

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation

“UNDERSTAND YOU ARE GOING TO DEAL WITH  
HARDSHIPS THAT WOMEN DEAL WITH IN THE  
CIVILIAN WORLD, KIND OF LIKE ON STEROIDS”:  
AIR FORCE AND ARMY WOMEN VETERANS’  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY

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The United States military (USM) is a totalistic and hegemonically masculine institution that leaves lasting effects on former members sense of self and identity. The performance of gender by individual members, and the gendered nature of the institution itself make it a challenging profession for those categorized into the subordinate gender to navigate and succeed. Using feminist standpoint theory, this dissertation explores women’s perspectives of their experiences during and after military service to better understand the role of gender on institution-public relational meaning making. Findings demonstrate that gender performance, on individual and institutional levels forms gendered relationships to the institution that have long term effects on individuals willingness to engage with the institution. From the findings identified, theoretical extensions and practice implications, as well as recommendations for the USM to improve its relationships with women veterans are suggested.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the participants who were gracious enough to share their experiences with me, to all the women who have paved the way for gender inclusivity in military service, and to all the women who have yet to serve.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a microcosm of society at large, the United States military (USM) is a rich institution for communication inquiry. Many of the elements that comprise its culture (e.g., structure, norms, behaviors) fundamentally transform the lives of service members and their families (Clever & Segal, 2013; Keats, 2010; King, 2006; Moore, 2020), requiring fealty and obedience to the President of the United States and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Armed Forces, 1956). The all-encompassing nature of what it means to “serve” conditions and dictates the behaviors and norms of service members on and off duty. While the modern day military touts a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion, its rich history of exclusion has created a legacy that negatively impacts those who fall outside of the masculine, warrior identity.

Women in particular have struggled to achieve acceptance. The USM was founded in 1775 (US Army, n.d.); however, legislation allowing women to legally serve was not passed until 1948 (Robinson & O’Hanlon, 2020). Now, over 170 years of masculine totalitarianism presents gender-specific challenges and barriers to women’s service in today’s military culture (Chiara et al., 2020; Edwards, 2021; Eichler, 2022; Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018). Historic and recent events regarding women in the USM suggest that women’s experiences within the armed forces are different than men’s in negative ways (i.e., bullying, sexual harassment, barriers to opportunity, murder of Vanessa Guillén) (Bell et al., 2014; McDermott & May, in review; Turchik & Wilson, 2010). The end result is that military service is a challenging career path for women, presenting a recruitment and retention problem for the USM regarding women service members (Government Accountability Office GAO, 2020).

Currently, women comprise 17.3% of the active duty population and roughly 12% of the veteran population (2 million of 17.4 million). As key stakeholders to the USM, veterans<sup>1</sup> may act as ambassadors, shaping how publics perceives the military and its reputation. For people from diverse or marginalized backgrounds, specifically women, veteran narratives may play a key role in their decision to join the military and willingness to connect with the service member identity (Pritchard et al., 2022). Thus, how women with military service experience communicate about the USM and characterize their military experience could play a role in others' decisions to join or support the USM. As such, understanding women's experiences and their relationship to the USM after separating from active duty service becomes increasingly important for identifying new avenues for better supporting women service members during and after service to improve the reputation of the USM (Department of Defense DoD, 2022a).

To explore women's experiences in the USM, I used feminist standpoint theory to uncover inequities experienced by women in the military. Feminist standpoint theory has been used similarly within hegemonically masculine institutions (Halpern, 2019; McDermott, 2019), as well as within the field of public relations (see Toth, 2023) to identify how oppressions based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation may be used to perpetuate inequitable experiences based in societal biases. Using feminist standpoint theory, one-on-one in-depth semi-structured virtual interviews with former women service members affiliated with the Air Force or Army were conducted to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?*

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that not all women or people with military service experience identify as veterans. The term veteran is used in this dissertation to denote any person with military service experience in line with the regulation Title 38 U.S.C. § 3.1. A further explanation of the nuances related to the term "veteran" can be found in the literature review.

*RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Airforce or Army)?*

As an interpretivist/critical qualitative scholar, I sought to co-create knowledge with participants by facilitating interviews to uncover their gender-based standpoints as women during and after military service. After completing 30 interviews, I used interpretive thematic analysis to analyze these data and answer the research questions. Findings from this dissertation demonstrate that participants perceive a difference in gender performance expectations for men and women while in service that leaves long-lasting effects on individuals' sense of self. Moreover, experiences based in gender, such as structural inequities and experience with sexual violence, played a significant role in how participants made sense of their relationship to the military during and after service. Findings also demonstrate that communication played a variety of roles in participants' meaning making of their relationship to their respective military branches, ranging from being used to reinforce institutional cultural norms to how communication expectations among branches differed. Finally, findings from this dissertation illustrate that former women service members often grapple with the decision to engage in veteran or military-affiliated groups following their separation from service because of the many complexities surrounding the "veteran" identity and the spaces, created or not created, for former women service members in these groups.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, I consider theoretical extensions, practical implications, and pose recommendations based on the lived experiences of women in the military to challenge and change structural processes in the USM to make gender a less oppressive element within the institutional culture. Theoretically, this dissertation (1) extends the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory through the elements of time and coping strategies, (2) identifies additional dimensions for qualitatively understandings relationships, and (3), offers the idea that institution-public relationships (IPRs) occur on a spectrum with many elements playing a role in relational meaning making. Practically, findings from participants' narratives demonstrated (1) how branch cultures plays a role in gender performance expectations and perceptions of satisfaction after service, (2) the importance of feminist standpoint theory in totalistic and greedy institutions, and (3) the role of communication in relational meaning making. Finally three recommendations, based on participants responses and the practical implications identified, are suggested for facilitating tangible change: (1) avenues for improving women's healthcare, (2) revisions to the transition assistance program, and (3) considerations for creating more inclusive spaces for former women service members.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation begins with a review of relevant foundational literature. Beginning with the concept of gender performance, the literature review then explicates the role of feminist standpoint theory for uncovering inequities in experience based in gender. I then explain some of the key elements that comprise the USM (e.g., structure and culture) and consider the positionality and complexities related to the term "veteran". The literature review closes by explicating the intersection of public relations and the USM, as well as explaining the purpose of the study.

After providing a review of relevant literature, I then explain the qualitative research methodology used to answer the four research questions. The methodology section begins with researcher reflexivity, to situate myself in relation to the research topic. Next, I evaluate the research project's significance using Tracy's (2010, 2019) big tent criteria. From there, I provide a detailed explanation of the protocol used to facilitate the interviews, as well as describe how the collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps of thematic analysis.

After explaining research methodology, I explicate research findings. The themes and sub-themes identified from the data analysis phase to answer each research question are presented and defined. Direct participant quotes are used throughout the findings to exemplify and illustrate each theme and sub-theme.

Following the dissertation findings, I explain the significance of these findings situated within the broader academic literature. Finally, I argue for theoretical extensions, practical implications, and recommendations. This section closes with an overview of the limitations of the project and avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The United States military (USM)<sup>2</sup> has been a topic of inquiry in popular press and academic research since its inception (Clever & Segal, 2013; Keats, 2010; King, 2006; Maples, 2017; Moore, 2020). Disciplines such as psychology and sociology have sought to understand how military service may affect the way people think and behave both in and out of active duty service (Britt et al., 2006; Crosbie & Kleykamp, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Soeters, 2018). Although communication scholars have explored topics related to the USM, such as the role of communication in military diplomacy (Azevedo et al., 2020; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005) and how families maintain communication during military operations (Houston et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2022), much remains unexplored from a communication perspective regarding the functioning of the USM. Communication, specifically public relations, may provide new avenues for understanding how the uniquely positioned USM may more effectively manage mutually influential relationships (Ciszek, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

Due to the all-encompassing, totalistic nature of the USM, its strict hierarchical structure, and its culture grounded in hegemonic masculinity, the USM becomes a difficult career path for women<sup>3</sup> service members to navigate and later exit. Historical and recent events regarding women in the USM suggest that women's experiences within the armed forces are different than men's in a variety of negative ways (i.e., bullying, sexual harassment, barriers to opportunity)

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the many service members do not view the military and their branch as one in the same. People often chose military service in order to serve a specific branch and fulfill a specific mission. For ease of reading in this dissertation I use "United States Military (USM)", while acknowledging that many service members recognize their service to one specific branch.

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge the differences between biological sex and gender. Sex refers to biological characteristics related to being male, female, or intersex. Gender, on the other hand, is a created through communication, performed on a nonbinary spectrum shaped by societal expectations spectrum (Cameron & Stinson 2019; Golombisky, 2006, 2015). The USM guidelines DTM 19-004 determine gender based on biological sex unless a waiver is approved for transgender members (Norquist, 2019). Thus, I refer to gender as biological sex in alignment with the USM standards for the purpose of this project. Further, the terms "female" and "women" are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

(McDermott & May, in review). Although women represent 17.3% (231,741) of active duty service members and comprise 2 million of the 17.4 million veterans within the United States today (DoD, 2022a; Vespa, 2020; Women Veterans Health Care, 2020), negative experiences while in service may play a role in how women veterans make sense of their relationship with the military during and post service. For example, women are 28% more likely than their man counterparts to separate from active duty service (GAO, 2020; Werner, 2020). Understanding how women veterans perceive their relationship with the military is important as their characterization of military service to others may affect the overall reputation of the USM. With the rise in social media, women veterans may act as ambassadors that can impact the recruitment and retainment of diverse, talented people. Thus, how former women service members communicate their experiences becomes increasingly important for the reputation of the USM.

Ultimately, this dissertation sought to better understand how women veterans make sense of and communicate their perceptions of their military service experience and their relationship to the USM after separating from active duty service. Before explicating the methodology of this dissertation, the following review of literature overviews the current research on gender performance, important aspects of the USM, and current knowledge related to veterans' experiences. The review of literature then explores how public relations may intersect with the USM. The literature review closes with the four proposed research questions.

### **The Performance of Gender**

Before explicating gender performance, it is important to define some of the key terms that comprise it, specifically, biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality. *Biological sex* refers to the biological and physiological characteristics of an individual as determined by their anatomy, such as their chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs



(World Health Organization WHO, 2023). Biological sex is defined by the categories of male, female, or intersex. *Gender identity* refers to one's innermost concept of self, such as how people perceive themselves and what they call themselves. Gender identity can be the same or different from people's sex assigned at birth (Human Rights Foundation HRF, 2023). *Gender expression* is the external appearance of one's gender identity, performed through elements such as behavior, clothing, and voice. As such, gender performance and expression are characterized by the roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender-diverse people, as well as their relationships and interactions with others often influenced by societal expectations (Cameron & Stinson 2019; Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], 2020). How people decide to engage in expressions of gender may or may not conform to socially defined characteristics associated with being masculine or feminine. Importantly, gender identity and expression should not be viewed as a binary with male and female at polar opposites. Instead, gender is a spectrum in which people perform differing degrees and combinations of mental, emotional, and behavioral characteristics typically associated with masculine, feminine, and/or agender identities (Castleberry, 2019). As argued by Rakow (1986) "'gender is a verb' created by and creating communication" (p. 11), thus people perform gender daily on a spectrum through their choices of discourse and action. *Sexuality* or sexual orientation is a person's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to others (HFS, 2023). Overall, the complex interrelationships between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality effect how individuals view themselves and their relationship to others. All of these elements are heavily influenced by societal norms and expectations, as well as the threats associated with violating these norms (WHO, 2023).

Golombisky (2012) argued that gender is accomplished through “embodied performances accountable to social context, which have social and material effects” (p. 21). Thus people can perform gender based on the integration of expectations determined by society and their internal perceptions of self. However, the rigidity surrounding societal expectations of gender identity and expression can make it difficult for individuals who violate gender norms (Hamel, 2020; Reidy et al., 2009; Wellman & McCoy, 2014). Specifically, the conflation of biological sex and gender has resulted in harmful societal scripts related to the confines gender performance (e.g., a female must act as a woman) (Callaghan, 2021; Webster, 2021). Through communication, which I define as the way people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, the interpretation and production of social and cultural norms, such as those related to gender performance, are created (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Societal norms and expectations ascribed to men and women are negotiated through dialogue as gender is a “socially and symbolically constructed notion” (Chesebro, 2001, p. 36). As Toth (2023) argued, “discourses carry gendered ideologies that propel women and men to enact certain performances that are gendered” (p. 12). Therefore, communication is a process for the (re)creation of social and cultural norms with which to contextualize the performance of gender (Nastasia & Rakow, 2006).

Within Western society, stereotypes associated with gender performance, also called traditional gender roles have dominated people’s expectations related to gender performance (Blackstone, 2003). Traditional gender roles are "socially shared beliefs about what qualities can be assigned to individuals based on their membership in the female or male [part] of the human race" (Lips, 2020, p. 4). For example, society dictates what is socially acceptable gendered behavior for men and women, and people are expected to act in line with their presumed gender

identity. A person's gender performance can then result in them being labeled as more or less man or woman (Gender Spectrum, 2019). Those who violate traditional gender roles may face a range of consequences (e.g., bullying, ostracism, physical harm). Because a person's biological sex is presumed to inform their gender identity (e.g., female-woman, male-man). Moreover, because biological sex and gender are often conflated, it is considered widely acceptable to use societal pressures and consequences to "realign" individuals who violate gender norms to their socially expected gender identity (Hamel, 2020; Reidy et al., 2009).

Through the communication of norms and expectations, people are socialized to accept characteristics and behaviors to be categorized as masculine or feminine. Lips (2020) identified six defining characteristics of men or "manhood": adventurous, dominant, forceful, independent, masculine, and strong. Men are expected to be leaders, heads of households providing financially for the family and make important decisions (Blackstone, 2003). Alternatively women are characterized as: sentimental, submissive, charming, emotional, fussy, and weak (Lips, 2020). Women are viewed as caretakers and nurturers, responsible for domestic tasks such as child rearing, and submissive to the men in their lives (Blackstone, 2003). Although traditional gender roles are oversimplified conceptualizations of gender, they define culturally shared beliefs about how men and women *should* act, think, and behave (Lips, 2020).

People can decide whether or not to adhere to traditional gender role scripts performed through their everyday discourse and behavior with varying degrees of cost for violating expected gender performance. Violating expected gender performance can result in a variety of negative consequences, from bullying to physical violence, as those who strongly adhere to traditional gender roles believe everyone should as well (Johns et al., 2019; Reidy et al. 2009). Specifically, those who subscribe to the hyperpolarized performance of masculinity, hegemonic

masculinity, are known to engage in violence against those who challenge traditional gender role expectations (Reeser, 2011).

### ***Hegemonic Masculinity***

Although people may perform masculinity to varying degrees, hegemonic masculinity is one extreme performance of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity is a highly idealized form of masculinity based on ultimate adherence to traditional gender role behaviors associated with the masculine identity (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Thus, the ideal hegemonically masculine man is expected to be assertive, aggressive, courageous, invulnerable to threats, and stoic in the face of adversity. Hegemonically masculine men are expected to display courage and strength and ignore emotions and physical weakness, as those behaviors and others associated with femininity are considered undesirable (McVittie et al., 2017). Through the perpetuation and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, men seek to legitimize their dominant position in society to justify the subordination of women and other “lesser” men (Jewkes et al., 2015). As described by Donaldson (1993):

a fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity, then, is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men. Women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation, and men compete with each other for it (p. 645).

Thus, hegemonic masculinity seeks to perpetuate gender inequality through hierarchies of masculinity, stratified access to power, and the emphasis of male bodies and masculine practices. This privileges and supports the misogynistic perspective of male dominance and female submission (Jewkes et al., 2015). Further, the conceptualizations of gendered behaviors of men and women expected by the hegemonically masculine identity provide prescriptive performance expectations based in traditional gender roles (e.g., man-leader, woman-caretaker), with no

gender allowed to violate these expectations. Although the behavior and performance of hegemonic masculinity is prescriptive, hegemonic masculinity is not easy to perform and does not truly represent the authentic experiences of men; however the idea of hegemonic masculinity provides a normative standard for men to aspire to and assess their own identities against, as well as a rationale for male dominance and overall adherence to the performance of traditional gender roles (McVittie et al., 2017).

Hegemonic masculinity is also interrelated to heteronormativity (Van Gilder, 2019). In other words, traditional gender roles (i.e., male sexual aggressor, female victim) and heterosexuality (i.e., only sexual attraction to the opposite sex) are expected. The strict, idealized norms of hegemonic masculinity can lead to tense situations and harmful environments for people who violate traditional gender role norms, e.g., women in leadership positions or men who are caretakers (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Additionally, hegemonic masculinity views violence as a strategic means to an end. Violence and aggression may be used to try to realign people to their prescriptive gender roles and reestablish power, leading to conflict, isolation, and tension (Hearn, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Scott-Samuel et al., 2009).

Overall, hegemonic masculinity has a detrimental effect on all genders. For example, hegemonic masculinity can result in the violence against women through the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and extreme adherence to heterosexuality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2012; Jewkes et al., 2015). Similarly, the pressure to adhere to masculine characteristics damages men's mental and physical health (Donaldson, 1993) and social relationships (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). The hyperfocus on breadwinning and proving manhood can be exclusive, anxiety provoking, brutal, and violent (Donaldson, 1993). The stereotype of being self-reliant and stoic is associated with heightened levels of depression and psychological

distress (Smith et al., 2022; Valkonen & Hänninen, 2012). Although hegemonic masculinity has detrimental consequences for all gender identities, it is still performed in a variety of contexts affecting the gender performance of others.

### ***Gendered Institutions***

Scholars have argued that institutions<sup>4</sup> are inherently gendered (Acker, 1990, 2015). In conceptualizing gender in institutions, gender extends past identity and image and becomes “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). Gender is not just an identity people may embrace. Rather, through communication expectations and restrictions, gender is used to create and stratify power. This results in the gendering of institutions. Aldoory (2005), similarly urged scholars to move beyond conceptualizations of gender as “women or female” in order to study all humans affected by gender constructions, stereotypes, and gender socialization (p. 675). Therefore, through the acknowledgement of institutions as gendered, we can begin to uncover the ways in which gender is used as a source of power via institutional structures and processes.

As argued by Acker (1990), labeling an institution as gendered means that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). Gender then becomes a form of power and capital built into the institution (Bourdieu, 1986). As such, the gendered nature of institutions may affect gender workplace segregation and performance, as behaviors such as sexual harassment and bullying couched in

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<sup>4</sup> As argued below, because the USM is an institution, the term institution is used throughout this dissertation instead of the term “organization” in order to maintain consistency. For much of the research related to gendered workplaces scholars use the term “organization”, however I have replaced organization with institution.

gender difference are not considered deviations of individual members' behavior but rather components of an institutional structure (Balmer, et al. 2020; Kanter, 1977; MacKinnon, 1982). Through these communicative behaviors, gendered disparities become a structural function and norm of the institution.

Scholars, as well as statistics from the Department of Labor, demonstrate that institutions have traditionally been dominated by men, as men continue to hold the most powerful institutional positions (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977; McKinsey & Company, 2022). Currently, men make up the majority of managers (60%), senior managers/directors (64%), vice presidents (72%), and C-suite executives (74%) (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Structures such as bureaucracy and hierarchy are male-created, male-dominated frameworks that, at their core, assume men's behavior and perspectives represent the general human experience (Gherardi, 1995; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). However, women and men are affected differently by institutional structures and processes such that institutions cannot be gender neutral. Viewing institutions as separate structures from the people in them is a narrow, biased perspective. Therefore, Acker (1990) argued for a systematic theory of gender and institutions, identifying five processes that reproduce gender in institutions: division of labor, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities, and institutional logic. First Acker (1990) argued that the division of labor is created through institutional practices and through these institutional processes gender is enacted. For example, men are almost always in the highest positions of institutional power and women tend to take on emotional labor in the workplace in roles such as human resources or administrative positions, reinforcing a patriarchal division of power. Second, cultural symbols are created by institutional processes and need to be understood to identify and disrupt gender inequality. Institutional processes may explain, express, or reinforce gendered

expectations such as what constitutes “success”, boundaries related to dress and language, and the formation of cultural symbols (e.g., pictures of men as top leaders in board rooms, or technical skills being linked to masculinity) important to and used within the institution. Third, cultural understandings of gender are often invented and reproduced through interactions in institutional spaces. For example, in institutional spaces, gendered behaviors and expectations are developed and reinforced through discourse implicitly (e.g., through communicative turn-taking women may be given less space to speak and be heard, men may be portrayed as the main actors and women may be viewed just as emotional support) and explicitly (e.g., through policy such as limited maternity leave). Fourth, some aspects of individual gender identity are a result of institutional processes and pressures. Thus, institutions play a role in how people may develop internal conceptions of gender and make decisions on how they choose to perform those conceptualizations of gender through communication and action, such as choice of dress and presentation of self (e.g., the belief that women may need to dress a specific way to attain respect in the workplace), as well as how they police others’ presentations of self. Finally, institutional logic refers to how hierarchies are rationalized and legitimized in institutions through policies and principles. This encompasses logical systems of work rules, job descriptions, pay scales, and job evaluations. Women who step outside of traditional gender role performance (e.g., through leadership positions) may receive lower evaluations from male peers that result in less pay and opportunities for promotion (Heilman, 2012; Inesi & Cable, 2014).

Previous research has used the theory of gendered institutions to understand women’s experiences in male-dominated workplaces (Balmer et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2012). For example, research conducted by Balmer et al. (2020) used the theory of gendered institutions to explore women’s experiences in academic medicine. Their findings demonstrate a disconnect



between formal expectations intended to be gender-neutral (e.g., merit for promotions presumed to be a gender-neutralizer through formal expectations and policy) and informal interactions that advantaged men (e.g., women not actually being considered for tenure despite meeting the merit required). As participants rose through the ranks, the findings demonstrated by Balmer et al. (2020) illustrate that women recognized that gender inequity was ultimately embedded in the institution as described by Acker's (1990) five processes (e.g., not considered for promotions, stereotyped as needing to be cared for, paid less than male counterparts, strategies suggested to "fix" women and not the institution overall). Williams et al. (2012) used the theory of gendered institutions to explore the experiences of geoscientists in the oil and gas industry. They found that participants felt required to engage in self-promotion while working in teams and engaging in networking to be considered for career advancement. Self-promotion can be difficult for women to engage in as women are traditionally socialized to downplay their accomplishments to adhere to the characteristics of femininity (e.g., focus on the collective and being submissive). This can be compounded in male-dominated environments in which hierarchies of masculinity seek to further subjugate femininity. Overall, Williams et al. (2012) argue that not only are jobs and institutions gendered, but the features of jobs have become gendered (e.g., how people are expected to work in teams and the self-advocacy required for career changing).

Although arguing for the logic of the theoretical framework of gendered institutions is outside the scope of this dissertation, this dissertation takes the position that institutions are inherently gendered. As argued by Bates (2022), Acker's (1990) theory of gendered institutions has most often been used to legitimize the idea that institutions are gendered. Based on this assertion, the gendered nature of institutions may affect the relationships that individuals cultivate with institutions, as well as impact individual meaning making processes as members of

that institution. However, more research is needed to understand the potential role of gendered institutional culture on people's relational meaning making.

### ***Performative Gender in the Workplace***

While institutions may (re)produce expectations related to gender, gender is also performed on an individual level within the workplace. Due to prescriptive gendered behaviors and culturally normalized gender roles, gender performance is a defining factor in people's lives, determining people's access to and experiences in the workplace (Golombisky, 2006; Koenig, 2018; McDermott, et al., 2022). Ultimately, the sexual division of labor is a powerful system of social constraint (Acker, 1990; Van Gilder, 2019). As argued above, the prescriptive behaviors associated with traditional gender roles leave little room for men and women to take on the behaviors of the opposite gender. As such, these expectations have been known to limit men and women's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and professional success, ultimately impacting and influencing their future career choices (Hodges & Budig, 2010; Plester, 2015; Rudman & Phelan, 2010).

People are socialized into gender stereotype roles from a young age, defining what counts as feminine or masculine jobs, and narrowing their perceived access to education and interests (Cortes & Pan, 2019). Gender gaps in fields such as mathematics and science favor the masculine identity and reinforce gender inequalities that fall in line with traditional patriarchal, misogynistic gender roles (Cortes & Pan, 2019; Kisselburgh et al., 2009). For example, gender stereotypes such as "girls can't do math" create a threatening environment for women, resulting in poor performance, feelings of isolation, and internalized self-doubt (Tomasetto et al., 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2020). In a review of discourse framing around science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), Kisselburg et al. (2009) identified that work in STEM

careers is framed by discourses linked to the masculine identity, promoting behaviors such as risk-taking, innovation, and independence. Because how people talk about work matters, framing STEM in conjunction with masculine behaviors can make it difficult for women to see themselves working and succeeding in these careers.

