gonna I'm still gonna just stay physically active I'm still gonna, you know, find time to do things that I enjoy to do.

### ***Theme Three: Difficulty Coping***

The participants of this study recalled the challenges that they faced during their retirement from Army service. In addition to the difficulties adjusting to civilian culture, the participants recalled the coping strategies they employed. Of the 14 participants interviewed, half of the participants recalled utilizing some kind of substance to cope with the changes in their mental health; the other half focused on establishing a structure and routine to cope.

**Use of Substance/Medication.** Participants in this study described their ability to cope with their transition as “stressful” and “overwhelming” (Cody). Several of them described drinking alcohol or using legal marijuana to find temporary relief from their thoughts. Fred reported:

I've always drank. But I don't drink to get drunk and you know, but. Those two, three times I got plastered, and I cried, and, and I got it out of my system, and it's still hard for me, I'm still struggling.

John added that a hospital visit for panic attacks and anxiety prompted him to “limit the drinking.” Allen went on to reveal:

Initially, I was on that bottle hard. Every day, I was drinking every day. Every day. Then I stopped. Then I won't drink for 30 days. Then it hit me bad again because it was just, I told the doctor like somebody had these dizzy, like them dizzy or something. And right hand, right hand to God... If I would drink something... It will go away. I won't even feel it anymore. And I said something wrong with me, but I was drinking initially, and I started to see behavior health and they prescribed me something.

Medication for depression and anxiety also became part of the coping strategies implemented by the participants of this study. Tala revealed:

I'm on medication for depression because I don't have a, I didn't have a support group at the time. You know, we had our peers there to be like, ohh, you can... You got this... you good? I didn't have it now because everybody was still at Ft. Green. I was back here in San Antonio, so my depression got, ten, it had got worse.

Nancy continued, “But the problem with that is you're going to eventually break, you just can't keep taking pills because at some point it's gonna be too much.” Although the participants felt the need to utilize a form of substance for mental health relief, many understood the need to limit their use (John, Allen, Nancy, and Janet).

**Establishing Structure.** The participants were asked about their ability to cope within the first 90 days after retirement, and 12 of the 14 participants mentioned the need to establish some form of structure or routine. The participants discussed the need for “grounding” (Lisa, Allen, and Jake) as they created routines and structures that would help to reduce anxiety and the loss of purpose. Luca added:

So, me personally, I think that finding balance is important, like a routine and keeping a routine that when you get out, like, that structure for me, I don't know, maybe it's because I've known it my whole adult life.

As part of establishing a routine, the participants revealed that establishing a workout or activity routine was important to them. Fred revealed that weightlifting really helped to keep his mind occupied and helped him to minimize drinking alcohol. Ren found peace and appreciation in nature and the sport of golf, while Melanie, Tala, and Nancy turned to yoga and mindfulness practices. Allen, Lisa, and Jake revealed that they maintained some of the same activities that kept them fit during their Army careers, which included walking and ruck marching. Jake added, "I'm still gonna just stay physically active; I'm still gonna, you know, find time to do things that I enjoy doing." Tala explained:

I started getting out and walking. I couldn't run like I wanted to, but I would get out and walk. I dropped the boys off. I get out and just walk the neighborhood to try to get that me time.

#### ***Theme Four: Support is Necessary***

The participants of this study acknowledged that support was necessary for their transition. When asked about available support during the first 90 days after transition, all 14 of the participants revealed that they relied heavily on the support of their peers during this period. The participants reached out to mentors and peers with whom they had established relationships. Luca added:

Battle buddies is something that, you know, like, we stress in the Army, and it continues on when you get out, and I think, I think me personally, is important to keep in touch with those people or like good friends you had because they, it, it's, it's easy to talk to

somebody who's been there and lived it, and they have a deeper understanding, like me personally, I'm kind of a closed individual. I even have a hard time with mental health professionals cause in, in my mind, you know, you can have all the schooling you want, but there's little experiences that you don't understand or, or you know just you've been.

Ren explained, “People that I know that have retired and that were in the same predicament I was, you know, so that, that to me, they served as my, my mental health advisor or assistant or whatever.” The participants of this study focused on different ways to stay connected with their peers. Tala and Nancy explained that they established schedules with friends and peers to communicate weekly. The ladies explained that weekly communication helped them and their peers through the transition phase. It was important to the participants to have individuals that understood their situation and could relate to their struggles with retirement from Army service.

Seven of the 14 participants relied on both peers and family support, and five of the participants recalled utilizing the Veterans Affairs (VA) crisis line and counseling services for mental health support. When asked, many of the participants expressed that although their family was great support, they did not want to burden them with their struggling mental health (Allen, Luca, John, Cody, and Ren). The participants expressed the understanding that their family members were also transitioning, and they did not want to make the process difficult for them (Nancy, Ren, and Tala).

Finally, several of the participants reached out to the VA for support during moments of mental health crisis (Melanie, Cody, Jake, and Allen). The participants noted that there is a transitional period between active duty and retirement where mental health support is not available (all participants). Many expressed that they reached out to the VA crisis line in

moments of distress. It was also noted that once they were in the VA system, they were able to receive mental health services.

### **Summary**

The findings obtained from the phenomenological qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews proved valuable to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of the 14 senior enlisted leaders who participated in this study. Distinct themes developed in the responses of the participants to the research questions: How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe changes in their mood and emotional health over the first 90 days after retirement? How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to adjust to civilian culture within the first 90 days after retirement? How do Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to cope within the first 90 days after retirement? What mental health transitional supports were helpful during the first 90 days after retirement?

The data obtained from the interviews was sufficient to attain saturation and to provide sufficient details on the following themes: (a) Significant Changes to Mood, (b) Difficulty Adapting, (c) Difficulty Coping, and (d) Support is Necessary. The narratives provided abundant detail to authenticate the researcher's findings and to shed light on the experiences of the retired senior enlisted leaders. In the final chapter of this study, the researcher provides a summary and discussion of the findings and discusses their implications in light of pertinent literature and the theory that guided this study. The researcher also offers recommendations for future research based on the outcomes of this study and is responsive to delimitations and limitations of the current study.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **Overview**

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days after retiring from Army service. This study sought to describe mental health concerns and helpful coping strategies after military service. This study also sought to understand Army senior enlisted leaders' strategies to adjust to civilian life within 90 days after retirement. In this chapter, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the results, and the study's implications are presented. Additionally, this chapter includes delimitations and limitations posed by the study, as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Summary of Findings**

Once the data was collected, all interviews were transcribed and coded. The codes allowed the researcher to identify and group significant statements and categories into themes. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the collected data: (a) Significant Changes to Mood, (b) Difficulty Adapting, (c) Difficulty Coping, and (d) Support is Necessary. Each of these themes directly related to and addressed the research questions of this study.

### **Research Questions Addressed**

The first research question of this study sought to understand how Army senior enlisted leaders describe changes in their mood and emotional health over the first 90 days after retirement. The detailed experiences of the retired veterans addressed this question. The participants acknowledged that their moods and emotions significantly changed during the first 90 days after retirement. The participants described experiencing an increase in anxiety and depression. Although several of the participants explained that they suffered from anxiety and

depression prior to retirement, the first 90 days after retirement exasperated their symptoms. The participants expressed that the increase in emotional distress was related to the many unknowns associated with retirement. Additionally, many of the participants related the increased emotional distress to unknown financial status, medical and mental health support, and identity/purpose struggles.

The second research question sought to explore how Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to adjust to civilian culture within the first 90 days after retirement. Based on their experiences, many of the participants found civilian life to be a difficult adjustment. They expressed feeling a loss of identity and purpose. Many of the participants reverted to establishing routines and creating missions to adjust to their new roles as civilians. The participants recalled finding it difficult to adjust to their new roles as civilian employees and members of their civilian communities.

The third research question sought to understand how Army senior enlisted leaders describe their ability to cope within the first 90 days after retirement. During the first 90 days post-retirement, the participants of this study expressed the use of substances and establishing a structure to cope with the new role of being a civilian. Several participants discussed using alcohol and legal marijuana to cope with the increase in anxiety and depression. Five of the 14 participants mentioned being treated for depression and anxiety during active duty and continued to take their prescribed medication during the first 90 days after retirement. All of the participants felt it was important to establish structure during this period. The participants felt the need to establish workout routines and daily tasks and purpose. Many of the participants recalled that having a daily routine helped to reduce feelings of anxiety and depressive moods. It was also noted that workout routines reduced the need for the consumption of alcohol.

The final research question explored what mental health transitional supports were helpful during the first 90 days after retirement. The participants of this study found that support was necessary for their transition. Specifically, all the participants expressed that the support of their peers was the most important during this life transition. They revealed that their peers and those who had retired before them understood and could better empathize with their situation. In addition to peer support, many of the participants expressed that they received family support and support from the Veterans Affairs (VA) crisis line. Several participants expressed that although they were close to family, they did not want to burden them with their mental health struggles.

## **Discussion**

### **Empirical Implications**

The empirical implications of this study aligned with previous studies in that veterans experience a myriad of challenges during the transition phase. This study aimed to address the gaps in the current literature that failed to understand the mental health impact during the first 90 days post-retirement from Army service for senior enlisted leaders. Military missions and culture may expose service members to challenging situations. While combat experiences are associated with an increased risk of mental health conditions, general military service can also result in mental health issues and challenges (Inoue et al., 2023). There are particularly stressful moments for military members and families, (Inoue et al., 2023) such as deployment during wars, frequent travel, or prolonged separation from family (Romero et al., 2020).

Several risk factors are associated with the transitioning process for service members. Once service members are discharged or separated from the military, the attachment to military service may induce anxiety and melancholy. Ahern et al. (2015) discovered that transitioning

service members experience a lack of structure, a sense of disconnection, alienation in civilian life, and a loss of purpose. Current research has suggested that successful reintegration into civilian culture depends on access to resources, community involvement, and peer support (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Olenick et al., 2015).

As senior enlisted leaders retire from military service, they are mandated to complete courses in financial education, interviewing techniques, and business attire (United States Army, 2022). In addition, as part of the retirement process, military personnel are required to undergo a physical health examination to resolve any physical issues prior to retirement (Army Retirement Services, 2019).

This study filled the gap in the literature attempting to understand the mental health impact during the first 90 days post-retirement from Army service. Specifically, this study focused on the experiences of senior enlisted leaders during the first 90 days after retirement. There is a large number of senior enlisted leaders who retire from service each year (Prestigiacomio, 2021); this study is far-reaching, as it is important to view the leader's perspective. Finally, this study offered insight for program and regulation developers to understand the impacts of the first 90 days post-retirement.

### **Theoretical Literature**

The theoretical lens used in this phenomenological research study was Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory of human development. According to Anderson et al. (2012) the therapist defined transition as an event or non-event that causes change and affects relationships, routines, assumptions, and responsibilities. The participants in this study all experienced the process of retiring from 20 years or more of Army service. Situation, self, support, and strategies are the four central factors that can ultimately influence the quality of the transition. When these

factors exist, and there are available resources, the individual can take charge and maintain control of how they manage the stressors associated with the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1984).

The “situation” factor described how individuals view change and their sense of control over events (Anderson et al., 2012; Browne et al., 2018). The participants of the current study understood their decisions to retire. Regardless of the circumstance that surrounded the decisions, the participants took ownership of the process and established mitigating factors to assist through the transition.

The factor “self” referred to the individual and internal traits that affect the ability to cope (Anderson et al., 2012). Personal and psychological resources are two dimensions associated with this factor (Elnitsky et al., 2017). The veterans in the current study experienced difficulties with the self factor of the transition theory. They experienced a sense of loss in identity and purpose as a result of the transition. Transition theory emphasized the role of explanatory style, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, values, and commitments in this process (Anderson et al., 2012; Browne et al., 2018). According to Wang et al. (2023), the level of resilience soldiers develop depends on the severity of childhood trauma they experienced. All of these factors increase the importance of focusing on resilient service members. Although the participants in this study were exposed to resilience training as part of their service, they experienced their transition as a loss and found it difficult to cope with reintegration into civilian culture.

During the first 90 days of retirement, peers and family became the support and strategy for the participants in this study. The participants of the present study established a network of personal support from peers and mentors who had retired from Army service and understood this transition. Additionally, the participants utilized the support of their family to assist them during

difficult emotional moments of distress. As a result of building and reaching out for support, the participants were able to manage stressful moments during the first 90 days post-service.

### **Implications**

The current study expanded previous research with an investigation of the lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days after they have retired from service. From the study, retired senior enlisted leaders revealed that they experienced some challenges within the first 90 days after retirement. They discussed how peers and family support were helpful for coping and relieving emotional distress during their reintegration.

### **Practical Implication**

Military personnel are faced with many challenges as they transition from soldier to civilian. These challenges may be in the area of mental health, social health, identity, and spirituality conflicts. Veterans face many psychological factors related to transition challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and distress (Paul & Moser, 2009). Mental health issues may impede a veteran's reintegration into civilian culture and lead to social isolation because of undiagnosed or untreated symptoms (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011; Stanton et al., 2017). Such obstacles can also hinder a veteran's social functioning, which may contribute to difficulties with family transitions or employment retention.

Additionally, senior enlisted leaders experience identity conflicts and spirituality. Conflicts, according to Carminati and Hélot (2022), can also be caused by interpersonal micro-processes, such as an individual's emotional and cognitive viewpoints. A veteran's spirituality and religiosity may play a big effect in how they view the move out of Army service throughout the transitional phase. According to Nir et al. (2013), religious attitudes are the most important variables in assisting veterans to overcome mental health illnesses and cope with life events.

For the reasons mentioned, mental health professionals, pastors, and chaplains who interact with veterans should be aware of the phenomenon investigated in this study. These professionals should also understand the long-term effects of military culture on the transitional challenges faced by veterans. Using the results of this study, human service professionals can provide practitioners and other professionals with insight into the expressed emotions experienced within the first 90 days of retirement to assist them in making decisions regarding care specific to that time period.

### **Theoretical Implication**

The current study's findings offered valuable insights into the identification of protective factors that enhance resilience during transitional or retirement phases of life. People commonly experience a three-phase progression during a major transition, wherein they internalize and embrace the changes that will transpire (Bridges, 2003). According to Bridges, these phases include first, letting go of the old ways and the old identity people have held. The second phase, referred to as the “neutral zone,” involves people experiencing a transitional period where the old is gone, but the new is not fully functional. The final phase refers to emerging out of the transition and creating a new beginning. During this phase, individuals develop new identities, experience new energy, and find a new sense of purpose that enables change to start working (Bridges, 2003).

The findings of the current study revealed that the participants struggled with the final phase of transition and factor of self as described in Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. The struggle and conflict with respect to identity and purpose is important to consider for adult development theories. Implications based on this study concluded that focus on transition experiences contributes to the need for transition preparation and the human transition theory.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

To acquire a thorough understanding of the study's correctness and reliability, delimitations and limitations must be exposed. Furthermore, restrictions may provide information to orient future study. The delimitations and limits of this study were primarily made of demographic information.

#### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are deliberate decisions made by the researcher to limit or define the scope of the study. The current study focused on a particular rank range within the U.S. Army. This study focused on the enlisted ranks of leaders between the ranks of Sergeant First Class (SFC), Master Sergeant (MSG), and Sergeant Major (SGM; E-7, E-8, and E-9). This study excluded all other enlisted and commissioned officer ranks. The researcher focused on members of the Army who retired from active-duty service and excluded members of the National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve. The researcher also excluded members of all other military branches, such as the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. Although there were no limits placed on gender, race, ethnicity, or age, the researcher did place a limit on the means of transition. The study required that participants served at least 20 years of service and had been retired for no more than 5 years.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that the researcher cannot control. The interviews of this study were all conducted remotely. As a result of the distance, the researcher may have missed nonverbal and paraverbal responses from the participants. Due to the delimitation of rank, the researcher did not capture the experiences of others who have retired



from Army service. Additionally, the researcher could not explore the challenges of transition beyond the 90-day period after retirement from service.