While gender stereotypes are highly oversimplified understandings of men and women, occupational breakdowns among men and women show that women are more likely to hold jobs such as administrative support, whereas men are expected to hold more ambitious roles, such as managers and executives (Cortes & Pan, 2019). Even though women currently make up half of the workforce, many occupations remain gender segregated whether or not they intend to be (Oswald, 2008). For example, in 2015 men were 53% of the US labor force, but held less than 30% of the jobs in education and more than 98% of the jobs in construction (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). Similarly, data show that women continue to dominate the lowest paying occupations, such as childcare, personal care aids, and restaurant related jobs, while men dominate the highest paying occupations such as executives, financial advisers, and judicial workers (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). For years, social scientists have been working to understand the underrepresentation of women in fields traditionally designated as “masculine,” including physically demanding jobs, jobs that require an extensive amount of math or science, and managerial roles (Oswald, 2008). The impact of gender stereotyping and gendered institutions may affect people’s perceived abilities and the occupations in which they believe they will succeed, implicitly forcing people to choose jobs based on prescriptive gender roles versus based on their interests and aptitudes (Golombisky, 2006, 2012; Oswald, 2008; Rudman & Phelan, 2010; Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). When people do choose careers “outside” of those stereotyped for them, they may experience bias, discrimination, and harassment, as well as a lack of support and mentorship hindering long-

term career success (Britton, 2017; Edmunds et al., 2016; McDermott et al., 2022; Wright, 2016).

Overall, gender performance expectations impact people's perceptions of their institution and workplace satisfaction (Magee, 2015; Sharma, 2017). Previous research has found that over time, experiences with bias and discrimination based on gender, as well as internalized expectations related to gender in the workplace, can result in a decrease in self-efficacy, mental health issues, burnout, and turnover (Deery et al., 2011; Duan et al., 2019). For women in male-dominated or hegemonically masculine environments, research demonstrates that women spend a significant amount of time attempting to conform to masculine roles, which can result in further isolation from peers regardless of gender (Bikos, 2016; Wright, 2016). Oftentimes because women feel unable to speak out about or change bias, harassment, and discrimination they have either witnessed or experienced, they report high levels of dissatisfaction with their male-dominated workplaces (Apaydin et al., 2022; Bikos, 2016). Moreover, experiences with harassment and bullying through workplace aggression have been found to result in increased anxiety, higher rates of stress, and poorer job performance (Deery et al., 2011; Hall & Gettings, 2020; Favaro et al., 2020). Overtime, increased stress and anxiety can lead to burnout and turnover (Deery et al., 2011; Duan et al., 2019).

It is important to note that gendered institutions and occupations are not inherently problematic. As argued by Gherardi (1995), gender is an inescapable part of human life and interaction, and does not necessarily imply inequity. The problem lies when people are only allowed to "do 'one' gender" and "subjugate the other" (Gherardi, 1995, p. 128). In other words, once individuals feel uncomfortable being able to perform one gender or that undue labor has been placed upon them in an attempt to meet gendered expectations, gender inequity is produced

(Britton, 2017). We cannot avoid gender and thus we cannot seek to “degender” institutions or performance. Instead we should seek to create less oppressive gendered expectations and make gender a less oppressive institutional element. For example, oppressive gender expectations may arise in work environments that are considered to be traditionally masculine, like the military, where women must overcome extensive barriers to compete with men (Germain et al., 2012; Locke, 2013; Pendlebury, 2020). As a hegemonically masculine institution, research and popular press have documented that female service members feel the need to adopt masculine qualities in order to survive within the military culture (Barrett, 1996; Hinojosa, 2010; Kronsell, 2005; Maples, 2017; Van Gilder, 2019). Within these environments, women have also reported feeling isolated and disparaged for being female, feeling as though they spent their entire career trying to act like a man, while still feeling unsupported by colleagues (Van Gilder, 2019). This is when gendered institutions and gender performance are a problem.

### ***Summary***

The performance of gender and gendered institutions plays a crucial role in the cultural norms and communicative behaviors expected in workplaces today. Institutions with an emphasis on hegemonic masculinity (i.e., those that privilege extreme masculinity over femininity) can result in toxic workplace environments for all genders. Through implicit and explicit requirements to adhere to traditional gender roles, hegemonically masculine institutions create almost insurmountable barriers for women to feel valued for their abilities and succeed. Moreover, in these hegemonically masculine institutions, traditional gender role stereotypes do not allow for either gender to take on characteristics or traits of the other, leading those who do challenge these stereotypes to be ostracized, dismissed or mocked in order to realign them with expected role responsibilities (Van Gilder, 2019). Overtime, these internalized biases can impact

women when in the workforce, leading to dissatisfaction and turnover (Janssen & Backes-Gellner, 2015). More research is needed to better understand how separating from hegemonically masculine institutions may leave a lasting impression on women's meaning making. Through the use of standpoint theory, we can start to interrogate gender performance in hegemonically masculine institutions from the lives of those who may have marginalized experiences.

### **Standpoint Theory**

As previously argued, institutions tend to be built for and around men, thus reifying masculinity. Although varying degrees of masculinity may be performed in institutions, as argued by Acker (1990) the prioritization of masculinity over femininity is communicated through elements like workplace discourse (e.g., communicative turn-taking practices), cultural symbols (e.g., who is seen at the top levels of the institution) and policies (e.g., family leave policies). Through the advent of feminist theory and movements, however, alternative perspectives and experiences have sought to challenge the status quo of the male experience as the "ideal" human experience. As argued by Britton (2000), more research is needed related to understanding gendering through discourse to continue to explore the effects of gendered institutions and reproducing gender inequity on institutional members.

As we continue to interrogate how gender may play a role in experiences, as well as how gender may be built into institutions, standpoint theory, specifically feminist standpoint theory, provides an invaluable lens with which to explore marginalized experiences that may not be obvious to dominant gender groups. Structural and systemic inequities may be revealed through standpoint theory, as this theory identifies power differentials between a group in power and an oppressed group (Wylie, 2003).

## ***Feminist Standpoint Theory***

Standpoint theory posits that those in unprivileged social positions are likely to generate perspectives that are “less partial” and “less distorted” than those who are in dominant positions (Harding, 2004). For example, Allen (2017) argued those in the nondominant group can provide more complete knowledge about reality because they understand the world from both perspectives (e.g., outsider-within). Standpoint theories have explored how societal positions related to identity characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, may affect people’s standpoints within society (Wylie, 2003). Specifically relevant to this dissertation is feminist standpoint theory, which explores how the patriarchy naturalizes male and female divisions, making it seem natural that women are subordinate to men (Collins, 1986; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Wood, 2005). The stratification of power couched in gender has made it so women’s lives are systematically and structurally different from men’s lives due to the social location of women. Social locations refer to people’s positions within social hierarchies based on characteristics and attributes (e.g., race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, language, social class, age, etc.) deemed important by societal norms. For example, within the patriarchy, women are placed in a social location under men (Wood, 2005).

A person’s social location(s) shapes the social, symbolic, material conditions and insights they may experience. It is important to note that social location alone is not a standpoint. Standpoints are achieved through critical reflections on power relations. As argued by Wood (2005), “a feminist standpoint grows out of (that is, it is *shaped by*, rather than essentially given) the social location of women’s lives” (p. 61).

Feminist standpoint theory offers a framework for critiquing the power relations between women and men and the inequality these power relations may produce. Feminist standpoint

theory contains four main tenets. First, that society is structured by power relations which create unequal social locations for women and men. The common conditions experienced by women and men respectively shape the experiences that are accessible to people of different social locations (Harding, 2004). Ultimately, this shapes what people know and how they make sense of life. Second, social locations generate knowledge. Those within subordinate social locations are more likely to generate “more accurate” knowledge (Allen, 2017). As Wood (2005) argues, this is because members of privileged groups have a vested interest in not seeing oppression and members of marginalized groups are more likely to understand both their location and the social location of those more powerful than them. Third, the position of outsider-within is a privileged epistemological position. Feminist standpoint theory scholars argue that being outside of the dominant group and intimately connected within that group allows for observation and entails double consciousness (i.e., a knowledge and awareness of both the dominant worldview and their own perspective) (Swigonski, 1994; Wood, 2005; Wylie, 2003). Fourth, standpoints do not just refer to a location or experience, but require a critical understanding of and reflection on the effect of social location for sharpening experiences. Importantly, people can have multiple standpoints shaped by memberships in groups defined by identities such as race, sexual orientation, economic class, and education.

### ***Feminist Standpoint Theory in Communication Research***

Feminist standpoint theory has been a significant theory for exposing social, political, and economic inequities in institutions that tend to be dominated by men (Pompper, 2007; Rolin, 2009). Within the communication discipline, feminist standpoint theory has been important for evaluating how the process of communication plays a role in institutional socialization. For example, Allen (1998) used feminist standpoint theory to analyze her experiences in the U.S. as a



Black woman, two historically oppressed groups, within academia. Through the outside-within positionality, she provides implications for understanding the effects of socialization on career success and provides implications for better supporting Black women to succeed in academia, such as not solely tasking Black women with diversity initiatives and acknowledging the effects of subconscious stereotyping during communication interactions. Feminist standpoint theory has also been used to interrogate women's experiences in traditionally male-dominated fields and institutions such as within STEM (Halpern, 2019; McDermott, 2019). Halpern (2019) argued that standpoint theory offered a new way of thinking about the nature of science to allow for integrating additional knowledge systems such as Indigenous knowledge. McDermott (2019) used the framework of feminist standpoint theory to uncover women's experiences in remote field stations. Findings demonstrated that women in field stations were forced to take on the role of nurturer and caretaker, pushing them into traditional gender role expectations. Overtime, these gender role expectations led to feelings of burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Within "pink-collar" settings (i.e., jobs that have typically been held by women such as secretaries or administrative assistants), Buzzanell et al. (2017) explored the standpoints of maternity leave. Findings demonstrated that even within workplaces that may be considered female dominated, mothers struggled to balance motherhood and wanted to embody what society has deemed the "ideal worker" narrative, e.g., that people should prioritize their jobs over everything else (Brumley, 2014). This is a gendered narrative that assumes men can devote their entire lives to the workplace while women stay home and maintain the household.

Related to the United States Military (USM) limited scholarship has used feminist standpoint theory to explore what knowledge may be uncovered from women's experiences within a hegemonically masculine and totalistic institution (Amer & Jian, 2008; Cockburn, 2010;

Henry, 2017; Kearns, 2019; Kronsell, 2005; Nurjannah, 2019). Scholars like Cockburn (2010) and Nurjannah (2019) have explored feminist standpoint from the position of women within anti-war organizations or women's experiences as casualties of war. Kronsell (2005) argued that it is valuable to "chart the experience of women in institutions of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 292) after listening to women military officers share their experiences navigating the Swedish military. Amer and Jian (2018) used feminist standpoint theory to explore the effect of institutional socialization on female member expectations in the military. They identified that higher ranking women can play a key role in the mentorship of junior female recruits. Howe and Meeks (2019) used feminist standpoint theory to uncover and compare the experiences of men and women in two totalistic institutions, the USM and the Independent Fundamental Baptist Church. Their findings demonstrated that "women must adapt to the heavily tinted masculine environment" which "perpetuate[s] inequality and oppression" (p. 61). Feminist standpoint theory was identified as a viable framework for exploring the role of communication in gender performance in gendered institutions for this dissertation, due to its use in previous research related to women's experiences in a variety of workplace settings and the military more specifically,

### ***Summary***

Communication is a process for culture creation which can shape relationships of power such as those based on gender, race, and other dimensions that may affect a person's social location and experiences. Standpoint theory, specifically feminist standpoint theory, provides an important framework for uncovering the inequities in experiences based on social location. Especially relevant to this dissertation, feminist standpoint theory is valuable for evaluating the role of gender on experiences. Previous communication research has used feminist standpoint

theory to begin uncovering women's experiences and knowledge within institutions such as academia and STEM. Moreover, scholars have used feminist standpoint theory to explore women's experiences in military settings. Therefore, to develop a better understanding of women's experiences in the USM, this dissertation used feminist standpoint theory to begin with the lives of the marginalized and uncover their stories. Because of the many unique elements that comprise the USM, such as its hegemonically masculine and totalistic culture, more research is needed to give voice to women who may be traditionally silenced in this male-dominated institution.

### **The United States Military (USM)**

Like any well-established institution, the USM has its own language, norms, behaviors, and culture. These values, beliefs, and norms can impact how events are interpreted and communicated (Park, 2011; May & McDermott, 2019). The subsequent sections seek to elucidate some of the key factors that comprise the USM.

#### ***USM a Total Institution***

Total institutions represent a unique subset of workplaces and/or organized groups. Before being able to characterize a "total institution" or "totalistic organization," terms used interchangeably in the current literature, it is important to delineate the differences between an *organization* and an *institution*. An *organization* is defined as an assemblage of people who unite to understand a common goal, led by a person or group of people with a specific life cycle (Khalil, 1995). Alternatively, an *institution* is an enduring establishment dedicated to promoting a specific cause that can be educational, professional, or social. Institutions are organizations first, that eventually grow and adapt to the status of institution (Khalil, 1995). From these definitions, I argue that the USM has reached the level of institution.

In 1968, Goffman conceptualized the idea of the “total organization or institution” (TI) as a term to define distinct institutions that are both part of and separate from modern societies. Goffman (1968) writes, a TI “may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together” (p. 11). Goffman goes on to further explicate the dimensions of TIs:

First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried out in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same things together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled with one activity leading at a pre-arranged time into the next, the whole sequence of events being imposed from above by a system of explicit, formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution. (p. 17)

Although Goffman builds this characterization from asylums, scholars have since applied the concept of TIs to other institutions within society such as religious institutions like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), police (Paoline, 2001), firefighters (Regehr et al., 2005), and the military (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Howe & Meeks, 2019). Most recently, Hinderaker (2015) has taken up the charge to redefine and extend TIs. Hinderaker (2015) extends the definition of TI to argue that TIs:

extend into an employee's everyday life and other organizational memberships, and tend to involve primary relationships that bind the member's family and friendships to that organization. Moreover, totalistic organizations often require complete member

loyalty, often publicly declared upon induction into the organization (e.g., oaths sworn by police officers or confirmation of church members). (p. 93)

In addition to extending into members' everyday lives and expecting complete member fealty, an important consideration related to TIs is the role of emotional labor experienced by members. Because TIs control the time and space of its members 24/7, Tracy (2000) argues that individuals' emotions are also regulated in a totalizing manner. Through her inquiry of experiences as a staff member on a cruise ship for eight months, Tracy (2000) identified that emotions and emotional labor were controlled in TIs by leadership, peers, and institutional structures severely constraining people's ability to perform emotion. Due to the lack of space to delineate on and off work, emotional regulation became a constant performance often leading to burnout as people always felt like they were always "on" while they were a member of the TI. Ultimately, the effects of a TI from regulating external behavior to internal emotions can have lasting effects on members.

It is important to delineate the difference between TIs and greedy institutions. While Davies (1989) argues there is overlap between the two concepts, the difference lies in the idea of an "enclosed life". Greedy institutions, as defined by Coser (1975), are institutions that require "total commitment". TIs, alternatively require a "totality of residence" (Davies, 1989, p. 84). In other words, TIs have a physical separation from the outside world, while those who are part of a greedy institution choose to "engage themselves totally even though they may be subject to rigid social controls" but may not have a separate physical location to separate from modern society (Coser, 1975, p. 6). From this definition, Davies (1989) argues that an example of a greedy institution is Jesuits and an example of a TI is a prison. An example of an institution that sits in the overlap is monasteries. I argue, meshing the work of Segal (1986), May & McDermott

(2019), and Howe and Hinderaker (2018), the military also lies at the intersection of both TIs and greedy institutions. Thus, from this synthesis of literature, I define TIs as value-based memberships that include a totality of residence and extend to include primary relationships requiring complete loyalty and commitment to the institution. Ultimately, through this definition, the USM is considered both a *total* and *greedy* institution. Currently, a dearth of research remains on how the attributes of a TI may affect member communication and perceptions about the institution following their exit. Furthermore, because of the complexities related to TIs (e.g., individual agency), communication barriers (e.g., limited access to informal social networks, limited time outside of the institution, complete fealty to the institution) may exist that impact an individual's experience when they are a part of and separate from a TI.

### ***Entire Family Serves***

As argued above, TIs tend to involve primary relationships that bind the member's family to the institution (Hinderaker, 2015). As both a totalistic and greedy institution, the effects of the military span into service members' personal lives, effecting family members in a variety of ways from having to navigate deployments as single parents to frequent relocations based on the needs of the military (Lester et al., 2010; May & McDermott, 2019; McDermott & May, 2022; Palmer, 2008; Segal, 1986). Although this dissertation focused on the lived experiences of the service member, research has found that service member morale is heavily influenced by family, as the entire family serves (Greene et al., 2010; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Rosen et al., 1989; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017). Thus, it is important to briefly contextualize the role of family in the military experience.

Previous research has demonstrated that the military effects all members of a service member's family, ranging from civilian spouses' ability to engage in the workforce to children's

experiences living on military installations (Belding & Hernández, 2019; Kleykamp, 2018; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019). Deployments, trainings, and permanent changes of station effect how often a service member may be home and the overall functioning of the family as service member's presence may fluctuate (Knobloch & Wilson, 2014; Sheppard et al., 2010). Geographically dispersed social support systems, partner post-traumatic stress, and chaotic schedule changes can all adversely affect military spouses (Pflieger et al., 2018). Military installations, which include grocery stores, schools, judicial systems, and housing, provide a self-sustaining community which can meet all of a military family's needs and provide complete and total immersion into the military culture (May & McDermott, 2019). When leaving the military, as Keeling et al. (2020) argued, military spouses transition too, as the effects of the military can leave a long-lasting impression on family members, in different but similarly impactful ways. Ultimately, the Department of Defense (DoD) acknowledges the important role family plays on service member morale as family members can promote increased retention rates, support service member mission readiness, and provide important emotional and social support outlets outside of the military (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).

### ***Structure***

In addition to considering the role of family, in order to fully understand the USM as a TI, it is important to explicate its structure. Structure is an essential component of military functioning, as “maintaining the integrity of the chain of command is critical to the effective functioning and mission success of the military unit” (Halvorson et al., 2010, p. 9). Starting at the top, the USM is civilian controlled, as the ultimate authority of the USM is the President of the United States, while the power to declare war lies within Congress in a purposeful separation of power (Halvorson et al., 2010). Under the Commander-in-Chief and Congress, the Secretary

of Defense, a cabinet-level position, acts as the principal defense policy advisor to the President and “is responsible for the formulation of general defense policy and policy related to all matters of direct and primary concern to the Department of Defense (DOD)” (Halvorson et al., 2010, p. 2).

To break down the organizational structure even further, the military is divided into ranks and military occupational specialties (MOS). Military ranks are divided into three categories, enlisted (E1-E9), officer (O1-O10), and warrant officer (W1-W5). Military ranks are associated with leadership, and higher ranks equate to more personnel, equipment, resources, and mission/operation responsibility. Enlisted service members comprise a majority (82.3%) of the military workforce (DoD, 2022a): “they are the men and women patrolling the streets, fixing equipment, cooking meals, processing the paperwork, and performing the thousands of tasks that keep the military functioning” (Halvorson et al., 2010, p. 7). Enlisted service members who are promoted beyond E4 become noncommissioned officers (NCOs). NCOs play a vital role in the military in positions of leadership in their units. They are in charge of ensuring the physical, mental, and emotional “fitness” of service members to ensure they are mission ready. Above enlisted service members are officers. Officers are the ultimate authority of any military unit. They are responsible for planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling their troops. Finally, warrant officers are commissioned officers that are considered technical experts in their area. They do not hold command authority or oversee personnel.

The chain of command remains clear from the largest to the smallest military teams, and service members are socialized to operate within the chain of command from the day they don their uniform. Service members have specific individuals they must report issues or concerns to and “jumping” the chain of command is heavily frowned upon. Going above an immediate



supervisor's head is acceptable only in situations in which the lower-ranking member does not believe their concerns are being adequately addressed, or in cases where the problem is with the immediate supervisor.

Once a command is issued from the top of the chain of command, a decision is considered final, although service members' voices may be considered during the decision-making process. Additionally, once issued, an order must be executed without question as "service members who hesitate in executing an order or who publicly question an order run the risk of at least being formally or informally disciplined and at worst risking the lives of their fellow service members" (Armed Forces, 1956; Halvorson et al., 2010, p. 8). The rigidity surrounding the chain of command illuminates clear lines of authority and eliminates any confusion in the decision-making process, especially during high-stress, time-sensitive situations.

### ***Branches***

While the USM is seen as the overarching umbrella institution, within the USM there are six distinct branches with specific sub-missions that affect the day-to-day experiences of service members. Although there are some overarching cultural norms across all branches, some cultural norms are unique to each branch (Fischer, 2006). For all military members, those who join the military agree to put military service above all else, including their family and their life (Armed Forces, 1956; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; May & McDermott, 2019). The core values of the military include honor, integrity, and no one left behind (Armed Services, 1956). Living and working within the constraints of the unit chain of command and under the regulations of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) dictate how all service members should function in and outside of the institution (Armed Forces, 1956).

Within this broader institutional structure, the USM is made up of six distinct branches – the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Space Force. In each branch there are both active duty (i.e., full-time service members) and reserve members (i.e., service members who serve in a part-time capacity). Due to the different job requirements of each branch, unique subcultures exist. The values of each branch are ingrained into service members throughout their tenure. These values are also expected to define and guide how service members live their lives, approach their duties, and succeed in their missions. The Army values are: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. The Navy and Marine Corps values are: Honor, Courage, and Commitment. The Air Force values are: Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do. The Coast Guard values are: Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. Finally, the Space Force: Character, Connection, Commitment, and Courage (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2021).

In his seminal work *The Masks of War* (1986), Carl H. Builder defined the cultural styles and personalities for three of the six branches. He posited although institutions are composed of many ever-changing individuals, there are distinct and enduring personalities to the institution performed by individuals. For example, Builder (1986) argued the Navy has enduring characteristics related to preserving and wielding sea power from the legacy of the British Navy. The personality of the Air Force, alternatively emphasizes technological advancement, seeing itself as a concept of warfare made possible and sustainable by modern technology. The Army is the nation's keeper of the essential skills of war that must be implemented when they are called upon to fight. Its history of service to the needs of its people cement the Army as a loyal servant to the nation. Importantly, Builder (1986) argues the utility of these personality characterizations related to the services is not their accuracy or completeness, but the ability of personality

characterizations to capture of some aspects of the service behavior “we can hold in our minds and easily manipulate to project future behavior” (p. 9). From these branch generalizations, we can start to see some distinctions between branch subcultures.

**Two Branches: Air Force and Army.** As mentioned above, each branch of the military has its own unique culture based on their specific mission and role within the USM system. Among those within the military community, clashes among branch cultures can serve as important points for connection used in jest to differentiate and uphold the importance of each branch. When researching the military, however, scholars tend to lump all service branches together or focus on one specific branch at a time, as most discussions of military culture seek to compare military culture to civilian cultures (Mastroianni, 2006). Comparing the experiences of service members across branches may uncover important similarities and differences in experiences. Moreover, the reputational images each branch has cultivated may affect how people make sense of their time in service and their sense of identity as a soldier, airman, seaman, marine, coast guardsman, or guardian. Specifically, for this dissertation I chose to focus on the Air Force and the Army. After speaking with active duty service members and consulting the literature (Meyer, 2015; Soeters, 2018), I decided to focus on the Air Force and the Army because of their histories, their missions and institutional subcultures, and the number of women in each branch. These reasons are expounded below.

The first reason I chose to focus on the Air Force and the Army was that the Air Force was originally established as a division of the Army. While the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have “co-evolved with the country for centuries,” (Mastroianni, 2006, p. 82) the Air Force is a more recent development. Broken off from the Army in 1947, the manner in which the Air Force was created sets it apart from the other services who grew with the start of the nation (Thomas,

2004). Although the Air Force and Army may have started under the same institutional culture, they are now considered vastly different in the experiences they provide to members, as “the Air Force still remembers its struggle with the Army for independence, and it is sensitive to challenges to that independence” (Smith, 1998, p. 14). Today, the Air Force often finds itself in conflict with the Army over operational doctrine and command and control issues (Thomas, 2004).