Finally, the sample size of the study was a limitation, as it only included 14 retired senior enlisted leaders. A limited sample size hindered the ability to generalize to a broader population; thereby, studying a larger group of veterans may be advantageous. Data saturation limited the need for a large number of participants because employing a qualitative methodology provided a dense, rich, and in-depth look into this phenomenon that had so many variables impacting and influencing retirement of the participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This section details recommendations for further research as a result of the findings, limits, and delimitations. The study focused on senior enlisted leaders; the sampling could be broadened to include commissioned officers who retired from the Army. This study could also be broadened to include National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers who have qualified for service retirement based on regulatory guidance. Additionally, future studies could expand on this study and investigate beyond the 90-day period. Transition is a journey; future researchers are encouraged to explore this phenomenon beyond the first phase of the transition period.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to broaden this study by exploring the experiences of members of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Although there are many studies that explore military culture, future researchers could explore the effects of the different branches and their effects on retired service members.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days after they have retired from Army service. This study

sought to describe mental health concerns and the helpful coping strategies after military service. This study also sought to understand the strategies that Army senior enlisted leaders employed for adjusting to civilian life within the first 90 days after retirement. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory guided this study. Transition theory looked at how a person copes and adjusts to a new environment. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory suggested that the individual veteran's situation, self, support, and strategies enable or hinder a successful transition out of active-duty service (Robertson, 2013).

There were four themes that emerged as a result of this study: (a) Significant Changes to Mood, (b) Difficulty Adapting, (c) Difficulty Coping, and (d) Support is Necessary. Each of these themes directly related to and addressed the research questions of this study. They aligned with previous studies in that veterans experience a myriad of challenges during the transition phase; however, this study addressed the gaps in the current literature, where previous studies failed to understand the mental health impact during the first 90 days post-retirement from Army service for senior enlisted leaders. The understanding of these experiences is essential for mental health professionals that offer their services to veterans. The hope was that this study would inform program developers and regulations on the struggles within the first 90 days after retirement. Finally, although there are limitations and delimitations to the current study, future researchers are encouraged to broaden this study by exploring the experiences of commissioned officers who retired from the Army, as well as members of other military branches.

## References

- Adler, A. B., Bliese, P. D., & Castro, C. A. (Eds.). (2011). *Deployment psychology: Evidence-based strategies to promote mental health in the military*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12300-000>
- Adler, A. B., Williams, J., McGurk, D., Moss, A., & Bliese, P. D. (2015). Resilience training with soldiers during basic combat training: Randomisation by platoon. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being*, 7(1), 85–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12040>
- Ahern, J., Worthen, M., Masters, J., Lippman, S. A., Ozer, E. J., & Moos, R. (2015). The challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans' transition from military to civilian life and approaches to reconnection. *PLOS One*, 10(7), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0128599>
- Ai, A. L., Huang, B., Bjorck, J., & Appel, H. B. (2013). Religious attendance and major depression among Asian Americans from a national database: The mediation of social support. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 5(2), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030625>
- Ainspan, N. D., Penk, W., & Kearney, L. K. (2018). Psychosocial approaches to improving the military-to-civilian transition process. *Psychological Services*, 15(2), 129–134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000259>
- Allen, P. E., Armstrong, M. L., Saladiner, J. E., Hamilton, M. J., & Conard, P. L. (2014). Opportunities, hurdles, solutions, and approaches to transition military veterans into professional nursing programs. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 30(6), 474–480. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2014.03.007>
- Anderson, M. L., & Goodman, J. (2014). From military to civilian life: Applications of

- Schlossberg's model for veterans in transition. *Career Planning & Adult Development Journal*, 30(3), 40–51.
- Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.) Springer Publishing Company.
- Army Retirement Services. (2019). *U.S. Army Retirement Planning Guide 2020*.  
<https://soldierforlife.army.mil/Documents/2020%20US%20Army%20Retirement%20Planning%20Guide.pdf>
- Aronson, K. R., Perkins, D. F., Morgan, N., Bleser, J., Davenport, K., Vogt, D., Copeland, L. A., Finley, E. P., & Gilman, C. L. (2019a). Going it alone: Post-9/11 veteran nonuse of healthcare and social service programs during their early transition to civilian life. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 45(5), 634–647.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1493410>
- Aronson, K. R., Perkins, D. F., Morgan, N. R., Bleser, J. A., Vogt, D., Copeland, L., Finley, E., & Gilman, C. (2019b). Post-9/11 veteran transitions to civilian life: Predictors of the use of employment programs. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 5(1), 14–22.  
<http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v5i1.127>
- Astor, R. A. (2019, February 21). The need to support students from military families. *Education Week*, 30(33). [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/06/08/33astor\\_ep.h30.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/06/08/33astor_ep.h30.html)
- Barth, T. M., Lord, C. G., Thakkar, V. J., & Brock, R. N. (2020). Effects of resilience strength training on constructs associated with moral injury among veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(2), 101–113. <http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i2.199>

- Baruch, Y., & Quick, J. C. (2009). Setting sail in a new direction: Career transitions of US Navy admirals to the civilian sector. *Personnel Review*, 38(3), 270–285.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/00483480910943331>
- Beardslee, W. R., Klosinski, L. E., Saltzman, W., Mogil, C., Pangelinan, S., McKnight, C. P., & Lester, P. (2013). Dissemination of family-centered prevention for military and veteran families: Adaptations and adoption within community and military systems of care. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 16(4), 394–409.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0154-y>
- Beehr, T. A. (2014). To retire or not to retire: That is not the question. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(8), 1093–1108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1965>
- Berg, K. F. (2008). Easing transitions of military dependents into Hawaii public schools: An invitational education link. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 14, 41–56.  
<https://doi.org/10.26522/jitp.v14i.3804>
- Bergman, B. P., Burdett, H. J., & Greenberg, N. (2014). Service life and beyond – Institution or culture? *The RUSI Journal*, 159(5), 60–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969946>
- Berkel, L. A., Nilsson, J. E., Kelly, P. J., Anderson, W. M., Joiner, A. V., Davids, C., & Serpe, C. R. (2019). Faith of our sister soldiers: National Guard women share stories of their faith during and after deployment. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 58(5), 1753–1769.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00839-1>
- Binks, E., & Cambridge, S. (2018). The transition experiences of British military veterans. *Political Psychology*, 39(1), 125–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12399>

Blackburn, D. (2016). Transitioning from military to civilian life: Examining the final step in a military career. *Canadian Military Journal*, 16(4), 53–61.

<http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol16/no4/page53-eng.asp>

Bond, G. R., Al-Abdulmunem, M., Ressler, D. R., Drake, R. E., Davis, L. L., Meyer, T., Gade, D. M., Frueh, B. C., & Dickman, R. B. (2022). Evaluation of an employment intervention for veterans transitioning from the military: A randomized controlled trial. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 210(5), 321–329.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001472>

Borowicz, L., & Sokołowski, M. (2015). The role of the sense of coherence and stress coping strategies as indicators of readiness to execute tasks in crisis situations among police officers, national fire service members, and military career officers. *Journal of Science of the Gen. Tadeusz Kosciuszko Military Academy of Land Forces*, 178(4), 5–18.

<https://doi.org/10.5604/17318157.1200159>

Borowski, S., Rosellini, A. J., Street, A. E., Gradus, J. L., & Vogt, D. (2022). The first year after military service: Predictors of U.S. veterans' suicidal ideation. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 63(2), 233–241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2022.03.017>

Botero, G., Jr., Rivera, N. I., Calloway, S. C., Ortiz, P. L., Edwards, E., Chae, J., & Geraci, J. C. (2020). A lifeline in the dark: Breaking through the stigma of veteran mental health and treating America's combat veterans. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 76(5), 831–840.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22918>

Bowen, G. L., Jensen, T. M., Martin, J. A., & Mancini, J. A. (2016). The willingness of military members to seek help: The role of social involvement and social responsibility. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 57(1–2), 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12030>

- Bradshaw, C. P., Sudhinaraset, M., Mmari, K., & Blum, R. W. (2010). School transitions among military adolescents: A qualitative study of stress and coping. *School Psychology Review*, 39(1), 84–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2010.12087792>
- Bridges, W. (2003). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change* (2nd ed.). Da Capo.
- Brisini, K. S. C., Solomon, D. H., & Nussbaum, J. (2018). Transitions in marriage: Types, turbulence, and transition processing activities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 35(6), 831–853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517699283>
- Britt, T. W., Adler, A. B., Sawhney, G., & Bliese, P. D. (2017). Coping strategies as moderators of the association between combat exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 30(5), 491–501. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22221>
- Brockman, C., Snyder, J., Gewirtz, A., Gird, S. R., Quattlebaum, J., Schmidt, N., Pauldine, M. R., Elish, K., Schrepferman, L., Hayes, C., Zettle, R., & DeGarmo, D. (2016). Relationship of service members' deployment trauma, PTSD symptoms, and experiential avoidance to postdeployment family reengagement. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(1), 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000152>
- Browne, J., Webb, K., & Bullock, A. (2018). Making the leap to medical education: A qualitative study of medical educators' experiences. *Medical Education*, 52(2), 216–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.13470>
- Burdett, H., Woodhead, C., Iversen, A. C., Wessely, S., Dandeker, C., & Fear, N. T. (2013). “Are you a veteran?” Understanding of the term “veteran” among UK ex-service personnel: A research note. *Armed Forces & Society*, 39(4), 751–759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12452033>

- Burkhart, L., & Hogan, N. (2015). Being a female veteran: A grounded theory of coping with transitions. *Social Work in Mental Health, 13*(2), 108–127.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2013.870102>
- Bush, N. E., Ouellette, G., & Kinn, J. (2014). Utility of the T2 mood tracker mobile application among army warrior transition unit service members. *Military Medicine, 179*(12), 1453–1457. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00271>
- Buzzetta, M., Hayden, S. C. W., & Ledwith, K. (2017). Creating hope: Assisting veterans with job search strategies using cognitive information processing theory. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 54*(2), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12054>
- Canino, M. C., Foulis, S. A., Zambraski, E. J., Cohen, B. S., Redmond, J. E., Hauret, K. G., Frykman, P. N., & Sharp, M. A. (2019). U.S. Army physical demands study: Differences in physical fitness and occupational task performance between trainees and active-duty soldiers. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research, 33*(7), 1864–1870.  
<https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0000000000002681>
- Carlson, M. B., Britt, S. L., & Goff, B. N. (2015). Factors associated with a composite measure of financial behavior among soldiers. *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning, 26*(1), 30–42. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1052-3073.26.1.30>
- Carminati, L., & Héliot, Y. G. (2022). Between multiple identities and values: Professionals' identity conflicts in ethically charged situations. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.813835>
- Carpenter, R. E., & Silberman, D. (2020). Veteran-civilian career identity conflict: What is human resource development's role? *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development, 32*(3), 35–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20287>



- Casner, R. W. (2017). Policy review: Appeals process for disability claims equals long wait time for veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 2(1), 19–28. <http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v2i1.26>
- Chance, S., Duffy, G., & Bowe, B. (2020). Comparing grounded theory and phenomenology as methods to understand lived experience of engineering educators implementing problem-based learning. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 45(3), 405–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2019.1607826>
- Cloutier, C., & Ravasi, D. (2021). Using tables to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Strategic Organization*, 19(1), 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127020979329>
- Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Medsurg Nursing*, 25(6), 435–436. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30304614/>
- Cooper, L., Caddick, N., Godier, L., Cooper, A., & Fossey, M. (2016). Transition from the military into civilian life: An exploration of cultural competence. *Armed Forces & Society*, 44(1), 156–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16675965>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- DeGraff, A. N., O'Neal, C. W., & Mancini, J. A. (2016). The significance of military contexts and culture for understanding family well-being: Parent life satisfaction and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25, 3022–3033. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0471-0>
- Denny, E., & Weckesser, A. (2022). How to do qualitative research? Qualitative research methods. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 129(7), 1166–1167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.17150>

- Denton, F. T., & Spencer, B. G. (2009). What is retirement? A review and assessment of alternative concepts and measures. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 28(1), 63–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980809090047>
- Department of the Army. (2019). *Army Regulation 600–25: Personnel–General: Salutes, honors, and courtesy*.  
[https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN20654\\_R600\\_25\\_Admin\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN20654_R600_25_Admin_FINAL.pdf)
- Department of the Army. (2020). *Army Regulation 600-20: Personnel–General: Army Command policy*. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN32931-AR\\_600-20-004-WEB-6.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN32931-AR_600-20-004-WEB-6.pdf)
- Department of the Army. (2021). *Army Regulation 635-200: Personnel Separations: Active Duty Enlisted Administrative Separations*.  
[https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN30496-AR\\_635-200-000-WEB-1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30496-AR_635-200-000-WEB-1.pdf)
- Department of Defense (DoD). (2021). *2021 Demographics: Profile of the military community*.  
<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>
- Elliott, B. (2020). US military spouses' experiences transitioning abroad: A narrative analysis. *Nursing Forum*, 55(4), 703–710. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12487>
- Elnitsky, C. A., Fisher, M. P., & Blevins, C. L. (2017). Military service member and veteran reintegration: A conceptual analysis, unified definition, and key domains. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369>

- Flack, M., & Kite, L. (2021). Transition from military to civilian: Identity, social connectedness, and veteran wellbeing. *PLOS One*, 16(12), 1–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261634>
- Foran, H. M., Adler, A. B., McGurk, D., & Bliese, P. D. (2012). Soldiers' perceptions of resilience training and postdeployment adjustment: Validation of a measure of resilience training content and training process. *Psychological Services*, 9(4), 390–403.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028178>
- Fortes-Ferreira, L., Peiro, J. M., Gonzalez-Morales, M. G., & Martin, I. (2006). Work-related stress and well-being: The roles of direct action coping and palliative coping. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 47(4), 293–302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9450.2006.00519.x>
- Freytes, I. M., LeLaurin, J. H., Zickmund, S. L., Resende, R. D., & Uphold, C. R. (2017). Exploring the post-deployment reintegration experiences of veterans with PTSD and their significant others. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(2), 149–156.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000211>
- Gettings, P. E., Hall, E. D., Wilson, S. R., Kamal, D. M., Inderstrodt-Stephens, J., & Hughes-Kirchubel, L. (2019). Effects of reintegration difficulties, perceived message acceptance and perceived autonomy support on U.S. military veterans' evaluations of messages encouraging them to seek behavioral health care. *Communication Monographs*, 86(2), 205–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2018.1536828>
- Gibson, C. B., Dunlop, P. D., & Raghav, S. (2021). Navigating identities in global work: Antecedents and consequences of intrapersonal identity conflict. *Human Relations*, 74(4), 556–586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719895314>

- Godfrey, R., Lilley, S., & Brewis, J. (2012). Biceps, bitches and borgs: Reading Jarhead's representation of the construction of the (masculine) military body. *Organization Studies*, 33(4), 541–562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612443458>
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory* (3rd ed.) Springer Publishing Company.
- Gorman, J. A., Scoglio, A. A. J., Smolinsky, J., Russo, A., & Drebing, C. E. (2018). Veteran coffee socials: A community-building strategy for enhancing community reintegration of veterans. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 54(8), 1189–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-018-0288-y>
- Grady, J., Banford-Witting, A., Kim, A., & Davis, S. (2018). Differences in unit cohesion and combat-related mental health problems based on attachment styles in US military veterans. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 40(3), 249–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-017-9444-8>
- Greenaway, K. H., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys, T., Branscombe, N. R., Ysseldyk, R., & Heldreth, C. (2015). From "we" to "me": Group identification enhances perceived personal control with consequences for health and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(1), 53–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000019>
- Griffin, K. A., & Gilbert, C. K. (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 71–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2015.11777357>
- Griffith, J., & West, C. (2013). Master resilience training and its relationship to individual well-being and stress-buffering among Army National Guard soldiers. *The Journal of*

- Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 40(2), 140–155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-013-9320-8>
- Grimell, J. (2017a). Advancing an understanding of selves in transition: I-positions as an analytical tool. *Culture & Psychology*, 24(2), 190–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17707451>
- Grimell, J. (2017b). Making dialogue with an existential voice in transition from military to civilian life. *Theory & Psychology*, 27(6), 832–850. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354317739164>
- Guise, V., Chambers, M., Välimäki, M., & Makkonen, P. (2010). A mixed-mode approach to data collection: Combining web and paper questionnaires to examine nurses' attitudes to mental illness. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 66(7), 1623–1632. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2010.05357.x>
- Guthrie-Gower, S., & Wilson-Menzfeld, G. (2022). Ex-military personnel's experiences of loneliness and social isolation from discharge, through transition, to the present day. *PLOS One*, 17(6), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269678>
- Hall, L. K. (2011). The importance of understanding military culture. *Social Work in Health Care*, 50(1), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2010.513914>
- Haller, M., Angkaw, A. C., Hendricks, B. A., & Norman, S. B. (2016). Does reintegration stress contribute to suicidal ideation among returning veterans seeking PTSD treatment? *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior*, 46(2), 160–171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12181>
- Hashemi Dezaki, Z., Eyni, S., & Ebadi Kasbakhi, M. (2021). Life satisfaction of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder: The predictive role of cognitive flexibility and

alexithymia. *Annales Médico Psychologiques*, 179(10), 901–906.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amp.2021.02.007>

Hawkins, B. L., McGuire, F. A., Linder, S. M., & Britt, T. W. (2015). Understanding contextual influences of community reintegration among injured services members. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 52(5), 527–542.

<http://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2014.08.0196>

Heppner, P. P., Wampold, B. E., Owen, J., Thompson, M. N., & Wang, K. T. (2016). *Research Design in Counseling* (4th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Hill, J., Lawhorne, C., & Philpott, D. (2011). *Life after the military: A handbook for transitioning veterans*. Government Institutes.

Hinojosa, R., & Hinojosa, M. S. (2011). Using military friendships to optimize postdeployment reintegration for male Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 48(10), 1145–1158

<https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2010.08.0151>

Hoffmire CA, Borowski S, Vogt D. (2023). Contribution of veterans' initial post-separation vocational, financial, and social experiences to their suicidal ideation trajectories following military service. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 53(4)443-456.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12955>

Hoge, C. W., Castro, C. A., Messer, S. C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D. I., & Koffman, R. L. (2004). Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 351(1), 13–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa040603>

- Horton, K. E., & Wanderley, C. d. A. (2018). Identity conflict and the paradox of embedded agency in the management accounting profession: Adding a new piece to the theoretical jigsaw. *Management Accounting Research*, 38, 39–50.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mar.2016.06.002>
- Hourani, L., Bender, R. H., Weimer, B., Peeler, R., Bradshaw, M., Lane, M., & Larson, G. (2012). Longitudinal study of resilience and mental health in marines leaving military service. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 139(2), 154–165.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.01.008>
- Igielnik, R. (2019, November 7). *Key findings about America's military veterans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>
- Inoue, C., Shawler, E., Jordan, C. H., Moore, M. J., & Jackson, C. A. (2023). *Veteran and military mental health issues*. StatPearls Publishing.
- Jetten, J., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys, T., Greenaway, K. H., Haslam, C., & Steffens, N. K. (2017). Advancing the social identity approach to health and well-being: Progressing the social cure research agenda. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(7), 789–802.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2333>
- Keeling, M. E., Ozuna, S. M., Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A. (2019). Veterans' civilian employment experiences: Lessons learnt from focus groups. *Journal of Career Development*, 46(6), 692–705. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845318776785>
- Kelty, R., Kleykamp, M., & Segal, D. R. (2010). The military and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 181–207. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0045>
- Kim, H., Kim, J., Lee, J., & Kim, J. (2022). Leisure types, coping, happiness, and life satisfaction

among veterans. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 46(3), 209–217.

<https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.46.3.1>

Koenig, C. J., Maguen, S., Monroy, J. D., Mayott, L., & Seal, K. H. (2014). Facilitating culture-centered communication between health care providers and veterans transitioning from military deployment to civilian life. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 95(3), 414–420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2014.03.016>

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 120–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>

Kukla, M., Rattray, N. A., & Salyers, M. P. (2015). Mixed methods study examining work reintegration experiences from perspectives of veterans with mental health disorders. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 52(4), 477–490. <https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2014.11.0289>

Lee, J. H., Nam, S. K., Kim, A.-R., Kim, B., Lee, M. Y., & Lee, S. M. (2013). Resilience: A meta-analytic approach. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 91(3), 269–279. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00095.x>

Legal Information Institute. (2014). *10 U.S. Code § 101 – Definitions*. Cornell Law School. <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/101>

Lewis, M. W., & Wu, L. (2021). Depression and disability among combat veterans' transition to an historically Black university. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(2), 215–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1671258>



Lisle, A. H., Merenda, C., & Gabbard, J. (2020). Using affinity diagramming to generate a codebook: A case study on young military veterans and community reintegration.

*Qualitative Research*, 20(4), 396–413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119851324>

Loughran, D. S. (2014). *Why is veteran unemployment so high?* RAND.

<https://doi.org/10.7249/RR284>

Mael, F., Wyatt, W., & Iyer, U. J. (2022). Veterans to workplace: Keys to successful transition. *Military Psychology*, 34(5), 516–529.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2021.2016307>

Mamon, D., Scoglio, A. A. J., Calixte, R. M., Tuval-Mashiach, R., Patton, B., & Drebing, C. E. (2020). Connecting veterans and their community through narrative: Pilot data on a community strengthening intervention. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 56(5), 804–813. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-019-00540-3>

Mathewson-Chapman, M., & Chapman, H. J. (2019). Addressing combat veterans' health challenges in postdeployment reintegration. *Academic Medicine*, 94(1), 9.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000002484>

McAdams, C. R. III., Foster, V. A., & Gosling, D. R. (2018). A tale of two families: Helping military couples understand and accept a returning soldier's "unit family" into their relationship. *The Family Journal*, 26(2), 238–245.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480718770157>

Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN). (2019). *Living conditions of families in privatized military housing*. <https://www.mfan.org/research-reports/?topics=housing>

Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., Perkins, D. F., Bleser, J. A., Davenport, K., Vogt, D., Copeland, L. A., Finley, E. P., & Gilman, C. L. (2020). Reducing barriers to post-9/11 veterans' use

- of programs and services as they transition to civilian life. *BMC Health Services Research*, 20(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05320-4>
- Morgan, N. R., Davenport, K. E., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K. J., Bleser, J. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2022). The relationship between veterans' employment program component use and career advancement over time. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 8(1), 147–163. [163.http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.281](http://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.281)
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Maurer, R. (2014). The influence of senior leaders in successful change. *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, 37(2), 4.
- Maury, R. V., Tihic, M., Pritchard, A., McKelvie, A., & Euto, L. (2022). 2021 National Survey of Military-Affiliated Entrepreneurs.
- Nash, R. A., Nash, A., Morris, A., & Smith, S. L. (2016). Does rapport-building boost the eyewitness eyeclosure effect in closed questioning? *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 21(2), 305–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12073>
- National Military Family Association (NMFA). (2011). *Finding common ground*. <https://www.militaryfamily.org/>
- Nir, M. S., Ebadi, A., Khoshknab, M. F., & Tavallae, A. (2013). Spiritual experiences of war veterans who suffer from combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder: A qualitative study. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 52(3), 719–729. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9629-2>