Second, the missions of each branch tend to guide some of the more specific subcultural norms. The Air Force and the Army both support offensive and defensive air and ground operations. This is different from the Army versus the Navy, which would compare land versus sea operations. As explained by Mastroianni (2006), a professor at the US Air Force Academy and Lieutenant Colonel in the US Army Reserve, the differences between the Air Force and the Army lie within their mission foci. Born out of innovation, the Air Force’s mission has been centered around technological advancement. Mastroianni (2006) argues that the focus on technology in the Air Force is seen as setting the Air Force “above the less-technological traditional services,” (p. 83) which may be perceived as confidence in intellectual superiority. In its emphasis on technological advancement, the Air Forces has sought to create a reputation as a kinder, gentler kind of military, and as the progressive and modern service branch. Alternatively, the Army presents a rough and tumble aesthetic, divided into traditional combat arms such as the infantry, artillery, and cavalry. The Army is often defined by its deep roots in citizenry and long and intimate history of service and devotion to the country. The Army holds a special position of significance and trust as “its ranks come from the people, the country’s roots, and its closest to the people” (Builder, 1989, p. 20). Oftentimes when the military is mentioned, people may automatically think of the Army as it seeks to be prepared to meet the varied demands the

American people ask of it. Ultimately the differences in sub-missions and cultures may provide important points for comparison and distinction among former service members' experiences.

Third, related to gender breakdowns, the Air Force and the Navy have the two highest number of women serving (Air Force 69,927 [21 out of every 100] and Navy 69,688 [20 out of every 100]). The Army and the Marine Corps have the lowest number of women serving (Army 74,104 [15 out of every 100] and Marine Corps 16,275 [9 out of every 100]). Due to the size of the Army, however, more women serve overall even though their ratio of women to men is lower. The Air Force has the highest women to men ratio (DoD, 2022a). Considering the impact of gender ratios on meaning making experiences could provide important insights into women's experiences within the Air Force and Army.

### ***Gender in Military Contexts***

Gender performance remains a highly contentious issue within the USM structure and culture, as gender integration and diversification in the USM has been a slow and arduous process. Although women have been serving in the USM since its inception, they were only officially *allowed* to serve in the military starting in 1948 (Women's Service Integration Act, 1948). Similarly, women were only first *allowed* to enter into military service academies in the 1970s and were only *allowed* to fly combat missions or serve on Navy combat ships starting in the 1990s. Further, from 1948 to 2016, over 20% of military positions associated with combat (e.g., infantry) remained closed to women. It was only in January of 2016 that all military occupations and specialties were opened to women (Robinson & O'Hanlon, 2020). While their ranks have grown exponentially since 1948, women currently only make up 17.3% of active duty members, and only 14% of senior enlisted personnel (e.g., leadership), meaning that men make up a majority of the active duty service members and those in positions of leadership (DoD,

2022a). In this slow integration of women into positions across the USM, a hegemonically masculine culture has been able to thrive (Van Gilder, 2019).

As defined above, hegemonic masculinity is the set of values, established by men in power, that function to include and exclude in order to organize society in gender unequal ways. Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by the following features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Jewkes et al., 2015). Based on this definition of hegemonic masculinity, the military is a prime institution to foster and perpetuate hegemonically masculine ideals (Kronsell, 2006). The expected performance of gendered behaviors and communication play a role in how members are socialized to act when in military service, perpetuating a hidden assumption that females are deficient in some way (Dunivin, 1994). For example, the military touts the hegemonic-warrior identity as the ideal framework for every service member (Archer, 2013; Dunivin, 1994). The ideal hegemonic masculine service member should exemplify the qualities of heroism, strength, and endurance, leaving no room for weakness or vulnerability (Archer, 2013; Hunter, 2007; Keats, 2010). From history textbooks to YouTube ads, military service has strong historical ties to (hyper)masculinity, turning "boys into men" (Brown, 2012, p. 3). Service members who fall outside the hegemonic masculine warrior identity are often scrutinized for any behavior that might be "interpreted as the slightest bit feminine" as it is "considered weak and unfit for military service" (Dunivin, 1994; Fassinger, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015, p. 47; Van Gilder, 2019; Weitz, 2015).

Previous research has found that women often struggle to navigate this hegemonically masculine culture, perceiving exclusion from fellow service members (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015;

Edwards, 2021; McCormick et al., 2019; Van Gilder, 2019). Female service members have reported employing a variety of specific coping mechanisms to survive in a hegemonically masculine environment. For example, women report having to continuously prove they belong through physical and mental feats, as well as downplaying their gender identity and sex/gender specific needs to make themselves invisible (Eichler, 2022). Overall, in an institution not built to meet their needs, women have found a way to thrive amidst strict gender performance requirements.

### ***Sexual Assault***

Tragically, previous research demonstrates that the hegemonic masculine identity perpetuates and reinforces rape myths and promotes sexual violence (Hearn, 2012; Hinojosa, 2010; Scott-Samuel et al., 2009). Similarly, within the USM sexual harassment and assault remain a rampant problem, affecting an unknown number of service members (Edwards, 2021; Office of People Analytics OPA, 2020). Researchers have noted that “the hypermasculine culture of the military is the core issue perpetuating sexual assault” (Edwards, 2021; O’Malley, 2015, p. 20).

Although studies estimated 8.4% of women and 1.5% of men in the USM experienced sexual assault or harassment within the past 12 months, this only accounts for people who are willing to report their experiences (DoD, 2022b). Researchers estimate these numbers may be much higher (OPA, 2020; Stander & Thomsen, 2016). For example, a 2022 survey of 828 female veterans conducted by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) found that 59% of women surveyed experienced sexual assault while in service, including behaviors such as unwanted touching, someone exposing themselves, or unwanted sexual contact (Pritchard et al., 2022). However, only 37% of those who experienced sexual violence reported these incidents to

authorities as survivors fear retaliation such as negative career impact, breaches of confidentiality, stigma from peers and leadership, and disrupting unit bonds (Mengeling et al., 2014; Orchowski et al., 2022; Sadler et al., 2018). The story of Private First Class (Pfc.) Vanessa Guillén underscores the pervasive issue of sexual violence and the risks service members face when attempting to report incidents of sexual violence. Guillén was murdered by her harasser, a fellow service member, in May of 2020 when she tried to report him to her chain-of-command (McDermott & May, in review). Fort Hood, an Army base in Texas, was slow to respond to the reports of the missing soldier until a social media movement forced them to respond.

#IamVanessaGuillén provided a space for current and former service members to share their stories of sexual violence and lack of perceived action from the military, bringing the issue of sexual violence in the military to the forefront of public consciousness. Although her story resulted in a change of leadership at Fort Hood (Fort Hood Independent Review, 2020) and the passing of the I am Vanessa Guillén Act to introduce third party reporting for sexual harassment and assault cases in the military (I am Vanessa Guillén, 2021), Guillén’s story and experience with sexual violence while in service is not unique and exemplifies the worst outcome for experiencing sexual violence in the military (McDermott & May, in review). Of the 828 women surveyed in 2022 by the IAVA, 66% believe that the DoD is not effectively addressing the problem of military sexual violence (Pritchard et al., 2022). As described by Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, the collective issue of sexual violence in the military as a “persistent and corrosive” problem (DoD, 2022b, p. 92).

### ***Women Leaving Service***

Unfortunately, sexual assault and violence are one of many factors that may affect people’s decision to leave military service. Overall, women are 28% more likely than their male



counterparts to leave military service and few women stay in the military long-term and become eligible for leadership positions and meet the requirements of retirement (GAO, 2020). While a variety of factors influence a service member's decision to separate, gender-specific challenges, such as experiences with sexual violence, stressors related to parenthood, and compounded effects of racial identity, may contribute to higher rates of attrition for women.

The Government Accountability Office (2020) found that sexism and sexual assault were among the top reasons more women leave the military than their male counterparts. For example, RAND published a report in 2014 stating that in the 28-month period after they were sexually harassed, 8,000 service members left the military. The number of service members who separated from active duty because of experiences with sexual violence was over the typical attrition rate of service members separating from active duty. An additional 2,000 service members left after a physical assault (RAND, 2014). Thus, experiencing sexual harassment or assault while in service is a salient risk factor for people deciding to separate from the military earlier than planned. More recently, the 2020 recruitment and retention report on female active-duty personnel (GAO, 2020) and the Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) (2021) identified experiences with sexual harassment and assault as one of the top factors influencing recruitment and retention of female service members.

However, sexual violence is not the only reason women may leave military service. Stressors related to family life were noted as key factor in women's decision to leave military service (GAO, 2020). For example, women in the military are less likely than their male counterparts to be married (46% vs. 58%) and women who do marry are much more likely than men to wed someone who is also active duty military, i.e., joint military (48% vs. 7%) (MilitaryOneSource, 2020). This can make it extremely difficult to balance family life and a

career. Rigidity surrounding job requirements and a lack of childcare options have been cited as salient issues for female service members (GAO, 2020). Oftentimes, the decision to parent represents a critical decision point for active duty service women as job requirements, such as deployments and specific training rotations, tend to occur at the time when women may be grappling with the decision to parent. Further, motherhood and military service have often been framed as antithetical to each other. Ultimately, as reported by the DACES (2021), the impact of military life on family plans for children remains an important unaddressed issue for recruiting and retaining women in service.

Finally, discrimination may also affect women service members' decision to stay in the military. Recently, concerns of discrimination perpetuated through the ideologies of White supremacy and extremism among service members has entered public consciousness as an issue within the military. A 2019 *Military Times* survey found that 36% of active duty troops had witnessed evidence of White supremacy in their ranks. More recently, in 2021 a survey of 5,174 active duty service members and veterans found that 1 in 3 personally witnessed extremist and/or White supremacist ideology among the ranks of active duty service members and veterans (Pritchard et al., 2021; Shane, 2021). White supremacy and extremism are profoundly sexist and misogynic ideologies that push hyperpolarized performances of traditional gender roles. These ideologies are extremely toxic and pose potentially life threatening issues for women service members in the military, as those who perpetuate these ideologies may use retaliation tactics ranging from bullying and harassment to full-fledged physical violence to realign women to traditional gender role (McDermott et al., 2022).

While leaving military service is a deeply personal decision, there are contributing environmental factors that may push women to leave military service earlier than expected.

Experiences with sexism, sexual violence, and discrimination can go beyond an individual level when women decide to speak out about these issues and effect the reputation of the USM, “mak[ing] folks think twice about joining the military” (Lam, 2021 para. 20). Overall, even though a variety of factors may affect women’s decision to stay or leave the military, these negative experiences can have ripple effects for both the military and civilian communities.

### ***Summary***

As a totalistic institution, the USM extends to effect primary relationships such as a service members family, and family satisfaction can have long-term effects on rates of morale and retention. While the structure and hierarchy of the military play an important role in maintaining efficiency in order to complete the needs of a mission, it can also create a challenging and even hostile workplace climate. The culture and values of the USM, as well as its history steeped in hegemonic masculinity, make it a fertile ground for sexual violence against all genders to occur. Experiences with sexual violence, challenges related to family planning, and the compounded effects of discrimination may all play a role in women’s decision to leave active duty service. Unfortunately, some of the negative experiences women have while in service, such as sexual assault, do not end once a service member leaves service. Six percent of female and 10% of male veterans report feeling unsafe when going to a Veteran Affairs (VA) facility. Seven percent of veterans report witnessing or personally hearing about someone else experiencing sexual misconduct while seeking care at the VA, and 4.3% of veterans have reported experiencing sexual harassment and assault while seeking care at the VA (Pritchard et al., 2022). Thus, the effects of gender performance and a hegemonically masculine culture may still affect service members post service not only within military-related systems designed to support veterans but also in the legacy of trauma. However, limited research has explored how the

military culture may play a role in people's meaning making of their own military experiences once they have left active duty service and become a "veteran."

## **Veterans**

The term "veteran" is potentially contentious for people who have served in the military. The official regulation from Title 38 U.S.C. § 3.1 states, "The term "veteran" means a person who served in the active military, naval, air or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable" (Veterans' Benefits, 2023, Definitions). In Title 38 a "veteran" is distinguished from a "veteran of any war." "A veteran of any war" is defined as "any veteran who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service during a period of war" (Veterans' Benefits, 2023, Definitions). Within these definitions, a reservist or a member of the National Guard called to federal active duty also qualifies as a veteran.

Beginning with the federal regulation definition of a veteran is important, as regulations and policy tend to dictate all aspects of a military members' lives. As such, service members tend to refer, defer, and abide by the rules set forth in federal regulations. However, even though the regulation defines a veteran as anyone who has served in the active military and left with any conditions other than dishonorable discharge, previous research has demonstrated that embracing the veteran identity is complex (Doe, 2020). Some elements that may play a role in people's decision to embrace the veteran identity include stereotyping by civilians after service, feeling unworthy to call themselves a veteran, and wanting to distance themselves from trauma experienced while in service. For example, Howe (2020) argued that veterans tend to be stereotyped politically by their college peers even though veteran political identities mirror the breakdown in the civilian world. Doe (2020) argued that "veterans hold disparate perspectives about their time and experiences in military service which shapes their subsequent veteran

identity” (p. 54). Thus, people may downplay their experiences or compare their time in service with others and feel undeserving of the veteran title. Finally, some former service members may not identify as a veteran in order to distance themselves from trauma experienced and endured while in service (Disabled American Veterans DAV, 2018; Leone et al., 2016). For example, Leone et al. (2016) found that among women veterans, positive regard for the veteran identity was differentially associated with participants’ military experiences (e.g., combat exposure, deployment sexual harassment) and mental health (e.g., depression). Those who experienced traumatic events such as combat exposure and sexual violence were more likely to use VA services, but less likely to feel positively about their veteran identity and be dissatisfied with VA services provided. Specifically for women, embracing the veteran identity may be especially complex.

### ***Women Veterans***

For women, embracing the veteran identity may be difficult as data shows women are less likely to identify as veterans and use the benefits and services they earned from their time in service (Estabrooks, 2022). The current structure of the military makes women’s needs both invisible and hypervisible. For example, women may try to downplay their gender while in service to fit in (e.g., being one of the boys); however, women can also become hypervisible due to the hegemonically masculine culture of the military (e.g., sexualization and subjugation of women) (Eichler, 2022). Much like their gendered experiences while in service, the performance of gender associated with the military from the civilian community may also impact service members post service (Eichler, 2022). When transitioning to civilian life, women have often reported having their service dismissed or ignored because they do not fit the traditional masculine mold of a “veteran” (Chiara et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2018). Because military women

are expected to fit the male norm and masculine ideal of the veteran identity, often reinforced in popular culture through media, they are rarely recognized as veterans after service (Eichler, 2022). As such, women most often have to self-identify as “having served in uniform,” a burden not often placed on their male counterparts. Moreover, because of the communication surrounding the veteran identity, they may feel the identity of veteran does not fit them if they believe their service was not risky or dangerous enough (DAV, 2018). For some, when discussing their military service women are “written off as not ‘real’ veterans” (Goldstein, 2018, para. 3). As Goldstein (2018), a Navy veteran, explained about her experiences as a woman veteran, people often make three main assumptions about military service: “the only ‘real’ military service is in combat; that a ‘front line’ exists; and that women aren’t on it” (para. 2). From these assumptions, women must often face simultaneous disbelief in the legitimacy of their service and devaluation of their service overall. Ultimately, women veteran’s tend to exist in the nexus of hypervisibility (e.g., not fitting the veteran mold) and invisibility (e.g., dismissing their time in service as easy) (Baker, 2019; Eichler, 2022; Goldstein, 2018; Harris et al., 2018).

The complexity surrounding women’s ability to embrace the veteran identity can also impact their use of services and benefits such as VA healthcare and disability rating applications. For example, reports show of the current 2 million women veterans, approximately only 800,000 (40%) are enrolled with the VA healthcare system and upwards of 50% have not accessed their disability benefits. Research related to VA usage has identified key barriers to utilization such as logistical issues, negative treatment bias, and concerns about stigma, privacy, and cost (MacDonald et al., 2020; Mattocks et al., 2020; Newins et al., 2019). Specifically, a lack of adequate healthcare services for women such as women-centered mental healthcare and the treatment of female-specific physical issues pose considerable barriers for women veterans.

While female veterans experience similar combat trauma to their male counterparts, they also experience increased potential for sexual trauma during service. Thus, female veterans have reported high levels of post-traumatic stress (PTS) post service, although access to resources like mental health services remain limited (Eichler, 2022; Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018; Turchik & Wilson, 2010). A meta-review of literature found that mental health problems are a prevalent issue among female veterans, and social support, as well as professional medical care, may be limited for helping these veterans (Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018). For example, gender-based discrimination for receiving VA healthcare has been identified to effect the diagnosis and treatment of medical and mental illnesses (MacDonald et al., 2020; Mattocks et al., 2020). Experiences with a lack of adequate healthcare treatment and gender-based discrimination have resulted in women veterans reporting being dissatisfied with current VA healthcare access and services (Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018; Kehle-Forbes et al., 2017).

The complexities surrounding the veteran identity, as well as challenges to VA healthcare can compound additional barriers experienced by women during the transition process out of the military. For example, the hypervisibility and invisibility of women in and out of military service may pose considerable barriers to civilian integration success as current institutional culture, norms, and structures are not built to adequately support them. In a survey of 828 women veterans, 62% described their overall transition from active duty to veteran status as “difficult” (Pritchard et al., 2022). The top challenges for women service members when leaving the military were loss of identity and purpose, difficulty reintegrating into civilian communities, health concerns (mental and/or physical) and finding/keeping employment. Only 23% of women veterans surveyed reported receiving support and training for their transition to the civilian workforce before leaving the military (Pritchard et al., 2022). Moreover 31% considered

themselves to be underemployed, characterized as not having enough paid work or not doing enough work that made full use of their skills and abilities (Pritchard et al., 2022). Fifty-four percent reported difficulty navigating resources in their local community (Pritchard et al., 2022).

Although programs such as the transition assistance program (TAP) (Congressional Research Service, 2017) have sought to alleviate some of the challenges faced when leaving service (i.e., financial literacy, career readiness), veterans have reported that these resources may not be useful and are only considered a “box to check” by leadership (Keeling et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2020). When not framed as valuable by leadership to attend and engage in, these important resources may not be prioritized as people transition out of active duty service. Furthermore, these programs and resources may also be built around a masculine identity and career paths. For example, the resources associated with the TAP may assume service members transitioning out have family support and access to stable childcare when searching for a new career (Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018). This may not be the situation for many female veterans, many of whom are the primary caretaker for their dependents. For example, Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) identified finding childcare and balancing home life demands as two of the most significant factors for women veterans’ life trajectories and retention in higher education. Research has also found that specific factors, such as being disabled, single, and having dependent children, are salient risk factors for homelessness among women veterans (Kenny & Yoder, 2019; Tsai et al., 2014). One in three homeless female veterans have dependent children (Tsai et al., 2014) and female veterans face a four times higher risk of homelessness than their non-veteran female counterparts (Kenny & Yoder, 2019).

Overall, in a survey of 5,174 male and female active duty service members and veterans, 85% said it was extremely or very important to address issues facing women veterans (Pritchard



et al., 2022). While research has documented that sexual assault and harassment can lead to a sense of betrayal among active duty service members, premature departure, and negative consequences to long-term well-being (Dichter & True, 2015; Monteith et al., 2021), little is known about how women veterans make sense of their overarching relationship with the military as an institution and how they choose to communicate about the military after leaving service. Previous research has demonstrated that veterans report feeling isolated when returning to civilian life (McDermott et al., 2020). Feelings of isolation are often compounded by a lack of structure surrounding expected norms and behaviors in civilian life (Doe, 2020; May & McDermott, 2020). This may be intensified for women who do not feel comfortable embracing the veteran identity or feel like their military service is devalued by people who only assume men are veterans (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). Ultimately, more research is needed to understand how women with military service experience discursively unpack their military experience and communicate about the military as an institution after their separation from service.

### ***Summary***

The military has traditionally been a hegemonically masculine institution in which power is held by men of similar backgrounds. When female veterans leave service, some of the challenges faced while in service such as isolation, ostracization, and sexual violence, may arise again as transition assistance structures may be tailored to best support the male identity and career path. Additionally, a lack of education among civilians about women as veterans and inadequate healthcare resources following service may impact women veterans willingness to embrace their veteran identity. However, women make up an important part of the military community and constitute the fastest growing group in the veteran population (Women Veterans Health Care, 2020). For example, while women made up only 4% of the veteran population in

2000, they are projected to make up 18% of the veteran population by 2040 (Thomas & Hunter, 2019; Women Veterans Health Care, 2020). Therefore, it is increasingly important to understand how women veterans characterize their own service experience and describe the military, as it may have long-term effects on the reputation of the USM. Through public relations theory and practice, we can begin to uncover how former women service members make sense of their relationship to the USM after separating from active duty service.

### **Public Relations and the USM**

Vasquez and Taylor (2001) described public relations as both a social science field and a professional practice. Grunig et al. (2002) argued public relations is the management of quality long-term relationships through symmetrical communication. Throughout its history, a multitude of scholars have come up with definitions of public relations (see Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2010). I understand public relations through the synthesis of the definitions provided by Grunig (2006) and Edwards (2012). I ultimately define *public relations* as the flow of strategic communication through continuous actions with other social entities seeking to manage mutually influential relationships. Thus, institutions must employ public relations strategies, frameworks, and practices to maintain influential relationships with publics. This definition places the unifying concept of relationship (i.e., communication between entity and other) as the focus of public relations. I ultimately define *publics* from a synthesis of Dewey (1927) and Leitch and Motion (2010). Publics refers to a collection of individuals that have common interests and concerns about an institution and/or who may be affected by the decisions and actions of an institution. Further, although there is no monolithic public, due to the internet and globalization, institutions should be aware that any message may reach any number of publics, whether intended or not.

From this centering of the relationship, we move from a strategic or management centered approach to public relations to a publics centered approach. As an institution from this perspective, the USM continuously engages in the mutually influential relationships with a variety of publics (i.e., American public, international audiences, its employees or troops, veterans) through communicative action. However, no research to date has sought to explore how an institution's cultural characteristics might play a role in their communicative behaviors and as a result the relationship that is developed and perceived by publics.

### ***Communication Research on Public Relations and the USM***

A dearth of research remains on the intersection of public relations and the USM. While some foundational pieces have sought to build a connection between public affairs, the military, and media (Hammond, 1996), gaps remain. Recently a growing body of scholarship has sought to expand scholarly and practitioner knowledge of the role of public relations in the USM through the perspectives of relations (both national and international) (Liu & Ni, 2021; Magen & Lapid, 2018; Paul, 2012) and public affairs or information officers (PAO or PIO), i.e., the military's version of public relations practitioners (Carlson & Cuillier, 2017; Mobilio et al., 2021; Owens, 2012). A majority of the current public relations work about the USM explores how the US government engages in diplomacy and strategic communication both domestically and abroad. For example, Paul (2012) provided an overview of current US government and US DoD communication, providing steps forward for engaging in more strategic communication efforts. In regards to PAOs, Carlson and Cuillier (2017) evaluated the difference between journalists and PAOs' perceptions of government controls on information dissemination. Mobilio and colleagues (2021) analyzed Marine Corps PAOs' perceptions of public affairs and job satisfaction. Most recently, McDermott and Anderson (2022) examined the intersection of

public memory and ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as an important avenue for reaffirming, yet rewriting reputational narratives.

Although these studies have sought to fill some important gaps in our scholarly and practitioner knowledge, more inquiry regarding public relations and USM is needed. Currently, no research found has considered how the unique institutional context of the USM may affect how key publics affiliated with the military make sense of the relationship cultivated between the USM and publics. Moreover, research is needed to better understand the importance of relationships between the USM and key publics.

### ***Relationships in Public Relations***

The role of public relations is to facilitate mutually influential relationships through communicative action between institutions and publics. As defined by Hung (2005), “institution-public relationships arise when institutions and their strategic publics are interdependent and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that institutions need to manage” (p. 396). As such, communication is a process for relational meaning making within public relations.

For decades, public relations scholars have sought to define the elements of relationships, like those between institutions and publics, both quantitatively and qualitatively. From a quantitative perspective, scholars like Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified and operationalized variables such as trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment. Trust is described as the sense that members within the relationship can count on each other. Openness is defined as frank communication between the institution and publics (Ledingham, 2003). Involvement is characterized as the institution and publics engagement in furthering each other’s interests. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) describe commitment as both parties’ choice to maintain the relationship. Finally, investment is defined as both parties’ willingness to build the

relationship through time, energy, and resources (Levenhus, 2010). Through these dimensions, institutions can gain or lose favor with publics.