- Olenick, M., Flowers, M., & Diaz, V. (2015). US veterans and their unique issues: Enhancing health care professional awareness. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 2015(6), 635–639. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S89479>
- O'Neal, C. W., Richardson, E. W., & Mancini, J. A. (2020). Community, context, and coping: How social connections influence coping and well-being for military members and their spouses. *Family Process*, 59(1), 158–172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12395>
- Parker, K., Igielnik, R., Barroso, A., & Cilluffo, A. (2019, September 10). 3. *The transition to post-military employment*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/>
- Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass/Wiley.
- Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Paul, K. I., & Moser, K. (2009). Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 74(3), 264–282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.01.001>
- Pellegrino, L., & Hoggan, C. (2015). A tale of two transitions: Female military veterans during their first year at community college. *Adult Learning*, 26(3), 124–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159515583257>
- Perales, R., Gallaway, M. S., Forys-Donahue, K. L., Spiess, A., & Millikan, A. M. (2012). Prevalence of childhood trauma among U.S. army soldiers with suicidal behavior. *Military Medicine*, 177(9), 1034–1040. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00054>
- Perkins, D. F., Davenport, K. E., Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., Bleser, J. A., McCarthy, K. J., Vogt, D., Finley, E. P., Copeland, L. A., & Gilman, C. L. (2022). The influence of employment program components upon job attainment during a time of identity and career

- transition. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 23, 1–23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-022-09527-1>
- Petersen, E., Jensen, J. G., & Frandsen, T. F. (2021). Information seeking for coping with cancer: A systematic review. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, 73(6), 885–903.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/AJIM-01-2021-0004>
- Polusny, M. A., Erbes, C. R., Kramer, M. D., Thuras, P., DeGarmo, D., Koffel, E., Litz, B., & Arbisi, P. A. (2017). Resilience and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq: A prospective study of latent class trajectories and their predictors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 30(4), 351–361. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22199>
- Prestigiacomo, J. (2021). *Review and analysis of the state of transitioning soldiers*. U.S. Army Soldier for Life.  
<https://soldierforlife.army.mil/Documents/static/FY21%20Review%20and%20Analysis.pdf>
- Rahim, H. F., Mooren, T. T. M., van den Brink, F., Knipscheer, J. W., & Boelen, P. A. (2021). Cultural identity conflict and psychological well-being in bicultural young adults: Do self-concept clarity and self-esteem matter? *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 209(7), 525–532. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001332>
- Ramos, K., & Lopez, F. G. (2018). Attachment security and career adaptability as predictors of subjective well-being among career transitioners. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 104, 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.10.004>
- Randles, R., & Finnegan, A. (2022). Veteran help-seeking behaviour for mental health issues: A systematic review. *BMJ Military Health*, 168(1), 99–104.  
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjmilitary-2021-001903>

- Redmond, S. A., Wilcox, S. L., Campbell, S., Kim, A., Finney, K., Barr, K., & Hassan, A. M. (2015). A brief introduction to the military workplace culture. *Work, 50*(1), 9–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-141987>
- Resnik, L., Bradford, D. W., Glynn, S. M., Jette, A. M., Johnson Hernandez, C., & Wills, S. (2012). Issues in defining and measuring veteran community reintegration: Proceedings of the working group on community reintegration, VA rehabilitation outcomes conference, Miami, Florida. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development, 49*(1), 87–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2010.06.0107>
- Resnik, L., & Reiber, G. (2012). Long-term disabilities associated with combat casualties: Measuring disability and reintegration in combat veterans. *Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, 1*(8), S31–S34. <https://doi.org/10.5435/JAAOS-20-08-S31>
- Ringel, S., & Brandell, J. (2012). *Trauma: Contemporary directions in theory, practice, and research*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230597>
- Robertson, H. C. (2013). Income and support during transition from a military to civilian career. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 50*(1), 26–33. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2013.00022.x>
- Robertson, H. C., & Brott, P. E. (2013). Male veterans' perceptions of midlife career transition and life satisfaction: A study of military men transitioning to the teaching profession. *Adultspan Journal, 12*(2), 66–79. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0029.2013.00016.x>
- Robertson, H. C., & Brott, P. E. (2014). Military veterans' midlife career transition and life satisfaction. *The Professional Counselor, 4*(2), 139–149.  
<https://doi.org/10.15241/hcr.4.2.139>

- Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., Raiche, E., McGuffin, J., & Captari, L. E. (2020). Attachment, coping, and psychological symptoms among military veterans and active duty personnel. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 33(3), 326–341.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2020.1723008>
- Rossiter, A. G., & Smith, S. (2014). The invisible wounds of war: Caring for women veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma. *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 26(7), 364–369. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2327-6924.12085>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). *Overwhelmed: Coping with life's ups and downs*. Lexington Books.
- Senecal, G., McDonald, M., LaFleur, R., & Coey, C. (2019). Examining the effect of combat excitement & diminished civilian solidarity on life satisfaction for American veterans. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 52, 12–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2018.09.001>
- Shafer, V. C. (2000). Choosing between the high-three and the redux military retirement programs: Thrift savings plan participation a valuable option. *The Army Lawyer*, 18–23.  
[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A71828859/LT?u=vic\\_liberty&sid=summon&xid=5d86d925](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A71828859/LT?u=vic_liberty&sid=summon&xid=5d86d925)
- Shan, Y., Zhao, W., Hao, W., Kimura, T., Ukawa, S., Ohira, H., Kawamura, T., Wakai, K., Ando, M., & Tamakoshi, A. (2022). Changes in behavioral activities and transition of depressive symptoms among younger-old community-dwelling adults during 6 years: An age-specific prospective cohort study. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 37(8). <https://doi.org/10.1002/gps.5778>

- Shepherd, S., Kay, A. C., & Gray, K. (2019). Military veterans are morally typecast as agentic but unfeeling: Implications for veteran employment. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 153, 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.06.003>
- Shue, S., Matthias, M. S., Watson, D. P., Miller, K. K., & Munk, N. (2021). The career transition experiences of military veterans: A qualitative study. *Military Psychology*, 33(6), 359–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2021.1962175>
- Soemantri, D., Findyartini, A., Greviana, N., Mustika, R., Felaza, E., Wahid, M., & Steinert, Y. (2023). Deconstructing the professional identity formation of basic science teachers in medical education. *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice*, 28(1), 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-022-10150-6>
- Soltani, M. A. T., Karaminia, R., & Hashemian, S. A. (2014). Prediction of war veteran's mental health based on spiritual well-being, social support, and self-efficacy variables: The mediating role of life satisfaction. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 3(57), 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2277-9531.134757>
- Stanton, M., Parker, M. W., McDougall, G., & Eyer, J. C. (2017). Reintegration issues of military nurses: A focus group approach. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, 13(1), 1–19. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/pmc6956650/>
- Starks, H., & Brown Trinidad, S. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1372–1380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732307307031>
- Stevenson, B. J., Thrower, S. J., Mueller, L., & Kelly, M. M. (2021). Vocational identity of veterans with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 55(2), 147–155. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-211153>

- Stone, C., & Stone, D. L. (2015). Factors affecting hiring decisions about veterans. *Human Resource Management Review*, 25(1), 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2014.06.003>
- Strong, J. D., Crowe, B. M., & Lawson, S. (2018). Female veterans: Navigating two identities. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 46(2), 92-99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-017-0636-3>
- TC 7-22.7 (2020) The noncommissioned officer guide.  
[https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN20340-TC\\_7-22.7-000-WEB-1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20340-TC_7-22.7-000-WEB-1.pdf)
- Thompson, J. M., Dursun, S., VanTil, L., Heber, A., Kitchen, P., de Boer, C., Black, T., Montelpare, B., Coady, T., Sweet, J., & Pedlar, D. (2019). Group identity, difficult adjustment to civilian life, and suicidal ideation in Canadian Armed Forces veterans: Life after service studies 2016. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 5(2), 100–114. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0038>
- Tinney, G., & Gerlock, A. A. (2014). Intimate partner violence, military personnel, veterans, and their families. *Family Court Review*, 52(3), 400–416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12100>
- Tran, C. T., Kuhn, E., Walser, R. D., & Drescher, K. D. (2012). The relationship between religiosity, PTSD, and depressive symptoms in veterans in PTSD residential treatment. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 40(4), 313–322.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711204000406>
- Trulia. (2014, November 10). *Where veterans live*. Forbes.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/trulia/2014/11/10/where-veterans-live/?sh=ededc37484d2>
- Tsai, J., El-Gabalawy, R., Sledge, W. H., Southwick, S. M., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2015). Post-traumatic growth among veterans in the USA: Results from the national health and



resilience in veterans study. *Psychological Medicine*, 45(1), 165–179.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291714001202>

United States Army. (2022, November 29). *Army Transition Assistance Program (TAP)*.

MyArmyBenefits. [https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Transition-Assistance-Program-\(TAP\)-?serv=122](https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Transition-Assistance-Program-(TAP)-?serv=122)

United States Army. (2023, June 30). *Army Recovery Care Program (ARCP) (formerly known as Warrior Care and Transition Program)*. [https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Recovery-Care-Program-\(ARCP\)-\(formerly-known-as-Army-Wounded-Warrior-Program-\(AW2\)\)-?serv=122](https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Recovery-Care-Program-(ARCP)-(formerly-known-as-Army-Wounded-Warrior-Program-(AW2))-?serv=122)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). (2019). *Benefit rates*.

<https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/ratesindex.asp#combined%20for%20calculating%20disabilities>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). (2022). *Post-separation transition assistance program (TAP) assessment (PSTAP) outcome study: 2021 summary report*.

<https://benefits.va.gov/TRANSITION/docs/2021-pstap-summary.pdf>

Van Dick, R., Ketturat, C., Häusser, J. A., & Mojzisch, A. (2017). Two sides of the same coin and two routes for improvement: Integrating resilience and the social identity approach to well-being and ill-health. *Health Psychology Open*, 4(2), 1–6.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2055102917719564>

Vervoordt, S. M., Bradson, M. L., & Arnett, P. A. (2022). Avoidant coping is associated with quality of life in persons with multiple sclerosis with high cognitive reserve. *Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology*, 37(7), 1527–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arclin/acac049>

- Wang, W., Zhang, J., Zheng, X., Li, G., & Zhou, Y. (2023). Heterogeneity of resilience and the curvilinear relationship between childhood trauma and resilience among people with schizophrenia. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1–7.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1082000>
- Whitworth, J., Smet, B., & Anderson, B. (2020). Reconceptualizing the U.S. Military's transition assistance program: The success in transition model. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), 25–35. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.144>
- Wimmer, G., Janda, M., Wieselmann-Penkner, K., Jakse, N., Polansky, R., & Pertl, C. (2002). Coping with stress: Its influence on periodontal disease. *Journal of Periodontology*, 73(11), 1343–1351. <https://doi.org/10.1902/jop.2002.73.11.1343>
- Woodruff, S. I., Galarneau, M. R., McCabe, C. T., Sack, D. I., & Clouser, M. C. (2018). Health-related quality of life among US military personnel injured in combat: Findings from the Wounded Warrior Recovery Project. *Quality of Life Research*, 27(5), 1393–1402.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-018-1806-7>
- Woodward, R., & Jenkins, N. K. (2011). Military identities in the situated accounts of British military personnel. *Sociology*, 45(2), 252–268.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510394016>
- Wooten, N. R., Brittingham, J. A., Hossain, A., Hopkins, L. A., Sumi, N. S., Jeffery, D. D., Tavakoli, A. S., Chakraborty, H., Levkoff, S. E., & Larson, M. J. (2019). Army warrior care project (AWCP): Rationale and methods for a longitudinal study of behavioral health care in army warrior transition units using military health system data, FY2008–2015. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 28(3), 1–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/mpr.1788>

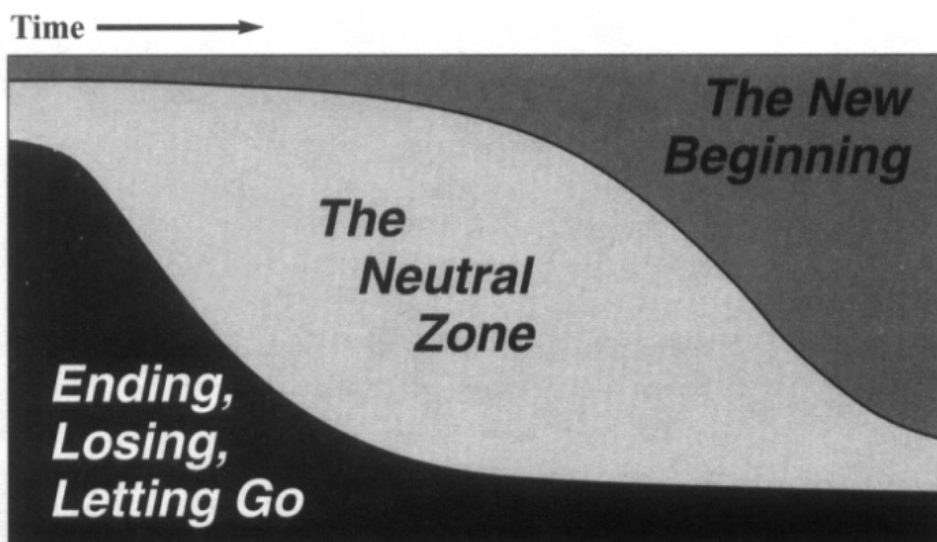
- Yablonsky, A. M., Barbero, E. D., & Richardson, J. W. (2016). Hard is normal: Military families' transitions within the process of deployment. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 39(1), 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.21701>
- Yan, G. W., McAndrew, L., D'Andrea, E. A., Lange, G., Santos, S. L., Engel, C. C., & Quigley, K. S. (2013). Self-reported stressors of National Guard women veterans before and after deployment: The relevance of interpersonal relationships. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 28(Suppl 2), 549–555. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-012-2247-6>
- Ziencik, C. (2020). Transitioning from the military to higher education: A case study of the transition assistance program. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), 30–45. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i2.178>
- Zivin, K., Yosef, M., Levine, D. S., Abraham, K. M., Miller, E. M., Henry, J., Nelson, C. B., Pfeiffer, P. N., Sripada, R. K., Harrod, M., & Valenstein, M. (2016). Employment status, employment functioning, and barriers to employment among VA primary care patients. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 193, 194–202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.12.054>
- Zizzo, G., Mackenzie, C., Irizarry, C., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2020). Loss and grief: The experience of transition to residential aged care. *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 55(4), 474–491. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.105>

## Appendix A

### Figures

**Figure A1**

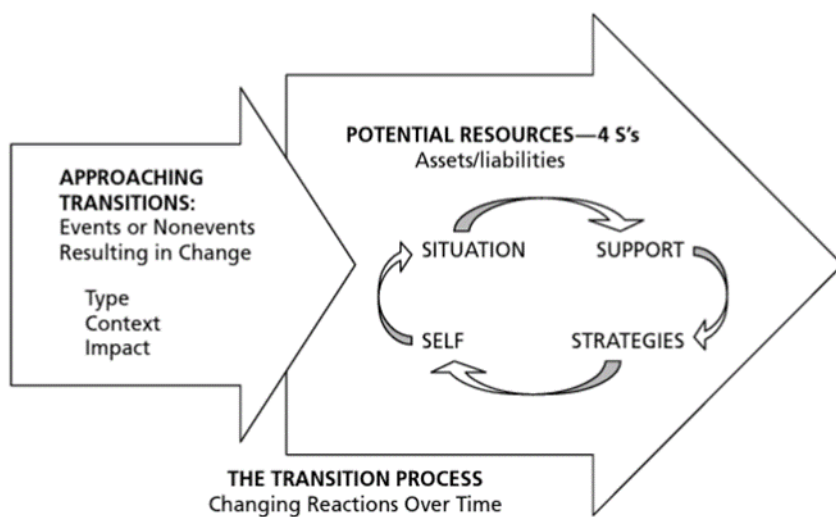
*The Three Phases of Transition*



*Note.* As adapted from Bridges (2003).