While scholars have occasionally used these quantitative dimensions in qualitative scholarship, additional scholarship has been conducted to identify the dimensions of relationships from a qualitative perspective. Scholars like Grunig (2002), Hung (2007), and Storie (2018) have identified important qualitative relational dimensions. Grunig (2002) identified six dimensions for qualitatively assessing relationships: *control mutuality*, *trust*, *commitment*, *satisfaction*, *exchange relationship*, and *communal relationship*. *Control mutuality* is characterized as the degree to which the parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship. *Trust* is defined as the level of confidence that both parties have in each other. Within trust, Grunig (2002) argues there are three underlying elements as this is a complex concept. The first is integrity, i.e., belief that the institution is fair and just. The second is dependability, i.e., belief that the institution will do what it says it will do. The third is competence, i.e., belief that the institution has the ability to do what it says it will do. *Commitment* is the extent to which both parties feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain. *Satisfaction* is the extent to which both parties feel favorably about each other. Oftentimes satisfaction is based on positive expectations about the relationship being reinforced, such as engaging in positive steps to maintain the relationship. An *exchange relationship* is defined as when “one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (p. 1). Grunig (2002) describes that an example of an exchange relationship is the marketing relationship between institutions and customers. However, the exchange relationship is unbalanced and thus, “an exchange relationship usually is not enough for a public” (p. 1). A *communal relationship* is when “parties

are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other—even when they believe they might not get anything in return” (p. 1).

Hung (2007) took a dialectical approach to qualitatively understanding IPRs. A dialectical approach seeks to emphasize a holistic evaluation of relationships, i.e., that relational entities cannot exist in isolation, but they are affected by fluctuating interactions. Huang (2007) identified interdependence, i.e., every relationship is embedded in a network of other relationships, as an important element in relational meaning making. Ultimately, Hung (2007) argued a dialectical approach provides the understanding of why and when parties choose their cultivation behaviors versus an emphasis on the calculation of rewards and costs. Hung (2007) argued that a relationship is “an ongoing process, each stage of relationship development is affected by the state of the previous stage” (p. 454).

More recently, Storie (2018) considered qualitative dimensions of relationships from the lens of public diplomacy. Their findings demonstrated four qualitative dimensions of relationships. First, they identified trust is an important dimension of public diplomacy IPR. Trust was conceptualized in this study as honesty and sense of security. Second, openness was identified as important and defined as transparency. Third, Storie (2018) argued that third-party endorsements played a role in relational meaning making. The fourth dimension identified was time, conceptualized as long-term commitment.

**Table 1**

*Current Conceptualizations of Qualitative Dimensions of Relationships*

<b>Qualitative Dimension</b>	<b>Description of Dimension</b>
Trust (Grunig, 2002; Storie, 2018)	Grunig (2002) - as the level of confidence that both parties have in each other. Storie (2018) - conceptualized in this study as honesty and sense of security.
Openness (Storie, 2018)	Storie (2018) - defined as transparency.

Networking (Storie, 2018)	Storie (2018) – defined as third party endorsements.
Time (Storie, 2018)	Storie (2018) – length of the relationship.
Interdependence (Hung, 2007)	Hung (2007) - every relationship is embedded in a network of other relationships, as an important element in relational meaning making.
Control Mutuality (Grunig, 2002)	Grunig (2002) - characterized as the degree to which the parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship.
Satisfaction (Grunig, 2002)	Grunig (2002) - extent to which both parties feel favorably about each other.
Commitment (Grunig, 2002)	Grunig (2002) - extent to which both parties feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain.
Exchange relationship (Grunig, 2002)	Grunig (2002) – “one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (p. 1).
Communal relationship (Grunig, 2002)	Grunig (2002) - when “parties are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other—even when they believe they might not get anything in return” (p. 1).

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Although these dimensions provide a strong foundation for qualitatively assessing IPRs, relationships are complex and chaotic, dynamic and ever-changing. Additional insights into qualitative relationship dimensions are needed as scholars have identified important gaps in the field. For example, Grunig (2002) mentioned that relationships have an inherent power imbalance; however, how this power manifests in IPRs has not currently been explored. Scholars like Heath (2013) have critiqued public relations scholarship related to relationships for not defining the concept of relationships, as well as ignoring factors such as manipulation that affect perceptions of relationships. Similarly, Cheng (2018) recognized that not all benefits in relationships are equally balanced, an important gap in current IPR research. Adding the concept

of hegemonic masculinity and TIs, this dissertation sought to further challenge these critiques, exploring how institutional culture may play a role in people's meaning making of their relationship with the institution.

Furthermore, negative relational features of IPRs have been researched less extensively. Negative IPRs (NIPRs), can impact an individual's relationship to an institution. Moon and Rhee (2013) quantitatively identified the dimensions of dissatisfaction, distrust, control dominance, and dissolution. From a qualitative perspective, the negative dimensions of IPRs have not been explored, thus it is imperative to identify negative relational components for restoring the damaged relationships between institutions and publics and to understand how NIPRs can challenge public relations efforts. Due to the nature of TIs, relationship management with key publics, such as stakeholders, is vital especially in times of crisis. Negative relational dimensions have been studied through the lens of crises many times. However, small, frequent, compounding negative interactions with an institution may lead to the same NIPR as a large-scale crisis.

### ***Importance of Reputation Management with Stakeholders***

One mutually influential relationship that public relations can be used to maintain is stakeholder relations (L'Etang, 2012). Publics that are determined to be important to an institution may be considered a stakeholder. As defined by Smith (2012), a stakeholder is seen as an "influencer, beneficiary, or risk bearer to an organization's wealth-creating capacity and activities" (p. 841). Therefore, stakeholders are any group that can affect or be affected by the behavior of an institution. A stake is considered a resource or potential contribution that an individual or group may offer or seek from a relationship (Coombs, 2007).



An important stake for institutions is institutional reputation. Gibson et al. (2006) defines institutional reputation as “accumulated organizational intangible assets including employee dedication, degree of consumer confidence, brand loyalty, management trustworthiness and organizational public image” (p. 15). More succinctly, a reputation is an aggregate evaluation made by stakeholders about how well an organization meets stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviors (Coombs, 2007). Thus, stakeholders can contribute to building an institutional reputation. Some researchers have gone so far to say reputation is the “single most valued organizational asset” (Gibson et al., 2006, p. 15). A good reputation has (in)tangible benefits, ultimately adding important value to the overall worth of the institution. For example, institutions with positive reputations attract better candidates for employment (Doorley & Garcia, 2015). On the other hand, an institutions negative reputations may negatively impact people’s willingness to engage with the institution (e.g., boycotts, fewer applications to open positions), resulting in an increased level of scrutiny from stakeholders on institution decisions and actions (Lange et al., 2011; Truong et al., 2020).

One important function of public relations work is to engage in reputation management. Reputation management is the creation and defense of positive public perceptions of an institution’s reputation. Previous research argues that stakeholder relationships are crucial in forming an institution’s reputation (Aderibigbe & Fragouli, 2020; Ji et al., 2017; van der Meer et al., 2017). How key stakeholders communicate about an institution can affect its overall reputational perception among other publics. For example, Ji et al. (2020) found that stakeholders’ positive and/or negative comments on a company’s Facebook page were a significant predictor of the company’s overall reputation. Thus, how and what key stakeholders communicate can have a potentially negative effect on an institution’s reputation (van der Meer

et al., 2017). While research has explored the interplay between an institution and its stakeholders during a crisis (van der Meer et al., 2017), no research has sought to understand how the complexities of an institution's culture may affect the relational meaning making between an institution and its stakeholders. Communication is an important process for building strong, positive, mutually influential relationships with publics. The relationships between institutions and publics can affect how publics decide to communicate about the institution, influencing its overall reputation.

### ***The “Reputation” of the USM***

Although the reputation of the USM may vary between individuals based on a variety of factors (e.g., military affiliation, political affiliation, personal values, etc.), the ultimate narrative the USM sets forth is a sense of nationalism, pride, and commitment to protect the interests of the American people at home and abroad. In a narrative perpetuated in movies, television shows, books, and more, the USM is often characterized as the “best” military in the world. Furthermore, military service is seen as the greatest sacrifice, making it a prestigious career path for those who pursue it.

In general public discourse, the USM is often framed around a Post 9/11 rhetoric of citizenship, service, and national security (Brown, 2012; Byrne, 2004; Kellner, 2007; Swers, 2007). Through a sense of common social good and duty to serve others, the military touts itself as a way for people to gain both extrinsic rewards (e.g., money) and intrinsic rewards (e.g., helping other and performing work worthwhile to society) (Fisher & Marshall, 2005). Military service is portrayed as an honor, providing the opportunity for Americans to participate in serving the greater good and securing their nation (Brown, 2012; Fisher & Marshall, 2005). This narrative holds true for those who choose to serve. As evidence, a survey of 5,174 active duty

service members and veterans found that 62% joined the military based on a desire to serve their country. Forty-six percent joined for a sense of purpose and 42% joined because of a family history of service (Pritchard et al., 2022). All in all, these values and the ways in which they are communicated to publics often create a strong sense of nationalism and pride that help the military to sell itself and its actions as “for the American people” (Bryne, 2004; Kellner, 2007).

However, there may be a gap in the idealized versus realistic reputation of the USM. For example, only 42% of 5,174 active-duty service members surveyed with an average of 15 years of military service would promote military service as a great career path to a friend or family. An additional 30% reported that they would actively *not* recommend military service to a friend or family member (Pritchard et al., 2022). How former employees communicate their experiences in an institution can impact how others view the institution. Furthermore, the American people’s trust in the USM has recently significantly decreased. While 70% of 2,500 people surveyed in 2018 had a great deal of trust and confidence in the military, only 56% of 2,500 people surveyed in 2021 had the same level of trust. This sharp decline in trust is a result of the overpoliticization of military (e.g., far-right and extremist individuals endorsing or serving in the military, perceived implementation of “woke” policies) and overall confidence in military competence regarding both leadership’s ability to lead and service members ability to win future wars (Myers, 2022). This decreased trust related to the USM is resulting in a “recruiting crisis”. Every branch of the military struggled to meet its recruiting goals in 2022 (Kube & Boigon, 2022). Ultimately, the discrepancy between the way the USM is framed in the media and popular culture and the reality of serving may be catching up with the USM. Thus, as managing the reputation of the USM becomes increasingly important, understanding how key stakeholders

make sense of their relationship to the USM may play a role in the discursive creation of this reputation and provide insight into repairing this image.

### ***Women Veterans as Key Stakeholders***

Currently, much of our understanding of reputation management focuses on the strategic design of communication. Although scholars and practitioners have traditionally focused on reputation building externally, recent scholarship has begun to consider the role individuals can play as ambassadors for an institution (Alsop, 2004; Dreher, 2014; Morhart et al., 2009). As such, reputation management is not just about external reputation management through official communication channels, “it also involves an important internal dimension whereby employees' communication is strategically managed” (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020, p. 277). However, as Wæraas and Dahle (2020) argue, little research has considered the “people management” dimension of reputational management related to how employees or former employees communicate about their affiliated institution.

As explained in the sections above, women veterans are a key component of the military-affiliated community; moreover, their experiences during and after service may be affected in gender-specific ways. Although research has explored female veterans experience separating from service (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015), transitioning to the civilian workforce (Wilson, 2015), and the general challenges faced during reintegration (Bryant, 2017), no research found seeks to understand female veterans experiences from the position of key stakeholder. Based on the literature definition of stakeholders (Smith, 2012), female veterans represent a unique stakeholder group that has both influencer and risk bearer potential to affect the institution's reputation. Furthermore, although research has often explored female veterans experiences immediately following separation from service (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Eichler & Smith-

Evans, 2018), no research found has sought to understand how year(s) disengaged might affect this relational meaning making.

The military is a difficult career path for women (Dichter & True, 2015; GAO, 2020; Kleykamp & Clever, 2015; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017). After leaving military service, women may continue to have negative experiences based on the lingering effects of the hegemonic and totalistic nature of military service (Van Gilder, 2018). How female veterans communicate about their experiences, make sense of their relationship with the military, and communicate this relationship may affect the military's reputation. Therefore, women veterans are a key stakeholder to the USM whose needs may not be met through current military and veteran resource structures.

### ***Summary***

Stakeholder management is a key aspect of public relations scholars and practitioners. An invaluable asset, reputations can make or break an institution and there may be stark differences in the reputations set forth by an institution and how those reputations are actually perceived. Currently, women veterans are key stakeholders to the USM whose voices may not be heard and needs may not be met. More research is needed to better understand how women make sense of their military experience during and after service, and how this relational meaning making plays a role in their connection to the military as veterans.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The literature review above explicates the current academic research on gender performance, feminist standpoint theory, the USM, veterans, and the intersection of public relations and the USM. Gender performance plays an important role in how people are socialized to behave and communicate personally and professionally. Institutions are inherently gendered

and in workplaces that emphasize polarized traditional gender performance, such as hegemonic masculinity, those who present in or are deemed to perform in the feminine may be seen as lesser and ostracized by workplace peers. Within the USM, women service members may experience additional challenges and barriers to success due to the strict structure, deeply ingrained values, and expected gender performance steeped in hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, these all-encompassing experiences may carry over into women service members meaning making processes after leaving service. Although previous research has sought to understand female service members transition back to civilian life and transitions into higher education (McDermott et al., 2020; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015), no research found has sought to understand how women service members make sense of their relationship with the military post service and the effects this perceived relationship may have on the reputation of the USM. The totalistic nature of the military makes it so that being a service member extends past professional lives and into personal identities. The military also requires the entire family to serve. These additional institutional complexities may affect how female veterans make sense of their relationship with the USM.

Due to the vital role of reputations in people's meaning making of an institution, understanding the inconsistencies between ideal and realistic reputation becomes increasingly important. Ultimately, female veterans are key stakeholders within the USM as an institution, whose voices and perspectives are currently muted by the hegemonic masculine and totalistic nature of the USM. Considering the potentially arduous task of balancing military and civilian cultures (May & McDermott, 2019), further research is needed to delineate the characteristics of military culture while exploring veterans' experiences with the USM after exiting service. Toth (2000) argued that public relations should be conceptualized in terms of interpersonal

communication where public relations can serve as a bridge between institutions and publics. Thus, public relations may serve as an important avenue for identifying gaps in communication among key publics who may not feel heard or valued by their institution. To avoid developing NIPRs, this dissertation used feminist standpoint theory to further investigate how women veterans make sense of their relationship with the military. The following are the guided research questions I sought to answer:

*RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?*

*RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Airforce or Army)?*

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Based on the literature review, I sought to answer four overarching research questions using qualitative research methods, *RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance*, *RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*, *RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*, and *RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Airforce or Army)?* The subsequent chapter will provide an overview of the methodology used to answer these four research questions. This chapter begins with a researcher reflexivity statement that articulates my positionality and pragmatic assumptions as a qualitative scholar. Afterwards, I evaluate the quality of the proposed project using Tracy's (2010, 2019) big tent criteria. I then explicate the interview protocol and steps for qualitative analysis used to analyze the collected data.

#### **Researcher Reflexivity**

In order to conduct ethical qualitative research, it is important to first discuss a researcher's reflexivity. In the following sections, to engage in reflexivity, I first explain how I define qualitative research. I then describe my researcher positionality, before detailing the paradigmatic assumptions that guide my approach to research.

#### ***Qualitative Research***

Qualitative research is an important form of scholarly inquiry that seeks to obtain an understanding of a social phenomenon. Hesse-Biber (2017) argued that qualitative research



consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that situates the observer in a way that makes the world visible. From this visibility, qualitative scholars then turn the world into a series of representations such as field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, or memos to self. From these interpretations, qualitative researchers attempt to find meaning and connection among their own lived experiences, theoretical frameworks, and the interpretations they have collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). An important component of qualitative research is that it privileges the idea that there are multiple understandings and subjective perspectives within the world. Thus, the ultimate goal of qualitative inquiry is “human understanding[s]” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 19), as qualitative scholars strive to discover how people make sense of their surroundings through various communication practices, social roles, rituals, symbols, and signs.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

After acknowledging that there are a variety of perspectives and lived experiences for unpacking human understanding, it is vital to explicate the positionality through which I explore my scholarship. First, I am a military spouse of five and a half years to an enlisted active duty Army soldier. Together, we have been stationed at three different military installations: Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Fort Wainwright, Alaska, and Fort Myer, Virginia. My youngest brother is also a reservist in the Army scheduled for deployment to Poland this upcoming fall.

Additionally, I am a cisgender, White woman in academia. Although military affiliation is often conflated with political right-wing conservatism (Squadrin, 2018) (i.e., Republicanism supporting free market capitalism, lower taxes, “traditional values” based in Christianity, etc.), research by Howe (2020) finds that the military community’s political affiliations mirror that of

the general public. I, personally, identify as a left-leaning democrat (i.e., liberalism supporting social justices, regulated market economy, social safety nets) (Squadrin, 2018).

In addition to situating my political values, it is also important to acknowledge the potential barriers that my positionality as a military spouse pose. Although I am a member of the military community, the positionality of a military spouse and dependent is distinctly different from the positionality and experiences of active duty service members. Within the military community, research (Chambers, 2013) and popular press (Green, n.d.; Huffman, n.d.) demonstrate a divide between women spouses and women service members. Military wives may feel “threatened” by their spouses being around women service members all day and during deployments. For women service members, this untoward tension can make it even more difficult for them to succeed in this male-dominated institution. From the perspective of women service members, military spouses who try to claim their spouses rank as their own dismiss the service experience of women in the military and can lead to further conflict.

Ultimately, as a spouse, I acknowledge as a limitation that I may not be fully aware of the lived experiences of service members as my position within the community is that of an outside observer. While I can learn the communication norms and acronyms, and listen to stories about time in the field, I may not ever truly understand the gravity of military service. Thus, through situating myself as a researcher and engaging in reflexivity, as well as using participants' words through direct, unaltered quotes to show rather than tell the study's findings (Tracy, 2019), I sought to avoid misinterpreting participants' experiences. Overall, through strategic and meaningful reflexivity, as well as through my positions as both a member of the military community and the academic community, I sought to use my positionality, knowledge, and skills to interpret the experiences shared with me through participant interviews.

### *Paradigmatic Views*

From the explanation of my positionality above, I now elucidate my paradigmatic views. Acknowledging and reflecting on paradigmatic assumptions (i.e., epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions) is important, as these perspectives often guide how and what research we conduct. Tracy (2019) argued that the nature of reality (i.e., ontology) and knowledge creation (i.e., epistemology) are inextricably linked. Thus, how we make sense of reality and how we acknowledge that knowledge is constructed are often connected. I acknowledge that reality and knowledge are constructed through communication and interaction, oftentimes mediated through power in society. Therefore, I identify as a scholar who works at the intersection of the interpretative and critical paradigms. A researcher's axiology, or how they place value in the research, also effects the methodological choices a researcher makes. I value the idea of co-creation of meaning and interpretation, in the pursuit of identifying theoretical and practical implications, to understand the world around me. Therefore, qualitative research methods are most useful and valuable to my research, as they ask open-ended questions that help the researcher extract meaning from situations, participants, and experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Used simultaneously, ontology, epistemology, and axiology define my research paradigm.

As mentioned above, I identify most at the intersection of the interpretivist and critical paradigms. As argued by Tracy (2019), it is important to blur paradigmatic boundaries to continue to grow and refine skills as a researcher. Researchers are encouraged to pick up guiding theories and paradigmatic perspectives as they grow in their careers and scholarship. Because I identify at the intersection of the interpretivist and critical paradigms, it is important to expound on each paradigm individually and then explore their overlap and connection.

**Interpretivist Paradigm.** Tracy (2019) explained that researchers in the interpretivist paradigm understand that reality and knowledge are co-created through communication and interaction. Interpretivist scholars seek empathetic understanding with their participants to make meaning of their lived experiences and the world around them. Moreover, interpretative scholars recognize that understanding is mediated through the researcher's identity and is connected to historical and cultural contexts. As an interpretivist scholar, I acknowledge that reality is mediated through the researcher, thus my experiences as a member of the military community adds to knowledge co-creation from the data analysis.

**Critical Paradigm.** The critical paradigm also acknowledges that reality and knowledge are co-created through communication and interaction; however, critical scholars also recognize that knowledge is informed by the way it is institutionalized and (re)produced. Ultimately, knowledge is constructed through communication and historical power relations; thus, critical scholars acknowledge that meaning and experiences are mediated through power. Therefore, critical research brings power relations to conscious awareness and seek to provide the space for questioning and transforming to make change (Tracy, 2019). Furthermore, as a critical scholar I believe that power differences are potentially most destructive when people view their own powerlessness as natural, necessary or inevitable (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As such, critical research is not only what is, but also what could be, as knowledge can be used to both control and liberate.

**The Intersection of Interpretivist and Critical Paradigms.** In tandem, these two paradigms provided the space for me to co-create meaning with participants to understand the world around them, acknowledging the role of communication, interaction, and power in making sense of the construction of reality and knowledge. The research questions that guided this

dissertation fell at the intersection of the interpretivist and critical perspectives. From an interpretivist perspective, through the use of qualitative interviews, I sought to co-create meaning with participants through dialogue to understand their lived reality in relation to the military. How participants made meaning of their reality through discourse and interaction provided insights into the knowledge they created regarding women's experiences during and after military service. From a critical perspective, the military has traditionally been an occupation where power is held by men of similar backgrounds. The strict hierarchical structure and ingrained cultural values have contributed to the systemic barriers to access and success faced by women in the military. Thus, uncovering the lived experiences of women, I sought to understand how former women service members experienced power dynamics and the potential role those power dynamics played on participants' experiences related to the military. By better understanding women's experiences and relationship with the USM through an interpretivist/critical paradigm, I sought to contextualize and uncover the everyday interactions that contribute to and negatively impact women's access and ability to communicate within a totalistic, hegemonically masculine institution as a starting place for change.

### **Research Significance**

In addition to researcher reflexivity, it is important to evaluate the quality of this dissertation topic. Using the big tent criteria for quality qualitative research proposed by Tracy (2010, 2019), I sought to demonstrate academic and practitioner value of this project. Although it is difficult to encompass all eight of the criteria (i.e., a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence) in every research project, due to the severity, scope, and value of this dissertation, I sought to include all of these criteria.

First, Tracy (2010) argued quality qualitative research is “relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative” (p. 840). In other words, it must be a *worthy topic*. With the recent crises regarding gender disparities in the military such as the Vanessa Guillén murder (McDermott & May, in review), media coverage of female service member being sexual assaulted (Kime, 2022), and the #militarymetoo movement (Johnson & Renderos, 2020; Stone, 2022), more research is needed to better understand women’s experiences and relational meaning making related to the USM. Moreover, as a woman-identifying military spouse, understanding women’s experiences in the military is personally significant to me. This personal significance ensured that a high level of care and attention was devoted to the design, data collection, and write-up of this dissertation.

In addition to a worthy topic, I sought to implement *rich rigor* into the research design, evaluation, and write-up. Tracy (2010) notes that richness is generated through “theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples” (p. 841). From in-depth interviews with a variety of participants to the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory, I engaged in rich qualitative rigor throughout the project’s execution.

*Sincerity* is characterized by authenticity and genuineness. I elucidated sincerity through researcher reflexivity and transparency. Moreover, as noted above, the personal significance of this project as both a spouse and family member of military service members enhanced my sincerity as a researcher. I was sure to communicate authenticity and genuineness to participants at the beginning and end of the interviews as I graciously thanked them for their time and willingness to entrust me with their lived experiences.

*Credibility* is defined as “trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). In the findings and discussion sections, I employed Geertz’s

(1973) thick description to culturally situate and contextualize the themes that were identified. I used participants' direct, unaltered quotes to show rather than tell results.

*Resonance* refers to a researcher's ability to promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers. My scholarly identity at the intersection of the interpretivist and critical paradigms seeks to emphasize an empathetic understanding of participants' experiences. Furthermore, through the use of evocative language and transferability, I express in the discussion section how these findings may be relevant for similar TIs and hegemonically masculine institutions. Additionally, through participants' quotes and vivid lived experiences, I provided theoretical and practical extensions to promote identification and reverberation for future practices among public relations scholars and practitioners.

This proposed research project sought to provide *significant contributions* on three fronts: theoretical significance, heuristic significance, and practical significance. First, I sought to extend feminist standpoint theory, as well as identify additional qualitative dimensions for assessing IPRs. Extending theory is important for building the value and relevance of a theory (Ferguson, 2018). Additional qualitative dimensions of relationships can assist public relations scholars and practitioners to more accurately assess and address the needs of key publics. Second, as many institutions seek the most diverse, talented workforce and demand more time, availability, and commitment from their employees, understanding the impact of TIs on key stakeholders provides valuable avenues for future public relations scholarship. This dissertation provides practical implications and recommendations based on participants' lived experiences for the USM to better meet the needs of its women service members during and after service.

*Ethics* is a cornerstone of any quality research project. As such, I sought to employ four types of ethics before, during, and after the completing the dissertation. Procedural ethics were

employed when getting Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the project (see Appendix A). Situational and relational ethics were implemented during and after the interviews as I sought to treat participants with respect and dignity. For example, one participant did not feel comfortable being recorded and was hesitant to participate in the study at all. During this interaction, I tried to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible, noticing when they displayed signs of being uncomfortable through tone and hesitation, as well as frequently acknowledging my gratitude for their willingness to share their story with me. Additionally, I assured that participants were fully aware of their rights throughout the entire data collection process, including their right to skip questions, end the interview at any time, or have their data removed from the dataset. Exiting ethics were employed during the writing process as I sought to take participants' feelings and perspectives into consideration through the narratives presented in the findings and discussion sections, as well as how the manuscript was disseminated to participants who were interested in the final write-up.

Finally, I sought to build *meaningful coherence* throughout the dissertation manuscript. I critically reviewed the manuscript to assure that the study achieved its stated purpose, accomplished what its espoused purpose, used methods and representations that paired eloquently with theories and paradigms, and provided a coherent, interconnection of writing and thoughts from the literature review to the conclusion. In the final write-up, I sought to highlight the care and devotion implemented throughout the lifespan of the dissertation by emphasizing the main themes and significance of the research project throughout each chapter.

From my positionality and paradigmatic assumptions, as well as after evaluating the project using Tracy's (2010) big tent criteria, four research questions were developed to guide this dissertation. As stated by Miles and colleagues (2014), research questions guide the research



process, providing important boundaries for exploring a specific research topic. These research questions include:

*RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?*

*RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?*

*RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Airforce or Army)?*

## **Interview Protocol**

The research questions above required using qualitative approaches to research. From a review of qualitative research methods, I determined that one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews were the best method for data collection to answer my research questions. The sections below expound on the value of interviews in relation to this dissertation topic.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are a guided question and answer conversation between a researcher and participant based on a specific topic related to research question(s). The purpose of an interview is to co-create meaning and knowledge between the participant and researcher (Tracy, 2019). Through organic knowledge co-creation, I sought an in-depth understanding of how women veterans make sense of their reality, and their knowledge construction in relation to the military, taking into account added complexities related to military service such as totality and

masculinity. Although there are different kinds of interview protocols, with methods ranging from structured interviews (i.e., specific questions asked the same way every time) to no interview protocol (i.e., engaging in dialogue via a free flowing exchange of ideas), I used a semi-structured interview protocol to collect data for this dissertation (Miles et al., 2014). A semi-structured interview protocol uses predetermined interview questions to guide the conversation between interviewer and participants, and thus allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions as topics emerge. This protocol differs from structured interviews as it allows more flexibility throughout the conversation and predetermined questions to guide the conversation and provides more structure than interviews with no protocol (Tracy, 2019).

The interviews were conducted over the digital conferencing platform Zoom. Using Zoom allowed me to reach participants around the world who may have been unable to participate in the study if in-person interviews were conducted, as many military-affiliated people are stationed across the globe. Moreover, due to COVID-19, interviews conducted over mediated platforms, like Zoom, have become more common place in people's everyday lives and reduce the burden of participation on participants (e.g., allow participation from any private location instead of having to travel to an in-person interview location, allow participation with the camera off instead having to meet the researchers in-person, etc.) (Oliffe et al., 2021).

**Strengths.** There are many strengths to the one-on-one, semi-structured virtual interview research method. First, it is a useful methodology for collecting rich, in-depth data (Tracy, 2019). The conversations between interviewer and interviewee can co-create meaning, resulting in thick, rich descriptions for analysis (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, one-on-one semi-structured interviews may be the only way to answer a research question based on how it is phrased, as

understanding people's lived experiences is best collected from their own words when follow-ups for clarification can be asked.

Second, one-on-one semi-structured interviews are a dynamic form of data collection. Probing questions can be asked as conversations emerge organically and important information might arise that could not be gleaned from a more static form of data collection and analysis such as documents or social media posts. While there are other dynamic forms of data collection, such as focus groups, the sensitive nature of the topic of this dissertation could have limited people's willingness to share their experiences in front of other veterans. Thus, the privacy afforded by one-on-one interviews facilitated participants' willingness to disclose information and engage in fruitful discussion.

Finally, the perspectives provided by the participants can change the direction of the research. Hearing participants' lived experiences may influence the direction of the research as new ideas the researcher had not originally thought of might be mentioned. With IRB approval, the interview protocol can be reflected on and amended to better represent participants' responses throughout the data collection process.

**Weaknesses.** Although the one-on-one semi-structured virtual interview methodology has multiple strengths, there are noted weaknesses. After identifying these weaknesses, I sought to mitigate these potential limitations through thoughtful research design and analysis. First, the one-on-one semi-structured virtual interview data collection methodology means that participants cannot be anonymous as they might be when completing an asynchronous survey. The audio and video components of the interview process removes some of the space and anonymity surrounding participation. Although identifiable data were removed from the dataset during the transcription phase of data collection before analysis, and participants were not named

individually in the findings chapter, the participants still “met” with me. A participant may prefer a more anonymous form of participation such as an online survey in which the researcher and participant never “meet.” Second, participants may feel uncomfortable disclosing information. Roulston (2014) explained that interviews can “fail” if the participant does not want to talk or if the interviewer is underprepared to facilitate the interview. Furthermore, specifically through virtual interviews, nonverbal cues may be lost as the researcher and participant are not in the same room to see all body language. Finally, Walford (2007) argues that researchers have to be wary of putting words in participant’s mouths during the interview or the write-up of the findings.

In order to mitigate some of these weaknesses in the methodology, I began by thoughtfully developing the data collection protocols. First, I was sure to protect the identities of my participants and communicate the care placed in confidentiality to participants during the interviews. For example, to ensure their confidentiality to the best of my abilities, all audio recordings and transcripts used pseudonyms in place of participants' real names. None of the participants’ real names were used when reporting findings. Additionally, some participants did not feel comfortable having their camera on. Thus, participants were able to participate in the interview and keep their camera off, while I kept my camera on to relay positive and affirming nonverbals throughout the interview. Similarly, participants were able to participate in the study even if they did not want to be audio recorded. One participant did not feel comfortable being recorded, and in that case, I took detailed notes throughout the interview. Second, in order to make the participants feel more comfortable in the interviews and promote disclosure, I sought to build rapport within the first few minutes of the interview and share my own military affiliations (Tracy, 2019; see Appendix B). I often mentioned my positionality as a military spouse and

family member throughout the interviews to connect with the stories participants shared by relaying my husband's and my brother's experiences as current service members. Third, I engaged in continuous reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process. I used direct participant quotes in the findings and discussion sections to exemplify the themes identified from the dataset to "show" rather than "tell" the results. As themes were identified during the analysis process, I acknowledged the boundaries between my own understanding and the participants' lived experiences.

### ***Data Collection***

Once one-on-one semi-structured virtual interviews were determined to be the best data collection methodology for this study, I developed the details of the data collection process, including participant criteria, recruitment, protocol, and the interview process.

**Participant Criteria.** The research questions used in this study helped to set the study boundaries including participant criteria (Miles et al., 2014). There were three main participant criteria necessary for participating in this study. First, participants had to identify as a woman and have had experience serving in the Air Force or Army. Second, participants had to have transitioned out of active duty military service in the last 20 years. Third, participants had to be over the age of 18 years old as per IRB standards. Those below 18 years of age are considered a protected group and therefore were excluded from participation. Further, rationale behind criteria one and two are explicated below.

As the research questions focused on the experiences of former women service members, those who did not identify as women or have service experience in the Air Force or Army were ineligible to participate. After consulting the literature, the Air Force and the Army were chosen to narrow participant criteria and allow for comparison of experiences across branches. Due to

the diverse missions and needs of each branch, as well as the distinct cultures they cultivate among their members, it can be difficult to compare the experiences of veterans across all branches. Thus, choosing two branches would allow for additional insights to compare experiences across branch cultures without adding too many elements of complexity and variation in experiences, such as trying to compare the different experiences between the Army and the newly formed Space Force. The Air Force and the Army were picked as the two branches of inquiry for four specific reasons. First, the Air Force and Army were chosen because the Air Force was originally established as a division of the Army. Although they may have started under the same institutional culture, they are now considered widely different in the experiences they provide to members, providing interesting points for comparison (Mastroianni, 2006). Second, the Air Force and the Army both support offensive and defensive air and ground operations. This is different from the mission of the Army versus the Navy, which would compare land versus sea operations. Similarities in operations provided the space for some commonality in experience, especially for those who experienced combat. Third, related to the recruitment of participants, the Air Force and the Navy have the two highest ratios of women serving (Air Force 69,927 [21 out of every 100] and Navy 69,688 [20 out of every 100]). The Army and the Marine Corps have the lowest ratios of women serving (Army 74,104 [15 out of every 100] and Marine Corps 16,275 [9 out of every 100]) (DoD, 2022a). Due to the size of the Army, however, more women serve overall even though the ratio of women to men is lower. The ratios of women serving is an important consideration, as having more women in a branch may lessen the overall (re)production of a hegemonically masculine culture. Moreover, the high number of women in the Air Force and Army assisted in the overall ability to recruit participants. Fourth, I have accepted a tenure track position at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). In

the state of Alaska there are nine distinct military bases or posts, six of which serve the Air Force and Army specifically. The other three bases are two Coast Guard bases and one Marine Corps base. Military affiliated students account for an important percentage of the student body at UAF (roughly 10%, R. Cortez Associate Director of Military and Veteran Services, 2022). Thus, I sought to use the practical knowledge gained from this dissertation to better understand and serve my military affiliated students, a majority of whom will be connected to the Air Force or Army specifically. Overall, there is enough similarity to establish some common experiences between women who have served in the Air Force and Army (i.e., Military Occupational Specialties [MOSs], branch objectives); however, the differences in factors, such as deployment lengths, quality of life, and women to men ratios, allow for some significant differences in gendered institutional experiences.

The second criteria for participation was that participants had to have transitioned out of active duty service in the last 20 years. Recruiting participants who have transitioned out of the military in the last 20 years encompasses the experiences of all of those who have and had been in active duty service during the two most recent United States (US) military conflicts, Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011) and Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2021). Both conflicts have been extremely formative for those who have served in the last 20 years, as those who served before 9/11 were considered to be part of a “peace-time” military. Additionally, 9/11 as well as the 2008 recession were two major recruitment factors for military service in the past two decades. As will be explained further in the findings, many participants in this study joined after 9/11 inspired them to serve their country (DeSimone, 2021) or after the recession hit as a new career opportunity (Tomsic, 2012). Moreover, as a result of these conflicts and an increase in women serving in the armed forces, the DoD has implemented a multitude of programs,

trainings, and initiatives within the last 20 years to create more inclusive spaces for women and other marginalized groups (Gaddes et al., 2020). Women who have served as these changes were implemented may have seen significant shifts in culture throughout this time.

**Recruitment.** From the criteria above, I first sought to complete the IRB process in order to have the interview protocol approved. Once the interview protocol was IRB approved (see Appendix A), I piloted the interview protocol to assure that the questions asked elicited responses to answer the research questions posed. One pilot interview was completed with a current scholar who has military service experience and now studies the military. The second pilot interview was conducted with a person who identified as a woman and had retired from military service experience in the last 20 years but served in the Navy. Based on these two pilot interviews, some of the interview questions were slightly revised. For example the question, “Tell me a little bit about your military career” was revised to “Provide a summary/overview of your military career.” During the pilot interviews, the original iteration of this question elicited short responses about participants' last few years in service. The revised version of the question more clearly asked participants to provide a full, holistic overview of their time in the military to contextualize their experiences.

After finalizing the interview protocol, I used convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants (see Appendix C). Convenience sampling relies on recruiting participants who are willing to volunteer to participate. I did not offer compensation for participation in this study. Incentives have been a source of controversy, as some scholars have argued that incentives can be coercive, especially for people who have limited financial resources (Groth, 2010; Millum & Garnett, 2019; Singer & Bossarte, 2006). Although this may have been a limitation to recruitment, as demonstrated above, women veterans tend to be at a higher risk of



homelessness than their civilian counterparts (Kenny & Yoder, 2019). Because of the potential risk of limited financial resources, I chose not to offer incentives in line with the guidance from Millum and Garnett (2019) who, instead, suggest conducting research with participants who share the same goals of the research, i.e., participating in the research because they also want to identify ways to better support women in military service. To engage in convenience sampling, I posted recruitment calls on social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Reddit. I also posted the recruitment call on listservs, such as the National Communication Association and the National Communication Association Communication and Military Division. Additionally, I used my personal networks as a military spouse and academic to recruit participants. After interviewing participants recruited using convenience sampling, I then used snowball sampling, i.e., asking former participants to share the recruitment call with those they know who fit the inclusion criteria, to recruit additional participants.

I chose not to partner with the DoD or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for this research project as both organizations have their own research agendas. This also allowed me to develop the interview protocol without outside influence or input to explore the potentially negative and challenging experiences faced by women during and after service. Additionally, I wanted to create a welcoming space for participants to share their true experiences without fear of retaliation. This was valuable for participants to share their genuine experiences, as many participants shared that they were facing current challenges with the VA. This decision proved critical for promoting disclosure, as some participants expressed being nervous about sharing their experiences due to potential retaliation from the military.

Previously published qualitative research using interviews to explore veterans' experiences has reached theoretical saturation, i.e., when new analyzed data no longer prompts

the creation of new information or themes (Tracy, 2019), from anywhere between two to thirty participants (Rossetto & Owlett, 2020; Teo et al., 2020). For example, McGregor (2020) interviewed seven veterans across genders to develop an understanding of the role of online social support pages among Marines. Mattocks et al. (2012, 2020) interviewed nineteen women veterans via semi-structured interviews related to military sexual trauma. Monteith et al. (2022) interviewed thirty-two female and eighteen male veterans who identified as having experienced military sexual trauma about their perceptions of veteran health care.

Within this study, theoretical saturation was reached with 30 participants. A description of participants' military service experiences and pseudonyms can be found in Table 2 below. For an overview of the demographic breakdown of all participants, see Table 3 below.

**Table 2**  
*Participant Pseudonym and Description*

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years Served</b>	<b>Enlisted or Officer</b>	<b>Branch</b>
Alta	Served 6 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Billie	Served 10 years	Enlisted	Army
Carla	Served 12 years	Officer	Air Force
Charlotte	Served 5 years	Officer	Army
Dina	Served 8 years	Enlisted	Army
Eleanor	Served 5 years	Enlisted	Army
Ella	Served 3 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Fran	Served 8 year	Officer	Army
Grace	Served 10 ½ years	Enlisted	Air Force
Helen	Served 9 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Irene	Served 5 years	Enlisted	Army
Isabella	Served 22 years	Officer	Air Force
Jenna	Served 4 years	Enlisted	Army
Kaya	Served 4 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Kim	Served 31 years	Officer	Air Force
Lidia	Served 5 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Molly	Served 24 years	Enlisted	Army
Morgan	Served 25 years	Officer	Army
Nora	Served 7 ½ years	Enlisted	Air Force
Olive	Served 23 years	Officer	Air Force
Paige	Served 7 years	Enlisted	Air Force

Quinn	Served 22 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Rebecca	Served 6 years	Enlisted	Army
Robin	Served 6 years	Enlisted	Air Force
Rosa	Served 20 years and 8 months	Enlisted	Air Force
Scarlet	Served 3 ½ years	Enlisted	Air Force
Tracy	Served 2 ½ years	Officer	Air Force
Vera	Served 20 years	Enlisted	Army
Wilma	Served 6 years	Enlisted	Army
Yvette	Served 4 years in the Army, 9 and ½ years in the Air Force	Enlisted	Both

*Note.* A random name generator was used to assign participant pseudonyms. The names are listed in the table in alphabetical order and not the order interviews were conducted. There is a significant gap in service of those who served 10 or less years and those who served 20 years. Around the time of 10 years in service, service members are required to make an indefinite reenlistment if they would like to continue in the military (RAND, 2007; Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2019). The indefinite reenlistment policy, “requires all soldiers reaching the rank of E-6 with ten years of service to reenlist indefinitely. Their new separation date becomes either the year they are required to leave the service if not promoted or their retirement date, whichever occurs first” (p. xiii). More information about this policy can be found in the discussion section.

**Table 3**

*Demographics of Participants*

Age	
25-34	9
35-44	14
45-54	6
55-64	1
Self-Identified Race	
Asian	1
Black/African American	1
Hispanic/Latina	6
White	22
Branch	
Air Force	17
Army	12
Experience in both branches	1
Combat experience	
Yes	19

No	11
Rank	
Enlisted	22
Officer	8

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*Note.* The age breakdown is based on the categories suggested by the US Census (2021). Combat experience is based on participants' description of being deployed in a war zone or an unsafe location.

**Protocol.** Using the concept of gender performance and totalistic institutions a semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the semi-structured interview conversations (see Appendix D). Semi-structured interviews are guided question and answer conversations (Tracy, 2019) in which meaning making occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee. The ultimate goal of these interviews was to co-create meaning and knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2017). I specifically sought to co-create knowledge regarding former women service members' relationship to the military by creating space to critically reflect on and explore their experiences during and after service. Additionally, the semi-structured interview methodology allowed organic conversations to emerge through flexible questions and probes (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was grouped into four overarching categories (i.e., rapport building, generating conversation, directive questions, and closing questions) (Tracy, 2019). Using this interview structure, I sought to gain a holistic longitudinal understanding of the participants' military service and post-service experiences, starting from before participants entry into the military to the present day. The first category of the interview protocol was rapport building questions. In these questions, I sought to build a relationship with the participant to make the participant feel comfortable, knowledgeable, and likable to promote disclosure (e.g., How did you decide to join the military?). The second category of questions was to generate conversation. These questions got at the heart of the research questions to generate

conversation with the participant (e.g., Describe to me in your own words, your respective branch). The third category was directive questions. Following conversation generation, the directive questions ask more specific questions about the topic being researched (e.g., How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your military service experience?). Finally, the category of closing questions were used as “catch-all” questions to close out the interview (e.g., What would you have liked to see different during/after your time in service?) (Tracy, 2019). After the closing questions were asked, I asked the participant to respond to some short open-ended demographic questions via the chat or verbally. These demographic questions asked about participants' race, time in service, and age to provide additional insight into participants' lived experiences.

**Interview Process.** Once participants responded to the recruitment message (see Appendix C) saying that they were interested in participating, I first assured they fit the participation criteria. Following the participation criteria check, interviews were scheduled at the participants convenience. After deciding on an interview time, participants were sent a Google calendar invite including a Zoom link for the interview to take place and the consent form, which included details such as information about the study, participants’ rights, and my contact information (see Appendix E). The interviews were conducted from November 2022 through the first week of January 2023. I received a written consent signature waiver from the IRB office due to the virtual interview modality and instead obtained verbal consent before starting each interview.

On the day of each scheduled interview, I entered into the Zoom space 10 minutes early to prepare for the interview and start the interview early in case any participants joined prior to the scheduled time to acknowledge and respect their time. I began each interview with

statements of gratitude for the participant's willingness to participate in this study and overviewed the informed consent form. When overviewing the consent form, I emphasized the purpose of the study, as well as the participants' rights throughout the study, i.e., that participants had the right to terminate their participation in the study at any point in time or skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Following the consent form overview, participants were asked if they agreed to participate in the study and be audio recorded. All the participants agreed to participate in the study, and 29 out of 30 agreed to be audio recorded. During the audio recorded interviews, I took minimal notes, writing down points of interest to consider during the data analysis process, such as the use of profanity, repetition of words, and tone. For the participant who did not agree to be audio recorded, I took extensive notes on their experiences and tone throughout the interview. The interviews last between 15 minutes to an hour and 53 minutes. The average interview length was 50 minutes providing rich, thick data for analysis (Geertz, 1973).

**Researcher Specific Behaviors.** Throughout the interviews I employed additional behaviors before, during, and after the interview process to facilitate ethical, successful interviews. First, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the data collection, analysis, and write-up phases, as well as acknowledge that as the researcher I had more power in the relationship (Tracy, 2019). I kept the concepts of reflexivity and acknowledgement of power in the back of my mind while preparing for each interview, while conducting the interviews, and during the data analysis phase. For example, in an interview where I noticed a participant becoming uncomfortable talking about gendered experiences that resulted in sexual trauma through the use of pausing between words, I thanked the participant for sharing such a difficult topic with me and let them know that they could share as many or little details about their experience as they

felt comfortable. This recognition and respect of the situation allowed the participant to feel more comfortable in controlling the level of detail they provided. Second, as noted above, it is important to build rapport with participants at the beginning of each interview, as well as throughout the interview process (Miles et al., 2014). Therefore, during the interviews I sought to build rapport with participants by engaging in active listening throughout the interviews, responding with positive nonverbals to show active engagement, and sharing my own military connections (i.e., my husband is currently active duty serving in a highly honorable position at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and my brother is the same Military Occupational Specialty [MOS] as some of the participants). Finally, I reflected after each interview to process my own sense making of the interview. This period of reflection following each interview was a crucial first step in the qualitative analysis process and allowed me to continue to review the interview protocol to assure that the questions I asked reflected the lived experiences of the participants.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Once all of the interviews had been conducted, I began to transcribe the interview audio. I started the transcription process by using the transcriptions generated from Zoom. Although the transcriptions from Zoom were mostly accurate, I went through each transcription while listening to the audio of the interviews to correct any mistakes and scrub the interviews of any identifiable data (e.g., names of leadership, locations stationed). The interviews resulted in a total of 1,527 minutes of audio and 511 single-spaced pages of transcribed data.

After all the interview audios were transcribed and scrubbed of any identifiable information, I then uploaded the transcribed pages to NVivo, a qualitative coding software (Dhakal, 2022). NVivo has been used in previous communication studies to assist in data management and analysis for large datasets (Hoover & Koerber, 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Once

all of the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, I then employed thematic interpretative analysis to analyze the data. As defined by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012, 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2014), analysis is “a method of identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning (themes) in qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 1948). Interpretative analysis requires that researchers take positions as both “cultural members and culture commentators” to make broader analytic statements about the overall story that the themes tell (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). To make sense of the data collected through interpretative thematic analysis, I sought to move abductively between the data, the theoretical framework, the research questions, and the broader scholarly literature while engaging in Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. The six steps included familiarization with data, thorough and systematic coding of the data, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Step one of the analytic process involved *familiarization with the data*. To start, I read through the finalized transcripts twice to get intimately familiar with my dataset. Once familiar with my data, I began step two of the process *generating initial codes*. As Clarke & Braun (2014) state, “coding is not simply a method of data reduction; it is an analytic process that captures both semantic (surface) meaning within the data and latent (underlying) meaning” (p. 1948). Codes “identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). NVivo was helpful for the initial coding of the data (Dhakal, 2022). For example the quote, “Bad leadership is the number one issue that I've seen the most. And that's part of the reason, that is the reason why I did not sign up for another eight years” was initially coded as *turning point deciding to leave*. The quote “once you get pregnant, you are useless to the military” was coded as *challenges to motherhood*. After all of the data was initially coded, I moved to step three of the data analysis process by completing a final



round of data review. Following this complete review of the dataset, I engaged in *theme development*. During this phase of data analysis, different codes were sorted into potential themes and subthemes. For example, the code of *turning point deciding to leave* was collapsed into a subtheme of *communication relationship levels* under the broader theme of *communication throughout military experience*. The code of *challenges to motherhood* was collapsed into the theme *ability to embrace alternative identities*. Following theme generation, I *compared the themes* against the initial codes and the dataset at large to refine the themes, and *finalize theme names and determine theme definitions*, i.e., “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). For example, the sub-theme *communication relationship levels* was defined how communication was experienced at different relationship levels and how communication at these different relationship levels played a role in the participants’ meaning making of their relationship to the military during and after active duty service. The theme of *ability to embrace alternative identities* was defined as how womanhood and being an active duty service member were often placed in competing positions, making it difficult for some participants to take on additional identities that they wanted to such as wife, mother, daughter, or caretaker. A full overview of the themes and sub-themes identified and defined to answer the research questions can be found in Table 4 (pg. 89). Finally, I began *producing the report*. While producing the report, I pulled exemplar quotes to use participants words to describe their experiences and meaning making (Tracy, 2010).

## Chapter 4: Findings<sup>5</sup>

Although the women in this study share aspects of a former service member identity, it is important to acknowledge that all experiences are individual, complex and nuanced, confounded by variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, rank, and years in service. I acknowledge the unique lived experience each participant entrusted with me to further our understanding of how women navigate the complexities of what it means to be a woman and a service member serving in the United State military (USM). Through their narratives, the complexities associated with the service member identity and what it means to be a woman service member were affirmed; moreover, the overarching themes identified suggest women service members, despite the uniqueness of their individual journeys, have similar experiences that impact their active duty service and lives as civilians outside of the military.