**Figure A2**

*The Individual in Transition*



*Note.* As adapted from Anderson et al. (2012).

## Appendix B

### Recruitment: Verbal Script (Phone or In Person)

Hello Potential Participant,

As a student in the School of Behavior Science at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experiences of army senior leaders once they have retired from army service and describe the mental health concerns and helpful coping strategies during the transition. If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, must be an army veteran, retired from the army, with the rank of either SFC (E-7), MSG/1SG (E-8), or CSM/SGM (E-9). Participants must have held the rank of E7, E8, or E9 for a minimum of 12 months prior to retirement. Participants may be male or female and must be retired for a minimum of 90-days post-retirement and no longer than five years. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an 8-question web-based questionnaire to gather demographic information (5 minutes). Participate in an interview via MS Teams, Zoom, or in person. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews will be scheduled for 1 hour at maximum. Participants be asked to meet with the interviewer at a time and location beneficial to the participant and interviewer. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy (20 minutes). Participants will be asked to take part in audio-recorded follow-up interviews and focus groups. If necessary, follow-up interviews will be scheduled for 30 minutes. Focus groups will be scheduled for 1 hour. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? [Yes] Great, could I get your email address so I can send you the link to the web-based questionnaire? Would you mind completing this survey and returning it by email to [REDACTED]?

Can we set up a time for an interview?

[No] I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document will be given to you one week before our scheduled interview date. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview. After you have read the consent form, please complete, and return the survey/click on the link to complete the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Do you have any questions? Thank you for your time.

## Appendix C

### Recruitment: Social Media

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experiences of army senior leaders once they have retired from army service and describe the mental health concerns and helpful coping strategies during the transition. To participate, you must be Participants must be 18 years of age or older, must be an army veteran, retired from the army, with the rank of either SFC (E-7), MSG/1SG (E-8), or CSM/SGM (E-9). Participants must have held the rank of E7, E8, or E9 for a minimum of 12 months prior to retirement. Participants may be male or female and must be retired for a minimum of 90 days post-retirement and no longer than five years. Participants will be asked to complete an 8-question web-based questionnaire to gather demographic information (5 minutes). Participate in an interview via MS Teams, Zoom, or in person. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews will be scheduled for 1 hour at maximum. Participants be asked to meet with the interviewer at a time and location beneficial to the participant and interviewer. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy (20 minutes). Participants will be asked to take part in audio-recorded follow-up interviews and focus groups. If necessary, follow-up interviews will be scheduled for 30 minutes. Focus groups will be scheduled for 1 hour. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeJodBJaCeusW99jd5AkL2nSNMtO\\_8320cGGbzAVT3csDwMyA/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeJodBJaCeusW99jd5AkL2nSNMtO_8320cGGbzAVT3csDwMyA/viewform?usp=sf_link) or contact me directly at sfrancis22@liberty.edu for more information or to schedule an interview. A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview.

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Flyer

# Research Participants Needed

## The Lived Experiences of Army Senior Enlisted Leaders During the Retirement Phase: A Phenomenological Study

- Are you a retired Army veteran?
- Did you serve with the ranks of SFC, MSG, or SGM/CSM?
  - Are you 18 years old or older?

If you answered yes to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

**The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of army senior leaders during the retirement phase once they have retired from army service.**

- ✚ Participants will be asked to Participate in an interview via MS Teams, Zoom, or in person.
- ✚ Participants will be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.
- ✚ Participants will be asked to take part in audio-recorded follow-up interviews and focus groups.

If you would like to participate, please click here

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeJodBJaCeusW99jd5AkL2nSNMtO\\_8320cGGbzAVT3csDwMyA/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeJodBJaCeusW99jd5AkL2nSNMtO_8320cGGbzAVT3csDwMyA/viewform?usp=sf_link)

or contact me directly at [REDACTED] for more information or to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview.

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

**Please contact Stephanie Francois at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515



## Appendix E

### IRB Exemption

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 8, 2023

Stephanie Francois  
Michael Howard

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-65 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ARMY SENIOR ENLISTED LEADERS 90 DAYS AFTER RETIREMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Stephanie Francois, Michael Howard,

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 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). 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:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

**For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.**

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

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

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**

*Administrative Chair*

**Research Ethics Office**

## **Appendix F**

### **Interview Questions**

#### ***Opening Questions***

1. How would you describe your integration into the Army?
2. How did your transition into the Army affect you?

#### ***Questions Related to Transition Experience***

3. What influenced your decision to retire from the Army?
4. What were your initial emotions when you made the decision to retire?
5. How did you prepare for retirement from the Army?
6. How did the Army transition process prepare you for retirement?

#### ***Questions Related to Mental Health Experience***

7. Did you experience any significant changes to your mental health within the first 90 days after retirement?
8. Tell me about any mental health struggles you experienced as you prepared to retire.
9. Tell me about mental health support you received during the first 90 days after retirement.
10. Tell me about coping strategies you employed for mental health struggles during the first 90 days.

## Appendix G

### Information Sheet

**Title of the Project:** The lived experiences of Army senior enlisted leaders 90 days after retirement: A phenomenological study

**Principal Investigator:** Stephanie Francois, Doctoral Candidate, School of Behavioral Sciences, Liberty University

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

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, must be an army veteran, retired from the army, with the rank of either SFC (E-7), MSG/1SG (E-8), or CSM/SGM (E-9). Participants must have held the rank of E7, E8, or E9 for a minimum of 12 months prior to retirement. Participants may be male or female and must be retired for a minimum of 90 days post-retirement and no longer than five years. Combat experience is not required for this study. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experiences of army senior leaders 90 days after they have retired from army service and describe the mental health impacts and helpful coping strategies during the transition. This study also seeks to understand how senior enlisted leaders adjusted to civilian life after retirement. This study will provide lived experiences on the possible barriers to services or programs related to army transitions and enlisted senior leader retirement. This study will offer a look into the perspectives of senior enlisted leaders seeking mental health assistance as they retire. Program developers may find these perspectives useful.

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

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

1. Participate in an interview via MS Teams, Zoom, or in person. All interviews will be audio- and video-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews will be scheduled for 45 minutes-1 hour. Participants will meet with the interviewer at a time and location beneficial to the participant and interviewer.
2. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy (20 minutes).
3. Participants may be asked to take part in an audio- and video-recorded follow-up interview. If necessary, follow-up interviews will be scheduled for 30 minutes.
4. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded focus group. Focus groups will be scheduled for 45 minutes-1 hour.

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

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the implementation of potential programs to benefit retiring army enlisted leaders for a smooth transition to civilian life.

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

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

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

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using 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. All hard copies will be stored in a locked file cabinet; the researcher will have sole access. After three years, all electronic records and hard copy records will be deleted and shredded.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. 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.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.

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

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not 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/phone number 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 Stephanie Francois. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Michael Howard, at [mdhoward@liberty.edu](mailto:mdhoward@liberty.edu).

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

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

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

## Appendix H

### Questionnaire Questions

\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender?

Female

Male

I choose not to disclose.

2. What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian/European American

African/African American

Spanish/Latino

Asian/Pacific Islander

Native American

Middle Eastern

Multiracial

3. Age range

18–20

21–29

30–39

40–49

50–59

60 or older

4. Did you serve in the Army?    Yes    No

5. Which senior enlisted rank did you earn?

E7 (SFC)

E8 (MSG/1SG)

E9 (SGM/CSM)

Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. Did you retire from the Army?    Yes    No

7. What year did you retire from the Army? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Would you like to participate in this study?    Yes    No