For each research question, the overarching themes are defined and explicated below. Table 4 highlights each theme and sub-theme name and their subsequent definition for ease of reading.

**Table 4**

*Dissertation Themes and Subtheme Definitions*

<b>Theme or Subtheme Name</b>	<b>Theme or Subtheme Definition</b>
<b>Research question 1</b>	
Differences in gender performance expectations	How service members engage in different gender performance based on different expectations for men and women, often rooted in traditional gender roles.
Men curating gender performance around women	How participants felt men tended to perform gender in ways that reflect larger social norms. Three main categories of gender performance were identified from the data: women as objects, men trying to wield power, and brother/dad dynamic.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to provide a warning that the content within some of findings of this research mention sexual harassment and assault, as well as describe experiences of toxic and abusive behavior.

Women's gender performance predetermined	How women's performance of gender was often predetermined by and reactionary to the men around them. Women were able to choose to be defined by one of three categories, bitch, slut, or pushover. Based on these categories and the gender performance of their male peers, women engaged in coping strategies to navigate their predetermined gender performance expectations.
Long-term changes on conceptualizations of gender identity	How the need to engage in strategic gender performance over time resulted in a change of participants' conceptualization of gender and their own identity.
Enhanced confidence and self-efficacy	How participants perceived their time in service to contribute to a greater sense of self and self-efficacy through the opportunities afforded by military service.

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**Research Question 2**

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Ability to embrace alternative identities	How womanhood and being an active duty service member were often placed in competing positions, making it difficult for some participants to take on additional identities that they wanted to such as wife, mother, daughter, or caretaker.
Structural inequities	How structural inequities such as ill-fitting gear to inequal policies, took a toll on women service members.
Sexual harassment and assault	How incidents of sexual harassment and assault and the subsequent handling of sexual harassment and assault cases played a role in participants relational meaning making.
Love/hate relationship	How participants, at this moment in time, expressed a bittersweet relationship to the military as a result of their gendered experiences while in service.

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**Research Question 3**

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Communication throughout military experience	How communication changed, ebbed and flowed, throughout participants' experiences within the military, as well as during their transition out of the military.
Communication for recruitment	How communication was first used to recruit participants into the military, ultimately starting the relationship.
Communication used to reinforce hegemonically masculine cultural norms	How communication was used to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes regarding

Communication relationship levels	women, resulting in a perceived subjugation of women within the military culture.
Communication during transition out	How communication was experienced at different relationship levels and how communication at these different relationship levels played a role in participants' meaning making of their relationship to the military during and after active duty service.
Communication of transition assistance program (TAP) resources	How treatment through communication played a role in participants feelings of connectedness after deciding to separate from active duty service.
Changes to long term communication behaviors	How transition resources were communicated to participants before their official separation from service.
Direct communication and the military dialect	How participants asserted that their communication behaviors were affected by their time in service.
Intercultural and strategic communication competence	How participants became more direct in their communication styles and picked up the new dialect of military speak
Communication performance differences between the Air Force and Army	How participants' time out of the country on deployments or Outside of the Continental United States (OCONUS) orders provided opportunities for them to build their intercultural communication competence and taught them the value of strategic communication.
Communication dimensions of "relationships"	How participants perceived different communication expectations between the Air Force and Army due to branch cultures.
Non-reciprocal	How additional communication dimensions of the relationship between former women service members and the military were also identified.
Time	How communication with the military ultimately highlighted that the relationship between the military and service members is not reciprocal.
	How time played a role in participants' relational meaning making, specifically the role of time away from the military for repairing their relationship to the military.

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**Research Question 4**

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Veteran Identity	How participants defined the veteran identity and how personal definitions played a role in their engagement in veterans or military-affiliated groups following their separation from service.
Definition of veteran	How participants defined the criteria for embracing the veteran identity. Criteria ranged from specific (needing to experience risk) to broad (even including those who were dishonorably discharged).
Proud of veteran identity	How participants were proud of their military service even if their relationship to the military post-service ranged from dissolved to highly connected.
Not identifying as a veteran	How some participants chose not to embrace their veteran identity
Always willing to connect with a veteran and be a resource	How even though participants might have quietly embraced their veteran identity or chose not to embrace their veteran identity, all participants mentioned being willing to engage with a veteran in need.
Having their veteran identity defined by others	How some participants experienced dismissal of their veteran identity by civilians and those adjacent to the military.
Discrepancy in engagement	How participants either did not engage/minimally participated in veterans groups <i>or</i> were highly engaged in veterans groups. There was no middle ground of engagement.
Not participating	How some participants did not engage with veteran's groups or other military-affiliated groups due to their bittersweet relationship to the military.
Highly engaged	How some participants engaged often with veterans or military-affiliated groups.
Not adequate resources	How outside of participating or not participating in veterans groups, participants wanted additional resources from the military related to the transition out of service and veterans' healthcare.
The space to talk	How participants felt there was no space for them to share their military experiences in military, in civilian, or in veteran spaces.

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*Note.* Indented themes are sub-themes located within the overarching theme above them.

## **RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?**

Related to research question one, three overarching themes were identified, because, as stated by Molly, “men and women go through different things [within the military].” The overarching themes of *differences in gender performance expectations*, *long-term changes on conceptualizations of gender identity*, and *enhanced confidence and self-efficacy* explain how women<sup>6</sup> with military service experience make sense of gender performance. The first theme, *differences in gender performance expectations*, is defined as how service members engaged in gender performance based on different institutional cultural norm expectations for men and women, often rooted in traditional gender roles. The second theme, *long-term changes on conceptualizations of gender identity* refers to how the need to engage in strategic gender performance over time resulted in a change of participants' conceptualization of gender and their own identity, even after separating from active duty service. Third, the theme of *enhanced confidence and self-efficacy* was identified. This theme is defined as how participants perceived their time in service to contribute to a greater sense of self and self-efficacy through the opportunities afforded by the military. Each theme is further expounded with participant quotes below.

### **Differences in Gender Performance Expectations**

Previous research has identified that gender is performed in the military (Van Gilder, 2019). This was reaffirmed through participants' responses that gender is performed in the

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to acknowledge that gender is not a binary; however, because the main gender performance mentioned in the interviews was related to women and men, I refer to gender in the findings section in a binary fashion. I also acknowledge that the mention of a transgender service member did come up in one interview; however, the participant did not identify as transgender and could not speak to that experience. As is noted in the future research section of this dissertation, future scholarship should explore the gender performance experiences and expectations of transgender and gender diverse service members.

military and that gender performance expectations are different for men and women. As Molly explained, “[gender expectations were] different for men and women” even though they may be doing the same job. As such, this theme illustrates how participants asserted service members engaged in different gender performance that was often rooted in traditional gender roles.

Through the sub-themes of *men curating gender performance around women* and *women’s gender performance predetermined*, participants’ description of their lived experiences explained how they came to make sense of gender performance while in the military.

### ***Men Curating Gender Performance Around Women***

Regarding participants’ experiences interacting with men in service, participants felt men tended to perform gender in ways that reflected larger social norms. As Molly explained, “I found men watching what they said in front of me. Others, I found the opposite extreme of purposely trying to get your goat and rile you up.” Whether or not men realized it, they engaged in strategic gender performance that often aligned with traditional gender roles (Hearn, 2012; Van Gilder, 2019). Further, how men curated their performance of gender was often dependent on elements such as who might have been witness to a particular situation. Three main categories of gender performance were identified from the data: women as objects, men trying to wield power, and brother/dad dynamic.

**Women as Objects.** One of the first categories of curated gender performance by men perceived by participants was that men viewed women as objects and treated them as such. From participants' descriptions, women could be viewed as objects to either sexualize or ignore. For example, as Alta explained, “if you're a single female, then like, all of your supervisors, mentors, everyone else, they feel like they cannot have a conversation with you, because you're a single female.” This quote illustrates how men viewed women, especially single women, as sexual

objects instead of as people, and this perspective influenced how they chose to behave around their female colleagues. This perception of women often carried over to outside work functions as Alta further described an experience she had in which she was ignored by her colleagues when their spouses were around. Alta explained:

They'll be friends with you at work. But at family events, like when their spouses are around, they're like, 'No, I don't know you.' It's like, nothing inappropriate has happened so the fact that you were acting like it has means that your intentions aren't as pure as you think, you know what I mean?

This quote similarly exemplifies viewing women as a sexual object rather than a person or peer who might deserve the same level of respect as a male colleague. Participants perceived a level of fear from their male colleagues because of their gender. Because they were women, participants perceived that their male colleagues felt they might get in trouble for talking to them as conversations could be viewed as “flirty”, especially by their spouses. Thus, women in the military were seen as a sexual object that could be dangerous to engage with both in and out of the workplace.

While not all men may have viewed women as sexual objects, some viewed them as objects to ignore. In this performance of gender, men showcased a perspective that women service members were less than or inferior in their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Van Gilder, 2019). For example Vera explained, “they viewed you as like, a separate, you know, they didn't view you as an equal.” This quote suggests some participants were perceived not as a service member but as a *woman* service member, a qualifier that diminishes capacity. Eleanor described how she had a superior refuse to acknowledge that she was the subject matter expert in her unit:

He did not like [that] I was in charge of all that. And he would always ask someone else



what was going on, even though everyone knew I was in charge. It was just one of the things, like, he did not want me in charge of anything. And he would always go to the males. And then some of the things he would say, just, it was questionable.

In Eleanor's example, the superior went out of his way to diminish her expertise and ask other men instead of acknowledging that a woman could be the expert in an area historically dominated by men.

Ultimately, in this curated gender performance, men viewed themselves as superior to women, treating them not as fellow service members, but as *women* service members who were less capable, less skilled, and less knowledgeable than their male counterparts. Women, in turn, became like an object to be sexualized or ignored.

**Men Trying to Wield Power.** While some men chose to perform gender by viewing women as objects, others used power to put women down. These men performed gender by reinforcing the cultural norm that men are superior women by exerting power through language, insubordination, and retaliation. Men tried to wield this power by goading women into verbal altercations to try to embarrass them, refusing to take orders from women superiors, and retaliating against women through accolades and workloads. Ultimately, this gender performance sought to put women "back in their place" within stereotypical gender roles and social location beneath men.

Molly described how men would often try to goad her into verbal altercations in front of her soldiers to diminish her power. Molly mentioned being called "honey" and "sweetie" by those above her in rank in front of her troops. Rebecca, similarly explained a situation in which a superior told her, every time she cursed, she would have to do 40 push-ups. Rebecca mentioned that the men in the office were allowed to curse without repercussion. In response to her

superior, Rebecca explained that she told him “over my dead body” would she do 40 push-ups after cursing.

In addition to verbally belittling women, several participants shared how some men took more extreme steps to challenge power, such as refusing to take orders from a woman. Dina recalled an experience during basic training in which one of her male soldiers refused to recognize her as a squad leader. As squad leader Dina was in charge of making sure her soldiers were “squared away” or prepared for the day’s tasks. Dina explained that the male soldier started talking while the drill sergeant was giving orders. When she told the male soldier to stop talking or “lock it up” he responded with, “Who do you think you are? You're a female, you don't tell me what to do.” Dina explained how she was upset by this altercation. While she reported this insubordination to her drill sergeants, she mentioned that she did not think anyone ever approached the soldier about his behavior. Tracy explained how she experienced insubordination from an Airman who continually had to receive counseling (i.e., the process of reviewing a subordinate’s performance) for disrespect and unbecoming conduct outside of work. Overtime, dealing with the Airman’s behavior led to feelings of burnout for Tracy. Olive explained how she experienced that some general officers were not willing to listen to female officers. She explained that women were not viewed as the same as their male counterparts even though they held the same rank. In Olive’s experience, some male officers would yell at or just ignore their women officer counterparts.

Finally, some participants experienced retaliation from men through their work. For example, Lidia described how she worked in a small office with two other male service members who engaged in “questionable behavior.” Lidia did not explicitly state what that behavior

entailed; however, she indicated that after “one of his scandals got exposed,” he blamed her for it and tried to retaliate against her. Lidia explained:

One of those secrets got out on accident. And I mean, this master sergeant, he just made up absolute lies about me, he tried to get me demoted. He tried to take my certifications away from me for my job.

Making up lies about her and trying to get her demoted resulted in an extremely toxic work environment for Lidia. Ultimately, she was able to escape the toxic workplace situation by going outside of her chain of command for help. Although breaking the chain of command is frowned upon as it is seen as undermining authority, this was the only way Lidia was able to find support and have tangible actions taken. Workplace retaliation was also experienced by Rosa, who explained how a superior tried to overwhelm her with work to exert his power over her. Rosa explained, “he was piling on the work. And he knew what I was capable of. And he was making unrealistic goals . . . he had said in a meeting, ‘I’m going to purposely overwhelm you’.” Even with other people around, the superior felt comfortable enough to explain that he was purposely trying to put her in her place. Rosa went on to explain from her perspective that, “he was very misogynistic. I think he saw me as a threat. And he targeted me . . . it held me back. And it had some damaging effects.” Rosa described that this retaliation impacted her career in the long term.

**Brother/Dad Dynamic.** The last category of gender performance identified from participants’ narratives was that some men performed gender from the perspective of a brother or dad, protecting women from others during their time in service. As described by Alta, some men took the perspective of, “‘just let us take care of you. Let us save you.’ Like they all have the savior complex” as a way to perform masculinity. Participants mentioned having mainly positive

experiences with male peers and leaders who performed gender in this way, appreciating that someone was looking out for them.

The savior, protector complex was described by Jenna in one of her stories regarding how a mentor “fixed” a situation for her. As stated by Jenna, “oh, my god, he was an angel, he fixed the whole entire situation. I actually felt like, I had a lot of father figures like, non-commissioned officers (NCO) in my career, and I'm so grateful for that.” Non-commissioned officers are enlisted service members who hold leadership positions. Alta similarly described how a superior “handled” a sexual assault situation for her. As Alta explained, “the only way I got anything done was I told my mentor, and he handled it for me.” She continued on to explain that he told her after the situation was handled that he viewed her, “‘like my kid.’ But he couldn't tell people that, like he felt that protective over me, because then they would single me out.” Morgan explained how as a young Lieutenant, men in her unit would protect her at bars. Morgan explained:

And once they knew that you were in the military, you were in their safety unit. . . Like four hours later somebody would be like messing with you [at the bar] and bothering you, and those guys would then come over and be like, ‘Yo, back off my girl.’ And they may not even remember my name. All they know is that I'm in their same division and they're going to protect me. And they don't even know me.

Helen similarly mentioned that, “my guys really looked out for me, like, they didn't look at me in a sexual nature. They looked at me like I'm their sister.” Helen experienced similar protection from the guys around her. Yvette explained that although it was harder to gain men’s respect, once you had it, male colleagues would correct people for her, “once you're respected if somebody new comes and they try to cross that line, like, I had to do less correction. Most

people corrected it before I even dealt with it.” For example, Yvette explained, “this one lieutenant got upset because I was teaching something about statistics. And he tried to correct me. And so I went to say, ‘stop’ and my commander goes, ‘I got this’.” Ultimately, some men performed gender from the position of a brother or father figure in an attempt to protect their fellow women in service.

### ***Women’s Gender Performance Predetermined***

Women’s performance of gender was often predetermined by and reactionary to the men around them. For many women, the socialization in this performance of gender began in basic training. Vera explained it, “starts in basic training. And I say that because female drill sergeants will tell you what not to do.” Vera continued to explain all the things women are told not to do, “they tell you ‘don’t be too friendly,’ ‘don’t smile,’ ‘don’t be embarrassed’, ‘don’t be that or don’t be that.’ You know, they tell you a whole bunch of ‘don’t’, but they don’t tell you what to be.” Women were constantly told what “not” to do or “be”, narrowing their allowed gender performance and leaving little room for understanding how “to be”. In line with their male peers engaging in traditional gender role performance, women were often expected to perform their gender through traditional gender roles. Morgan explained, “as a female, you are under the microscope every second of the day. And there are a high majority of men that want to see you fail, because they believe you should be barefoot and pregnant.” Thus, participants described grappling with only being able to perform gender as “a bitch, a slut, or a pushover”, as well as needing to find ways to cope with the performance of gender expected of them.

**Old Adage “Bitch, Slut, or Pushover”.** Participants often mentioned that their first explanation of how to act as a woman in the military was to pick one of three things to become, “a bitch, a slut, or a pushover.” Women were expected to pick one of these categories to act

within or those around them might decide what category they should be in. As Nora explained, “I never slept with anybody I worked with. So I only had two options available. And most times, I just came across like a bitch.” Nora went on to further explain that when in leadership positions, being part of one of these three categories became even more difficult:

I could either be a pushover or I would be a bitch. And when I became an NCO, and I was ordering people to do something I had to do in a way that didn't come across as an order.

Often the categories set forth for women's gender performance by others were extremely restricting. Isabella similarly mentioned “vividly recalling” upon her entrance into a service academy that she could be “a bitch, or you could be a dyke, or you could be a slut. You couldn't just be a leader, you had to be one of three things and that would define you.”

In some participants' experiences only two categories were allowed. As Carla explained at her service academy, “the first thing they told me, they're like, ‘you're either going to be two things, you're going to be a bitch or a slut, you choose which one.’” Helen similarly mentioned, “you can't have emotions, or they'll think you're, excuse my language, but they'll think you're a bitch. Or you're a lesbian, because you're so mean, and whatever else, you know, just stupid, stupid stigmas that they have.” Eleanor explained, “there's a mindset that if you smile too much, you're a slut. And if not, then you're a bitch. But you only get the two titles, slut or bitch.” A majority of participants mentioned adopting the persona of a “bitch”, being labeled as “difficult” or “mean” in order to get their job done and keep themselves safe. No one mentioned wanting to take on the persona of being a slut or a pushover. Overall, expectations of gender performance was predetermined for women into narrow categories that placed women in difficult, restrictive positions, further subjugating women service members.

**Coping Strategies.** Oftentimes the discrepancies in expectations surrounding institutional gender performance and individual gender performance played a role in how participants saw themselves in the military and made sense of their gender. As such, participants had to develop coping strategies to meet “gaps” in gender performance expectations. These coping strategies ranged from overcompensating to prove themselves, to defensive othering, queen be effect, self-blame, and taking initiative.

***Overcompensating.*** One of the main coping strategies used by women in the military was to overcompensate to prove their worth. Participants mentioned feeling an implicit need to prove themselves as capable and worthy members of the institution. For some participants this meant to physically out perform their male counterparts. Grace explained, “if the guys can run this fast, you need to be able to run faster.” Vera described, “there were a couple times where I believed I had to be better at PT than my squad leader.” Vera continued on to explain how she worked harder to run faster and complete more push-ups than her squad leader. Helen explained, “I definitely worked twice as hard to try to prove myself. And of course, there's still people that would be like, ‘Oh, well, you're just a girl’. Well, I'm about to drive circles around you.”

For some participants, overcompensating manifested both physically and mentally. For example, Rosa explained how she always felt the need to be on the ball, “Well, I will say this. I feel, as a female you have to, in a male dominated space, you have to know your policy, your reg and what you're talking about.” Rosa continued on to explain that when she was “mansplained” or interrupted by a man, “I was able to back that up with the knowledge that I had in my job. So when people tried to do it, I would come back with it. And they would know ‘okay, she means business. She knows what she's talking about.’” Morgan explained how she would tell her female soldiers that they needed to “give me 100% even when people aren't looking, because the

minute you fail, the other 22 of us, we've got to work twice as hard.” Morgan continued on to say, “if you're not showing that you've given 100% you have immediately tagged everybody in our unit as being worthless. And it sucks that we have to overcome that, but that’s the bias. It's the stereotype.” Women constantly felt like they had to overcompensate in all aspects of military life to earn their place. As Robin explained, “I think, myself and a lot of the women that I met, they have that internal fire. . . a lot of women kind of overcompensate and we tend to be quite intense, which is really great.”

Participants also mentioned that often being the “only woman” played a role in feeling the need to overcompensate. Yvette explained how at one of her posts, there was “one woman for every 67 men. I call it hell.” Rosa and Vera both mentioned that they were usually the only female in their unit and thus felt like their work represented their entire gender. Rebecca shared a similar story in which she felt additional pressure because of her position as the only woman on her team:

I was actually the only woman on my team in Iraq. And I knew I had to be good at what I did. It's this feeling of having to, not one up, but you're given these expectations that you didn't set for yourself. And so it's this feeling of having to exceed them [the expectations] no matter what.

Being the only women made participants feel like their colleagues' perception of all women in the military hinged on their daily performance. Yvette described, “if a man is lazy, it is attributed to him. If a woman is lazy, it is attributed to all women.” As such, participants mentioned feeling the need to exceed expectations mentally and physically to be considered worthy to be a member of the military and prove that women were valuable teammates and peers.



***Defensive Othering.*** An important coping strategy that participants described to navigate the hegemonically masculine culture of the military was to engage in behaviors that equated to defensive othering. Defensive othering is defined as deflecting stigma onto others in an attempt to distance oneself from said stigma (Armstrong et al., 2014). Because of the stigma placed on women, defensive othering was used both by the participants and experienced by the participants from other women in an attempt to distance themselves from the category and identity of “woman”.

First, participants often engaged in defensive othering when explaining their experiences within the military culture. For example, when asked how gender may have played a role in their military experiences, participants often relayed statements such as “I’ve always been a tomboy” or “I’ve always just gotten along better with men” as rationale for why their experience may have been different from “other women”. For example, Dina explained that being in the military allowed her to be her more authentic self, to burp in public and not be bullied by other women. Dina stated, “But even before the military, I have always been able to, like, get along better with guys than girls. I got picked on by girls a lot, my entire life, even into adulthood.” Robin similarly explained, “I’ve never really been girly. So it [the military culture] wasn’t a huge, extreme shift for me.” Olive explained how she thought it was, “easier to communicate, in general with men” because communicating with women required more “warm and fuzzy” communication. In this performance of defensive othering, participants described distancing themselves from behaviors attributed to femininity, rationalizing that they just felt more comfortable performing masculine behaviors to begin with.

In addition to engaging in defensive othering themselves, participants also mentioned using defensive othering to enforce gender performance standards and expectations in others. For

example, as Alta explained, “they [men] make fun of like, of all women, and then they encourage you to also make fun of them. Because how else are you gonna fit in with the guys, you know?” Wilma expressed similar sentiments that upon reflection, “I think I definitely adapted to and tried to mimic and do the same thing as whatever my male counterparts were doing or how they were talking.” Wilma continued on to explain that she felt like she became more sarcastic and sharp with her comments, adopting more masculine communication norms. Overtime, this played a role in how women saw themselves and their gender expectations. Kim explained a situation where she enforced defensive othering:

I think we all know women who will get upset and cry in front of everybody. That doesn't work. . . I was commander and she was running down the hall crying because she's gonna miss her kids [on deployment], and I'm like ‘what? you can't be doing this.’ We had to remove her from the position. She was going to be Chief Nurse over there, so we had to rethink that. And so you're not going to, you're generally not going to have a man do that.

This short description of an interaction between Kim and another female service member illustrates how it was expected that people distance themselves from emotions, traditionally categorized as feminine. Further, Kim makes the assumption made that a man would not cry in the same situation of having to deploy and be away from his children. Fran shared a similar sentiment when she stated, “you just having thick skin and not be too sensitive or you're just not going to cut it.” As Wilma reflected further in our conversation she described:

Now that I'm thinking, like, I, for sure, was like an underground enforcer of those things too. I would say, because it was like, ‘well, oh, look, I'm doing it. And this is what we should all be doing.’ And like, ‘You're being too girly over there. Like, get yourself together.’

Alta similarly explained how women would judge each other for partying on the weekends:

They're like, 'Oh, did you hear she got drunk and hooked up with someone?' And it's like, yeah, she's 23, what do you mean? That's normal! You're the one who was married from the age of 20. Doing age appropriate activities is not 'age appropriate' in the culture of the military and so women judge themselves so much more than they should. And then the men feel entitled to judge women for what they do, but they can't be judged.

In the statements above from Wilma and Alta, defensive othering was used by and experienced by women distancing themselves from behaviors considered traditional feminine to fit within the ideals put forth by the hegemonically masculine culture. Policing other women's behaviors became a way to separate themselves from being "one of those types of women", i.e., emotional or girly.

Defensive othering was also experienced by participants through the overt adoption of hegemonically masculine behaviors from other women. For example, Eleanor explained how one of her leaders would "offer rides and then ask them [new male soldiers] very personal sexual questions. And she slept with a lot of people and she was married." Using positions of power to engage in sexual activity with subordinates might be traditionally categorized as hegemonically masculine behavior (Hearn, 2012). Fran also mentioned how one of her female superiors was investigated for sleeping with soldiers while on deployment. As Fran explained, "There were stories about her being deployed over there and wearing inappropriate things and fraternization with the guys." Jenna similarly remarked that at one of her duty stations women slept with their leadership or colleagues to get promoted. Extreme heteronormativity, as well as sexual domination are traits that are considered hegemonically masculine behaviors (Hearn, 2012; Van Gilder, 2019). Thus, defensive othering was a coping strategy enacted and experienced by

participants as a way to distance themselves from being categorized and stereotyped as “woman” by their male peers.

***Queen Bee Effect.*** Similar to defensive othering, participants also mentioned experiencing what they termed as the “alpha female” or “queen bee” effect. The “queen bee” effect is a term used to describe how women in high ranking position can create hostile or competitive workplace environments for lower ranking women in order to maintain power and position (Kark et al., 2023). As Lidia explained, “I had a staff sergeant, she and I were the only two females on this shift with four guys, and she just needed to make her dominance known. So she would do things occasionally to just kind of make them see that she was the one in charge.” Lidia continued on to explain, “I made up this term, alpha female complex” to explain the negative interactions she had with the female service member. Lidia described that the “alpha female complex” was how she perceived the woman to try to exert control over her and show her “alphaness”. Tracy explained a similarly difficult situation with another woman Airman, “she was the most personally difficult person I've ever worked with. And I think a lot of it was that she felt like she had to protect her role as a woman and as a mom.” Fran explained that after her female superior was investigated for fraternization, she started to spread rumors that Fran was a terrible employee. The story shared by Kaya of the queen bee effect had some of the most detrimental effects as the woman in her experience caused such severe anxiety it resulted in a medical discharge from service. As Kaya explained, “she was very demeaning, very critical. You know, she did not take kindly to any emotions.” Kaya continued, “if I saw her car there [at work], when I got there, first thing in the morning my stomach just dropped, I felt terrible.” Overtime, Kaya developed Crohn’s disease because of the stress experienced from her female superior. Reflecting on the entire experience Kaya closed with:

I think like sometimes in the military, there's this weird stigma that other females, like, they look at other females differently. Like 'I'm the only female, this is my unit' you know what I mean? But it was weird. It was almost like she didn't see me as like worthy of even being a member of her team.

The hegemonically masculine culture of the institution overall resulted in reproduction of hierarchy even if women were in charge of or dominated the workplace. As Irene explained, even though a majority of the people she worked with were women, “surprisingly, it didn't really help that we were women. I'll be honest, for a while we had a very toxic work environment.” During her interview Vera similarly mentioned how she could not work in a “female dominated military occupational specialty (MOS), I've always been the only female.” Vera explained that she would be more nervous to work in a female dominated workplace than a male dominated workplace because of negative experiences she had with other women. Thus, the queen bee effect was another coping strategy experienced by participants that reproduced masculine based hierarchies subjugating women.

***Self-Blame and Internalized Misogyny.*** In addition to overcompensating and defensive othering, participants described self-blame and internalized misogyny as a result of the hegemonically masculine culture. Participants often mentioned their age, “being young”, as a rationale for why they were treated a certain way, most often by older men. When couching things in misogyny, women are often socialized to engage in self-blame such as youngness and naiveté to excuse or rationalize toxically masculine behavior (Carretta & Szymanski, 2020). For example, Billie stated, “I was like, so young, now I would have been like, ‘what did you just say?’ But back then, it's like, ‘I work for this guy.’” Other participants like Irene and Kaya mentioned being “young and naïve” when it came to being around men. As Kaya put it, “I was

very excited. I was like, ‘a single young female with lots of males, like, this will be great.’ It was not great.”

Along the lines of self-blame, internalized misogyny was also used as a coping mechanism. For example, Carla shared a story of a conflict with another Airman while deployed. Carla explained:

I was deployed with a supervisor who got really upset. He was difficult to work with, and he got really upset and one time he goes ‘Carla, you need to get the sand out of your clit! You need to get the sand out of your clit!’ And I was so shocked that I was like, in my head, I was like ‘did I hear it clearly? Maybe I’m not understanding?’ And then I automatically jumped to ‘Well, I give him points for creativity.’ I actually briefly gave him credit for creativity as a defense mechanism.

In Carla’s story, giving the supervisor credit for a creative insult was due to internalized misogyny. Carla even recognized that trying to rationalize the insults as creative was a learned defense mechanism from being in a hegemonically masculine environment. Molly described a similar situation in which her response to dealing with some men’s comments was, “sometimes you internalize it, and you’re like, ‘did that dude really just say that to me?’” Fran explained, “you cannot be sensitive. You just gotta be like, you know, at some point boys are going to be boys, and that’s how they’re going to behave.” Boys will be boys is often a socializing phrase used to dismiss misogynistic behaviors from men. Although people within the military are supposed to be held to a higher standard through the regulations and policies passed to promote a culture of respect, inappropriate behavior is excused through the internalization of misogyny.

Internalized misogyny also resulted in some women looking down on other women within the military. For example Grace explained, “There are a lot of girls that use the girl card.

Yeah, it's out there. 'Oh, I can't lift that. That's too heavy. Can you help me with this?'" Using the "girl card" refers to the exploitation of women's identity and sexuality for personal gain (Atkinson et al., 2018). Irene similarly explained that she did not believe women should be allowed into all positions within the military. Irene stated, "there are very few times that I would want to have someone my size and my gender on the front lines, just because of a simple question. If you come under fire, will you be able to help the person to your left and right? Or will you be a hindrance?" Kim explained that she did not agree with the new regulations that allow women to wear their hair down. While she mentioned that she believed it was a safety issue, she also explained that it "looks more professional" to have your hair up. Kim continued on to say, "I mean, I look at some of the folks that wear it down, and I'm like, 'You look like you're, you're 15 years younger than you are' which kills your credibility." Kim's rationale for disliking the new hair regulation speaks to the policing of women's appearance in order to wield authority. It exemplifies how women have to downplay their outward appearance of femininity through specific dress to be taken seriously. When explaining her experience with sexual harassment and assault in the military, Fran described:

Other women had different experiences than I did, or so I heard. I did also hear that some of them [other women service members] engaged in things they probably shouldn't have. And who knows how much of that actually caused behavior that you don't want to have happen, right? So there is that.

In this quote Fran describes that she perceived some women might have been engaging in behavior (e.g., over drinking, promiscuity, etc.) that invited men to engage in unwanted behaviors (e.g., sexual harassment, assault). Believing the women's behavior may have "caused" or invited consequences from men service members and holding women to a higher standard in

order to receive respect reinforces expectations surrounding misogynistic gender performance for women. Ultimately, internalized misogyny manifested in many ways, often dictating how women believed everyone should look and act.

***Taking Initiative.*** The last coping strategy mentioned by participants was taking initiative. As Quinn explained, “you have to bark and you have to bark loudly. And then you have to let people outside your chain [of command] know.” Participants often mentioned having to take initiative and go outside of their chain of command to have their voices be heard. For example, Jenna explained that although you are not supposed to skip your chain of command, when a sergeant was acting inappropriately towards her, “that got old really quick when he got super inappropriate one time while we were working. And I pretty much skipped chain of command and I let my staff sergeant know.” She further mentioned that women often have to “try to have a bigger voice” in the military. Eleanor described a situation during a watch shift in which she had to take out a knife to show the men around her that she was not comfortable with the situation unfolding. Eleanor explained:

I've actually had to pull a knife on someone, because I was on CQ [charge of quarters], I was in uniform and this dude, just would not leave me alone. And he started trying to put his arm around me. So I took my knife out and I stabbed the desk. I'm like, ‘I am working. You are getting in the middle of my job. And like, stop fucking touching me.’ Molly similarly explained that she often had to argue, yell, scream, and fight to get things done. Molly stated, “it's a matter of picking your battles and things like that. But I was always pretty proactive in getting what I wanted in this job and in the military.” As Rebecca similarly described, “a lot of men like to play this alpha role, where they're like, ‘Oh, I'm alpha.’ And there had been plenty of times where I had to, almost like, make myself louder, like, ‘you will



hear me, you will respect me.” Taking initiative to protect their own safety or complete their job was an important coping strategy women used to overcome some of the barriers they experienced while in the military based on the expectations surrounding gender performance.

### **Long-Term Changes on Conceptualizations of Gender Identity**

Overall, the need to engage in strategic gender performance over time resulted in a change of participants' conceptualization of gender and their own identity. Specifically, participants acknowledged that their experience in the military changed their own perceptions of their gender identity not only within the context of the military service but in all aspects of their personal, professional, and now civilian lives. Thus, this theme is defined as how long-term strategic gender performance played a role in participants' sense of their own gender identity and gendered expectations because as stated by Eleanor, “the military itself is just traumatic.” Trauma has been known to be “life-changing”, affecting people’s sense of self long after the incident or incidents have occurred (Muldoon et al., 2019, p. 326),

Generally, the effect of having to adopt masculine behaviors to succeed in the military lead to long-term changes in how participants conceptualized their own gender identity. For example, Wilma explained, “as I've sort of gotten older and advanced in my own career, I've thought more about, my own gender experience there [in the military]. And did I feel like pressure to, be more masculine to sort of adapt to that.” The pressure to act more masculine while in service affected how women made sense of and performed their gender identity when out of service. For example, participants often mentioned divorcing themselves from their emotions. Emotions are oftentimes categorized as a feminine trait. As mentioned above, women often policed their own emotional expressions and the emotional expressions of their female peers to meet expectations of gender performance set forth by the hegemonically masculine

military culture. This left lasting impressions on participants. For example, Robin explained, “my husband will tell you, he knew me before I was in the military. And he will tell you that I used to cry a lot. And was very emotional. And then I went into the military and I don't cry anymore.” Participants also mentioned that their time in service affected their perceptions of motherhood. Rebecca explained that she is, “probably more of a helicopter mom, and more cautious than most because I'm a veteran, and I'm, you know, went through six years of always feeling being on edge.” She mentioned that she did not realize the effect military service had on her perceptions of her identity and behaviors as a mother until she was clearing the house before letting her children enter every day. Clearing a house or room is a military maneuver in which a person enters to remove any potential threats.

In addition to having to suppress their emotions and the effects on mothering, the pressures of tokenism left a lasting effect. Robin mentioned the effects of being reminded while in service that she was, “a female airman, I'm not just an airman, I'm a female airman.” She continued on to explain, “sometimes that hurt and it limited me in a particular way. It limited me in the sense of people would have really low expectations of what I could do.” Participants of Color felt added pressure while in service that they then carried through to the civilian world. Carla explained:

Even still today, when I'm in rooms I sit there and I'm like, ‘wow, there's 10 people here and of the 10 people here, there's two females and of the two females, I'm the only Latina’ . . . I'm very, very, very acutely aware of the diversity in the room.

Carla felt that she not only had to represent her gender but her race as well because of her experiences within the military.

Gender performance while in service left a lasting impression on how participants viewed women and professionalism. For example Vera explained how she thought, “my professionalism and my power and presence came from my perfect bun, my perfect neutral makeup, my perfect pressed uniform, my clean boots, my posture, my blouse.” Upon leaving service, Vera mentioned being extremely concerned about what she was going to look like without a uniform and where she would draw her professional power.

Overall, the long-term gender performance women engaged in during military service often led to a sense of identity loss. Morgan explained that while serving she felt like she had to compromise her femininity and “curse like a sailor” to get her point across. She advised other women, however, “Don't sacrifice your femininity for being directive. You don't have to sacrifice your femininity to be a leader. You can do your hair and wear some makeup and you know, and still be a leader.” Molly explained:

Assimilation into and out of the military are equally hard. I can't speak for men, you know, for me, as a woman, it was hard. At first trying to prove that you're worthy, trying to prove that you're just as good as a man, just as smart as a man, just as whatever as a man, trying to fit in, trying to be one of the guys.

Ultimately, the assimilation into and out of the military left participants with changed conceptualizations of their gender. As Morgan stated, “the sexual bias, the having to change your personality in order to meet the needs of your chain of command, or to be able to talk to have respect, I think that molded my personality.” As Vera stated, “when you're constantly self-analyzing [your gender performance] from the very young age of 18, there becomes new negative self-talk.” Participants described that the negative self-talk they learned from the

hegemonically masculine culture and gender performance expectations while in service stayed with them after separating from service.

### **Enhanced Confidence and Self-Efficacy**

It is important to note that not all meaning making related to gender performance resulted in negative experiences. Participants explained that their time in service contributed to a greater sense of self and self-efficacy through the opportunities and values instilled in them by the military. These effects also left long-lasting impressions on participants, even as they separated from active duty service. As Dina explained her experience in the military “emphasize that women can do anything.” Billie similarly stated:

I think it really helped me tremendously to find who I was in the military, having to assert myself. So having confidence in your abilities as a female and being able to not let anybody tell you that you can't do something.

The military provided the space for women to develop confidence in themselves and their own abilities as they challenged low expectations for women’s military service. For example, Olive explained that her time as a flight nurse taught her to be “confident in your own ability to make assessments and be able to pivot to the next problem.” Scarlet and Fran similarly described how the military instilled a sense of confidence in them. As Scarlet stated, “I went from being this shy little book nerd, I had never run a day in my life, to, I was maxing out push-ups, maxing out my sit-ups.” Molly and Carla mentioned that their time in the military helped to instill a sense of independence. As such, obtaining a large breadth and depth of experiences contributed to participants’ sense of confidence and independence.

In addition to growing confidence and independence, Robin explained that the military, “really taught me to make the best of things.” Participants like Billie, Rosa, Ella, and Kaya all

similarly mentioned the importance of the resilience they learned in the military for handling difficult situations later on in their lives. As stated by Ella, “learning that I can be put through the wringer and I come back out, probably stronger than, you know, than what had happened” was a valuable lesson she took away from her time in service. Because of their increased confidence and new found sense of resiliency, Grace noted that the military gave her the “drive” she has today. Dina explained that she felt her military experience was going to “help me to fulfill my fullest potential.” Similarly Wilma described, “I found my military experience, to be quite valuable to my development as a person in my sort of leadership skills and my character and things that I valued.” From the experiences and opportunities afforded to them during their time in service, participants left the military with an increased sense of self-efficacy and resilience that they took with them into future career paths.

### **Summary**

From participants' responses, I identified a difference in participants' perceptions of gender performance expectations for men and women. Participants' responses illustrated that they perceived that men curated their gender performance in front of women, often in line with traditional gender roles of dominance, power, or protector. Women's gender performance was often predetermined by and reactionary to the men around them as they developed coping strategies to meet the institutional and individual expectations of gender performance set forth for them. Generally, the limiting predetermined gender performance expectations for women changed their own perceptions of their gender identity not only within the context of military service but in all aspects of their personal, professional, and civilian lives. As a result of their experiences in the military, however, participants felt that the military provided them with a

variety of opportunities to enhance their confidence and self-efficacy to prove that women were capable of anything.

**RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches?**

Based on participant responses, gender was found to play a role in participants' relationship to the military. Four themes were identified to answer research question two: *ability to embrace alternative identities, structural inequities, sexual harassment and assault, and love/hate relationship*. The first theme, *ability to embrace alternative identities* is defined as how womanhood and being an active duty service member were often placed in competing positions, making it difficult for some participants to take on additional identities, such as wife, mother, or caretaker. For some participants, this became a large factor in their decision to separate from active duty service. The second theme, *structural inequities*, is defined as how the experiences of inequities based on gender, such as ill-fitting gear and male centric policies, negatively affected women's ability to effectively serve. This led to frustration that played a role in participants' relationship to the military. The third theme of *sexual harassment and assault* is defined as how incidents of sexual harassment and assault, and the subsequent handling of sexual harassment and assault cases played a role in participants relational meaning making. The fourth theme, *love/hate relationship*, is defined as how the gendered experiences participants had resulted in their expression of a bittersweet relationship to the military.

**Ability to Embrace Alternative Identities**

How participants made sense of their relationship to the military changed based on their personal needs outside of service. Specifically, as women's personal lives and goals changed, their perceived relationship to the military also changed. Thus, women's ability to embrace

identities outside of the service members identity, such as wife or mother, played a role in participants' relational meaning making. For example, as Irene explained, "so my career, kind of, there's different phases." Although Irene did not explain the different phases she perceived, Vera similarly shared that she felt her career had three distinct phases. Vera explained in detail how the different phases of her life changed her relationship to the military. At the beginning of her career, Vera mentioned having fun, enjoying Army life as a single soldier, "so in the beginning, it was, priorities are different, right? So being young, unmarried, no kids, what I liked about it was being able to travel and be exposed to different cultures." In the second phase of her career, Vera explained, "And then being married, before having children, then it was about, well, now let's go and hike or find new things. But now we're a power couple." Her priorities shifted to career advancement and meeting goals identified as important within her marriage. In the final phase of her career, Vera explained after having children her priorities shifted to wanting to center and integrate her family life more. Molly similarly mentioned that she, "loved army life when I was younger," but as she rose through the ranks and became a mother, her perspectives changed. Overall, the inability to embrace identities outside of "service member" led to conflict between competing identities.

Thus, one of the major challenges related to gender and relationship to the military was the antithesis of motherhood and service members identity. Motherhood was cited by participants as a common reason for deciding to leave active duty service. As participants mentioned "once you get pregnant, you are useless to the military." Because the military has physical requirements attached to all its jobs, and some jobs are physically demanding, being pregnant requires special accommodations for physical training and doctors' appointments, and makes service members nondeployable. However, the military requires many women to serve

during critical childbearing years, as there are age maximums for enlisting. As participants weighed the decision to parent, the lack of perceived support at the individual and institutional level was an ultimate relationship ender for some participants. For example, Billie mentioned, “that was one of the reasons why I ended up completely leaving, it was just, it was so hard. Yeah, that's the only thing. If people want to have a family, they should probably not join the military.” Robin similarly left because of a family situation, stating, “I didn't want to get out. But that was the best for my family.” Olive described that the biggest challenge for her on active duty was, “just feel[ing] like you never have any time for yourself and your family.” She continued on to explain that at one of her duty stations, herself and the other nurses “we figured it out one time, we on average, had one day off a month.” In her reflection of that work schedule, Olive admitted she had no idea how they did it. Quinn explained that after she got pregnant with her youngest, “I decided that I was ready to retire because I wanted to raise one of my children.” The all-encompassing nature of the military with long-hours, trainings, and deployments may make it difficult for service members to feel present for their families.

The service member identity as the antithesis of motherhood resulted in some participants experiencing sexist treatment from colleagues and superiors once they got pregnant. Although some participants described wanting to stay in following their pregnancy, the treatment they received during their pregnancy led them to change their mind completely. For example, Helen explained:

I ended up getting pregnant and I didn't find out until three days shy of going to Afghanistan, and it was gonna be a completely different mission. It was very scary, because we weren't gonna be in vehicles, we were gonna be basically ground patrol. And I was like, ‘No, I need armored vehicles to roll.’ So it was a blessing when I found out I



was pregnant. But then, so remember how I told you there's like part of your unit that deploys and then part of them stay behind? So my unit that I'd always been with, was deployed, and I was stuck with people I didn't know. And they treated me terribly, you know, 'oh, you got pregnant on purpose', you know, 'you're just trying to get off these deployments.'

Helen's story was not unique. Grace recalled a superior telling her "Well, nobody told you to keep it" after she decided to get out to raise her daughter. Lidia shared a similar story. Her experience with pregnancy while in the military was so terrible she decided, "There's no way. There's no way I'm reenlisting after this."

In addition to the challenges faced while trying to be a service member while pregnant, participants shared additional difficulties related to balancing motherhood and active duty service. Specifically, they perceived a lack of resources and feelings of guilt related to having chosen the military over their children. For example Carla explained:

I was breastfeeding in bathroom stalls, like there was no nursery rooms, there was no lactation rooms. I've breastfed and I've pumped in cars. I pumped on the floors of bathrooms. I've pumped in very otherwise unsanitary places in order to feed my child. Thankfully there's been improvements there.

Molly explained experiencing discrepancies between parenting allowances for men and women:

It wasn't apparent until towards the end and it kind of opened your eyes to, you know, a man can't come to work because his kid is sick. And that is actually looked upon positively. Whereas when a woman can't come to work because they're kid is sick, it's like, 'the kids sick again [eye roll].'

For those who were single parents, a lack of childcare resources played a significant role in their parenting difficulties. For example Rosa explained, “I had to deploy for a year to Afghanistan as a single mom. . . if it wasn't for my mom helping me, like, I would not have been able to do it.” In addition to the lack of resources like adequate childcare, Robin explained, “having the mom guilt is, is a lot. And when you're in uniform, you know, you have to essentially, choose your mission over your kiddos, and sometimes that's really rough.”

Parenthood for women is viewed as an antithesis to active duty service, whereas men were celebrated for being fathers. As Helen explained, “it's definitely seen more like women do it [get pregnant] on purpose . . . people think you do it on purpose, and they don't see the value in you anymore.” As Jenna explained, “If I didn't join at such a young age, I think I would have started a family way, way sooner, but it was just the overall sacrifice.” Overall, participants felt that men were able to assume parenthood in a way that supported both the service member and parent identities. For women, there became a forced choice between service member and motherhood. For some, this forced choice became a relationship ending ultimatum.

### **Structural Inequities**

Another gendered experience that played a role in participants' relational meaning making was the effects of structural inequities over time. Structural inequities, ranging from ill-fitting gear to gender-specific policies, took a large toll on women service members. For example, participants mentioned that ill-fitting gear not based on women's bodies resulted in long-term physical health impacts. Grace explained that she has “weird arthritis issues and neck issues” because the gear they wore was not made for female bodies. Rosa similarly mentioned that the equipment she was given never fit, which caused huge problems down the road for her. Rosa argued that an important change she wanted to see from the military was, “equipping your

female troops, like you equip your male troops. Equip them appropriately.” Within current structures, women are not properly equipped with gear to be effectively mission ready. Instead, women’s bodies are expected to fit men’s equipment, putting them at a disadvantage during active service and contributing to negative health-related outcomes post service. Similarly, Quinn explained how she was passed up for a promotion because of her gender. As Quinn explained, “I was passed up for a step promotion because they said, ‘Oh, she has her whole career, this dude needs to be promoted, you know?’” Quinn explained that because she “looked younger,” they felt she had her whole career ahead of her to be promoted, although she was more qualified than her male peer for promotion.

Participants shared the challenges they faced surrounding policies intended to lessen the unequal experiences between men and women. Policies related to weight and height did not take into account women’s health and created additional inequities and barriers for women. Olive explained that she was unable to decide when she retired, a male superior decided for her when she was dealing with physical health issues. Olive described:

I was having some physical issues, female issues, that resulted from a hysterectomy, but I was not really able to do the physical tests and the physical exams and the fitness exams. But I had doctor's notes to explain that there was something going on. But I had a commander who was really just gung ho. And I mean, the guy was a runner, and he was a pencil, and, you know, so he actually jumped the gun, putting me into a weight management program. The Air Force has, I mean, all services have weight management programs. But it really wasn't applicable to me, because I had the flight surgeon and the general medical officers notes about what was going on and what they were evaluating. But nobody supported me from that perspective. After he submitted it, and they said,

‘That's all there is.’ And so as soon as that happened, then I got what was what's called a referral meaning that my Officers Performance Report listed me as ‘unable to promote’ because of the weight management program. As soon as that happens, you'll never be promoted again.

Morgan similarly explained how height and weight restrictions affected her:

I never passed height and weight, straight up. And when I was in college, I was three pounds over my screening weight. And my battalion commander, while I was in ROTC in college, sent me to the health clinic for eating disorders, mandatory counseling for eating disorders, because I looked so bad, and I was still over my screening weight because I have such a big frame.

Policies related to height and weight do not take into account the diversity of body shapes and dispersions of body weight that might occur on female bodies. For example, Morgan explained how she was impacted when the regulations regarding taping (i.e., the metric for determining a service member's body fat) were changed, “the day before they changed it I was 5% under and then the day they changed I was 3% over.” Yvette mentioned that the height requirement for the military fleet at the start of her career limited the MOSs she was eligible for.

Furthermore, while there are policies designed to promote inclusion on the surface, participants perceived a gap between the policies and their needs as service members to fully belong as members of the institution. For example, as Molly explained getting the same treatment as male counterparts, “it just was not the same. It just doesn't work like that.” As Rosa argued, “we are equal, but we are very different. We have a lot of different things to bring to the table.” Those differences need to be taken into account. For example, policies such as separating the genders while in the field or during deployment, while seemingly helpful, actually lead to

additional safety concerns for participants. For example, Grace explained how after days in the field with 14 guys, leadership finally asked if she would like an enclosure put up to change; however, separating the genders puts women at a higher risk. As Helen explained:

We used to share the same like tent with our guys, but when I went back, they wanted us to be separate. And of course, we were upset because we're like, 'but now we're more of a target', you know, because a lot of people would be sexually assaulted there.

This excerpt from the interview with Helen highlights how women felt safer during deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan sleeping in the same tent with the service members they had trained with for months or potentially years before deploying. Because of the relationships built within their teams, participants felt like the men they knew would protect them from experiencing sexual assault from other men who did not know them. Thus, it was when women were moved to separate tents away from their direct peers that participants felt sexual assault and harassment were more likely to occur. Charlotte described how during her deployments, you always had to have a buddy on base. Although she understood the reason for needing the buddy system, Charlotte explained, "But then, you know, I'm gone for four days by myself, all around the country, no one's hearing from me. But you're gonna, like, berate me for walking to the gym alone on this well-lit big base." Although some policies and structures were seemingly put in place to protect women, they actually put women at higher risk and put additional burdens on female service members.

Overall, as Molly poignantly stated "they don't have the services or infrastructure to truly support women." As a result of the lack of structures to adequately support women in their mission readiness, participants felt an increased sense of "otheredness". Overtime, the experience of structural inequities played a role in how women perceived their relationship to the military.

## Sexual Harassment and Assault

Lastly, participants experiences with sexual harassment and assault played a role in their relational meaning making. A total of 22 out of 30 participants<sup>7</sup> (73%) mentioned experiencing sexual harassment or assault first hand or knew of fellow women service members who experienced sexual harassment or assault. While the interview protocol did not specifically ask about participants experiences with sexual violence, many participants shared in response to question 8 (see Appendix B) that their gender resulted in sexual violence that played a role in their military experiences. Experiences with sexual violence ranged from unsolicited comments to traumatic assault. These incidents left lasting impressions on the participants regarding their relationship to the military. For example, Wilma explained:

I mean, I guess sexual harassment is like the best word for it. It, it, yeah, I mean, I won't make excuses for that. It just, you know, it was verbal, it was all verbal, it was with other people around even so it almost made it even worse.

Throughout her description, Wilma struggled to label her experiences as sexual harassment as evidenced through using terms such as “I guess” and the repetition of “it” when finally deciding to call it verbal sexual harassment. Olive said a similar statement, “it would be called harassment now. We, you know, we didn't really look at it that way.” Helen explained having to navigate the difficulty of saying no, “the downside of being a pretty female in a predominately male job is having to find a way to go ‘No thanks. Yeah, well, I don't care if you're my supervisor.’” Scarlet shared that she unfortunately experienced two incidents of sexual assault. Scarlet explained:

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<sup>7</sup> In 2021, the most recent report, 8.4% of women around 16,000 service members experienced unwanted sexual contact. However, scholars estimate that sexual harassment and assault experiences are higher than reported as many factors play a role in people's decision to report incidents and how incidents are handled by chain of command (Sexual Assault Prevention and Rape, 2022).

I was taken advantage of by an older Airman, who had a history of sexual assault already, and was actually in holding for that sexual assault. Like he was waiting there for his legal case to go on. And [the Air Force] was just keeping him there. And that Airman would, I was young and dumb, and they manipulated me with their words. They would literally take me to places where they knew that cameras didn't work and they would, they would do bad things [sexual assault]. And I was, I was afraid to tell anyone.

Scarlet explained that this experience led her to experiencing further sexual assault later in her military career. Paige described experiencing both verbal and physical harassment. In one instance while Paige was holding the door, "I held the door for him. And he's like, 'Oh, no, you go ahead. Like I like the view from back here' and stuff like that." In another incident, a captain grabbed her butt without her consent, a type of physical sexual aggression.

Some participants mentioned hearing about sexual harassment and assault experiences through rumors, which made sexual harassment and assault feel welcomed in the military culture. For example, Molly recalled hearing about an E4 and an E9 sleeping together. There is a significant power disparity between an E4 and E9 rank. E9 is the highest rank for enlisted service members, and E4 is considered a junior enlisted rank. Irene shared a similar story of an older sergeant major who "selected all young women" for his administrative team. She continued on to explain that even though he was married, he got one of his administrative team members pregnant. As Irene described:

It was just gross because everyone knew, everyone knew what was happening. It was openly talked about what was happening. But no one could do anything because it was Sergeant Major. And what makes it worse is our commander, like the battalion commander, was a fucking woman!

Irene's example illustrates that sexual harassment and sexual assault were openly discussed, and the perceived abuse of power was tolerated. Further, the use of profanity in her description of the events underscores the anger and disgust she felt over the situation. Quinn explained that after she took over one of the training schools she found out there were "quite a few violations," such as instructors sleeping with students. She worked hard to curtail any inappropriate behavior and was viewed negatively for it in the beginning.

In addition to experiencing and hearing about sexual harassment and assault, these cases were handled problematically. Many participants described a lack of action by the chain of command or described experiencing retaliation for reporting the case. For example, Eleanor explained that after her sexual harassment, assault, rape, prevention (SHARP) case, her leadership tried to move her, "it was more of like so 'I'm getting punished.' I thought like, 'No, I'm not the one that did something wrong, he did something wrong.'" Vera shared a similar story in which she brought forth a SHARP complaint, and it was dismissed at the time. As Vera explained:

It wasn't until like six months later, another coworker of mine was like, 'I just caught him doing this.' And I was like, 'Well, I blew the whistle and he was senior to me. I got moved. You saw what happened.' He was like, 'I'm so sorry. I didn't believe you.' And I was like, 'Dude, I claim harassment. No one wanted to listen, that's fine. Now you get to deal with it.' Hopefully those female soldiers go on and don't think that they can just sleep with their platoon sergeants, but whatever.

Although she followed the proper protocols, her experience and report of harassment was dismissed. This was common among participants who mentioned that SHARP cases were oftentimes dismissed, improperly investigated, or otherwise ignored. As Scarlet explained related



to her SHARP cases, “I went to the chaplain, I went to everyone I could. I did everything they told you to do. I still got punished. . . that felt really unfair. I feel like they really kicked me in the pants there.” Olive mentioned that, “as much as they [SHARP] are supposed to be non-punitive and non-retaliatory, that cannot be controlled.” Retaliation for reporting SHARP incidents was a real fear for women in the military. Thus, how sexual harassment and assault cases were experienced, talked about, and handled played a role in how participants made sense of their relationship to the military during and after leaving service.

Importantly, some participants mentioned that they did feel like the culture of the military surrounding sexual harassment and assault was changing. For example, Rosa, who worked in military crime investigations, explained a shift in taking SHARP cases seriously:

I was ready to face investigations where if a female said that she was sexually assaulted, people would say ‘she's lying’. And the case wouldn't be opened up. Or like, the subject will be like, ‘Hey, he's a good guy, he gets out in a year, blah, blah, blah.’ Now, we're at the point to where it's evolved to where people's allegations are taken seriously. And we find out that that ‘good’ Airman is a predator. And he has not only one, but he has three other victims.

Quinn and Grace similarly mentioned hearing that the culture of the military was shifting to a “kinder, gentler military.” Molly echoed that she felt today’s military was more respectful stating, “the Army's more respectful of, you know, men and women, women's rights, men's rights, all the other stuff .” However, while participants acknowledged the culture of the military was shifting, they lamented that “it takes, sadly, big events that have come out in the media, for changes to happen.” Morgan similarly echoed that society “pushed that. You know, the ‘kinder, gentler, be nice to everybody’ society that we're in right now is forcing the military to be human.

You can no longer be an asshole and get away with it.” Although some participants perceived the military as evolving, they did express a desire for additional progress. As Lidia stated:

I think military culture is starting to move towards men and women being equal, which is a very good direction for it to be going in. I think, as long as it keeps going in that direction, we're going to be very well off.

Ultimately, however, participants experiences with sexual harassment and assault, as well as the lack of action taken to rectify these events during their time in service played a role in their relationship to the military in the long-term.

### **Love/Hate Relationship**

The result of inequitable experiences based on gender resulted in participants, at this moment in time, expressing a “love-hate relationship” to the military. A total of 18 out of 30 participants communicated feeling a “love/hate” relationship. Robin, for example, explained, “You have kind of amnesia over all of the kind of bad times, you know.” Grace stated, “I look upon it as both good and bad. Just with anything else that you know, you're going to have bad experiences, you're going to have good experiences, I tend to focus more on the good.”

Charlotte, Billie, and Kaya all responded that they have a “love/hate relationship” when asked about their relationship to the military today. Olive described her relationship to the military as “historied,” alluding to the conflicting feelings she felt related to her service. For example, while most of her experiences in service was good, she had feelings of dissatisfaction related to the end of her career when her retirement was initiated without her consent. Morgan explained that she was:

a little salty leaving, but then I sit back and I go, You know what, look at the other 23 and a half years and how was that? So? Couple of bad times. But I would say 90% of my military career was amazing.

Unfortunately, for some participants their relationship to the military after leaving service was strictly negative. For example, Isabella, who was reluctant to even participate in the interview, mentioned that she did not want to remember her time in service. She explained that she never talks about her time in service unless it benefits her family. Alta repeatedly stated, “I have so much anger towards the military. I'm very angry. I'm very angry because I see a system that takes advantage of people, and they willingly do so.” Molly explained that, “the military opened my eyes to life, and I'm very bitter. I'm a very bitter person seeing the things that I've seen.” For participants like Scarlet who had a traumatic out-processing experience, “I have a lot of paranoia that the military instilled in me. So I keep everything anonymous to the best of my ability.”

Those who had extremely negative experiences with the military communicated perceiving an overall negative perception of the military which resulted in their advice to women thinking of joining the military: “don't”. For example Irene stated, “I honestly would not join the military, unless you have absolutely no other choice. Just because it leaves you scarred.” Isabella said that she had no advice for women entering into service and hasn't encouraged women or her children to enter into service. Alta similarly mentioned not wanting her daughters to ever join the military. Overall, participants feelings towards the military can be summed up by Carla who explained her relationship to the military as a frenemy, “It's like a like a frenemy. Yeah, like bittersweet.”

## **Summary**

Based on participant responses, gender was found to play a role in participants' relationship to the military. Specifically, how women were allowed to embrace identities related to gender, structural inequities related to supporting women, and women's experiences with sexual assault and harassment influenced participants meaning making of their relationship to the military. The result of these negative experiences was a love/hate relationship to the military. For some participants, this also resulted in their advice to women thinking about joining the military "don't do it".

**RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?**

Communication played a variety of roles in participants' meaning making of their relationship to their respective military branch. Four overarching themes were identified to answer research question three. First, *communication played a significant role* throughout women's time in service. This theme illustrates how communication changed, ebbed and flowed, throughout participants' experiences within the military, as well as during their transition out of the military. The second theme identified was how military service *changed participants' overall communication behaviors*. Upon reflection, participants noted that their communication was more direct as a result of their military service. Participants also acknowledged that their time outside of the US on military missions helped them to build their intercultural and strategic communication competence. The third theme identified was the *difference between the Air Force and Army* in communication performance expectations. This theme is characterized as how participants felt that the different branches had different communication performance expectations based on their mission and how the branches built their reputation. The fourth theme identified was the *communication dimensions of relationships*. Two communication

dimensions of relationships were identified, including communication that was non-reciprocal and based on time.

### **Communication Throughout Military Experience**

Communication played a variety of roles within participants' relational meaning making. Five main subthemes were identified as phases of communication throughout participants' military experience. First, communication was used to jump start participants' connection to the military. Second, once in the military, communication was used to reinforce cultural norms. Third, participants identified that communication occurred at different relationships levels. Fourth, during participants' transition out of service, communication, or lack thereof, played an integral role in participants' relational meaning making to the military. Fifth, the perceived ineffective communication of transition assistance resources and programs played a role in their perceptions of their relationship to the military during and post transition.

### ***Communication for Recruitment***

For participants, communication was first used to recruit them into the military, ultimately starting the relationship. Participants mentioned that communication surrounding the role of the military as “providing a greater purpose” was a large motivating factor for joining the military. Some participants specifically referenced communication surrounding 9/11 as their catalyst for enlisting. As described by Ella, “It was actually the beginning of my sophomore year of college. And then 9/11 happened and my roommate and I decided that we were going to join the military.” Charlotte also mentioned the role of 9/11 in her decision to join, noting “both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were kind of in full swing.”

While not all participants specifically referenced 9/11, the communication of the military providing the avenue to serve a greater purpose was a common factor in participant's decision to join. For example as Dina explained:

At the particular time that I joined I was 20 years old, and was kind of not really satisfied with how my life was at the time. And it just kind of felt like I was kind of entering into this season of just coasting. I was just working full-time, going to the gym, going to my church, and it was just not fulfilling at all.

The communication surrounding joining the armed forces to serve a higher purpose played an invaluable role in recruiting participants' to join the military. As Kaya explained, "I just had this desire to serve and to be a part of something that was wholesome and making a difference."

Tracy stated, "I wanted to serve other people. So I think that's something that the Air Force was really good at, is giving us opportunities to volunteer and to serve other people." Thus, communication was a recruitment tool used to begin participants' relationship to the military.

### ***Communication Used to Reinforce Hegemonically Masculine Cultural Norms***

After the start of their relationship to the military, communication was used to reinforce hegemonically masculine cultural norms. Oftentimes, these cultural norms reinforced traditional gender stereotypes regarding women, resulting in women's subjugation. As Molly described, the expectations communicated to women often highlighted that they were a "nuisance" or hindrance on the system rather than a benefit. Verbal harassment, bullying, name calling, and the silent treatment were some overt ways communication was used to reinforce cultural norms that women service members were "less than" or inferior to their male peers. Scarlet recalled, "I experienced what I thought was a little bit of discrimination. I was bullied in tech school." Kaya echoed a similar experience in her tech school stating, "And the folks that I went to tech school

with, were really unkind. Just a lot of, like, belittling.” Quinn mentioned that the treatment under one of her male supervisors was so toxic, “we did have occupational health come in and speak to all of us because of how he was treating us. I totally forgot about that. I try not to remember that.” Grace shared some of the common sayings communicated to her about women while in service, “I remember hearing something like ‘I don't trust anything that bleeds for a week and doesn't die’” and the “golden pussy syndrome”. Graced described that “golden pussy syndrome” is a result of prolonged exposure to situations where the ratio of men to women is high, so men’s standards for women’s attractiveness decreases as they are just focused on having sex. Olive mentioned how, “You'll always hear flight nurses and pilots go together” was a common phrase she heard as a flight nurse. Fran explained, “you're going to be surrounded by dirty jokes and you're going to be surrounded by the snide comments that are about civilian women.” For many of the participants, derogatory and degrading communication was just part of the male dominated military. Molly similarly mentioned that, “I can tell you that there's discrimination [against women]. It's prevalent.” Overall, communication was one way in which discrimination was (re)produced. As Eleanor explained, “in the infantry, there's a lot of old mindsets still there. And it, it breeds.” Eleanor provided an example related to physical issues and pain, sharing how infantry leadership would tell people to “push through it, rub dirt in it.” As a result, Eleanor witnessed an increase in injuries during her service that became especially troubling when leadership required people to go into the field during a winter storm and 50+ people went down as cold weather casualties.

In addition to communication being used to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, communication was also used to limit what women could be. Technically women were not allowed into “combat” roles until 2016, when the DoD eliminated the “1994 Direct Ground

Combat Definition and Assignment Rule” in 2013 (Carter, 2015); however, from participants' experiences, women have been in active war zones at the height of both Iraqi Freedom and Operation Freedom, getting shot at and blown up well-before 2016, oftentimes without the same training as their male peers. However, the limit on women's available Military Occupational Specialty (MOSs) negated many participants' combat experiences. For example, Wilma shared her experiences as a medic in Baghdad in the late 2000s, recounting how constant fire and explosions left her with Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). Helen similarly shared that she had to be hypervigilant during her two deployments because of the improvised explosive device (IED) blasts and mortars going off. Molly explained:

Even before [2016] women were in combat. If you were a supply sergeant in Iraq, guess what? You were shooting people, so you could call it combat or not, but every job was combat. You know, in the wars, if you were over there, you were locked and loaded just like the men in the convoys doing everything that they did, and sometimes more because, you know, there's a culture overseas, there are cultural issues with men talking to women and everything like that. So there always had to be a woman available. And you know, there's just things that women experience that I don't see how you're not changed.

Yvette similarly described, “women did a lot of firsts over there. . . we have proven our mettle. . . and most of us [women] were not trained in combat, but yet we were forced into combat situations, and we proved that we can improvise.” Ultimately, communication was used to limit what people expected women could do based on the “restrictions” of MOSs, even though women were in the same combat zones and experiencing the same traumatic war experiences as their male counterparts.

### ***Communication Relationship Levels***



Participants expressed that communication was experienced at different relationship levels, and that the communication at these different relationship levels played a role in how participants made sense of their relationship to the military during and after active duty service. Thus, how participants conceptualized their relationship to the military was based on three different levels of direct influence to their day-to-day experience.

The first communication relationship level identified was “the military”. While “the military” was not often mentioned as playing a role in participants’ meaning making experiences, participants often used the term “the military” when referring to their active duty experience for ease of explanation, making it an important umbrella relationship. “The military” was defined as all the branches fighting for the broader mission of protecting the US. As Robin stated, “the military, is kind of the umbrella, like all the services. We have a mission. We have a mission to defend and protect, period. . . I think at the end of the day, we all have the same mission.” Participants mentioned that while all the branches had their own sub-missions, they all served a greater purpose to meet the needs of the US overall. Thus, communication with “the military” was limited.

The second communication relationship level identified by participants as impacting their relationship with the military was the “corporate” or C-suite level of each branch. Often called “Big Blue” or “Big Army” sarcastically, this level was characterized by policy orders and initiatives that would impact the day-to-day lives of service members. As Scarlet explained:

I was raised to question everything and be a skeptic. I definitely didn't play into the Big Blue a whole lot . . . I feel like it's the same relationship as it would be with like corporate versus the service industry, like you have ‘Big Blue’. And then there's the day-to-day of the service members, that's definitely a divide. Now, it doesn't necessarily happen in

every office. But we do get the dog and pony shows [from Big Blue] that come in weekly and monthly, what have you. And they are very noticeable. And they're very distinct. So you can definitely feel a change, depending on who's around and what sort of environment you're in.

In Scarlet's description, there is a divide between those who make the policies, "Big Blue", and the lives of the service members who are impacted by them. Because of this divide, participants seemed to be most disillusioned with "Big Blue" or "Big Army." As Molly explained, "most everything that I have a problem with is more institutional than it is individually."

The third communication relationship level identified was the direct experiences level, i.e., the daily interactions with fellow service members and chain of command. These experiences were varied and heavily influenced by the "local" culture at different military installations and during different military missions. As such, these experiences and relationships were characterized by participants as the most impactful relationship experiences because they were tied to individual experiences vs. serving "corporate" Air Force or Army. Participants described both positive and negative communication experiences at this level.

As Fran stated, "the people" were the most important part of her military service experience. Charlotte similarly explained:

Because there's no like 'the Army', right? 'The Army' isn't there. It's like, you know, your unit or this person you're trying to command or this leadership person. I'm like, 'the Army' is great. Like I love doing all that play soldier garbage and like go in the woods and that kind of thing. But trying to make any progress on things it very much depends on who your commanders are and what they're trying to get out of it, whether it's a

promotion, or they really care about what's going on, or they just want to keep on other wheels going.

As Billie explained, “I felt like the people that I was around made me feel like, I had a family, even though they were not my family.” Molly similarly mentioned that relationships within a unit were, “almost like a family that you have without being blood related.” Helen explained the impact of having supportive team members around when she first tried to drive a forklift:

I remember the first time I got behind a forklift, I knocked every pallet over in this little obstacle course type thing. And I remember crying because I'm like, ‘I'm terrible at this. This is the worst. I'm the only female.’ But they were awesome. That was like my first taste of them actually, like rooting me on and cheering me on.

Even though she failed her first try at the obstacle course, her peers made her feel supported, cheering her on to keep improving. Having supportive people in your corner impacted people’s perceptions of their relationship to the military. Kaya explained:

I think the biggest thing for me was the, I believe the word may be, camaraderie as far as it was such an amazing experience. I think that's what really keeps a lot of people sometimes in the military, as far as, like, the type of friendships you build.

Thus, the friendships and connections “made huge differences” in people’s military experiences. Olive described that she still gets together every three years with some of the nurses she served with because of the bonds they built during their time on active duty. Charlotte explained, “[it] can be frustrating, there's always one and two that drive you crazy, but [I] always usually had a really good group of soldiers. And that kind of is like, your motivating force.” As Morgan asserted, “my military folks are ride or die.”

Not all experiences on the individual level were positive however, and negative interactions as a result of ineffective communication or bad leadership, had similarly impactful effects on participants. For example as Dina explained, “Bad leadership is the number one issue that I've seen the most. And that's part of the reason, that is the reason why I did not sign up for another eight years.” Dina explained that one of her leaders failed to sign her healthcare paperwork after she communicated with them several times about the urgency. This impacted her combat readiness and led to frustration as Dina explained, “I can't follow a bad leader. I just, I'm not motivated. The morale is low. I can't function the way that I know I can function.” As Scarlet echoed, “good leadership is the foundation of success. If you do not trust the person who was above you, you are not in for a good time, you're just going to be riddled with a lot of problems.” Participants adeptly noted that negative communication experiences with leadership could ripple down the chain of command. As Eleanor explained, “it just takes one bad leader. And the toxicity breeds.” Negative experiences over time could lead people to decide to separate from the military, as Morgan explained:

It is true to fact, even in and out of the military, you will never leave a job because of the job. You will leave a job because of the people. I left the military, I dropped my retirement paperwork because the organization I was in, my boss who was a full bird colonel, was a herbivore. He did not have a backbone. And the deputy who was a civilian was an asshole.

Carla similarly noted the role of communication and leadership in her decision to leave active duty service:

If you had a good job, but a really bad boss, that could really make your experience bad, or if you had a really bad job, but a really great boss that can really change it. And for

me, I think one of the big factors that contributed to me separating from active duty was at my last active duty unit, I had a boss who I felt was preventing me from growing to my fullest potential.

Vera similarly mentioned that one of her reasons for separating from the military was that she felt she was mentoring her superiors more than they were mentoring her. Ultimately, this left Vera feeling like there were no opportunities for continued professional development. Overall, as summarized by Irene's description explanation:

Wherever you go, your base is completely dictated by your command team. I went through four different command teams, and every one of them completely changed the atmosphere. It went from being the absolute worst time of my entire life to being 'I don't want to leave.'

Thus, the individual communication level of relationships played a significant role in participants' experiences while in service. Sometimes communication fostered life-long relationships. In other cases, negative relational communication experience over time resulted in participants' decision to separate from active duty service.

### ***Communication During Transition Out***

Communication played a significant role in participants' experience during their transition out of active duty service. Once participants decided to leave service, communication played a role in their feelings of connectedness. For example, Rebecca explained that after she decided to separate, "I just felt more and more shunned. Because I wasn't given the opportunities as other people were because they knew I was getting out. Or like they wouldn't ask as much of me." Grace similarly explained that once people knew you were getting out, "they will call her

fat, they will call her the B word, they would call her lazy. Once they knew that you were getting out, you were less than worthless.”

The negative communication experienced by service members from leadership and peers during their transition out was often compounded by an anticlimactic end to their service. As Yvette stated, “one day, I was in the military, and the next day, I wasn't. And so that was a little disconcerting.” Dina shared the anticlimactic ending to her military service:

He [an Army administrative specialist] was on the phone, he said, ‘All right, well, it looks like you satisfied your contract your obligation. It's been a pleasure serving with you. If you have any questions or want to change your mind, you know where to reach me, or where to reach us.’ I was like, ‘It's been real.’ So yeah that was it. And then we hung up and it was literally probably like a 10 minute conversation.

After hanging up the phone, Dina sarcastically described, “I was like ‘wow, I'm glad y'all are gonna miss me.’” Scarlet was medically discharged from active duty as a result of mental distress and described that, “[in] five days, like yes, that was the quickest thing they've ever done in the military is kick me off of a foreign island. Booting me from the military. It was impressive.” Scarlet explained:

I didn't know what was happening to me at the time. I didn't know what my future was. And they were not setting me up for success. I was thinking that the whole time, I was grateful that I had a family waiting for me on the other side because without my mother to support me, I probably would be homeless.

Rebecca explicitly remembered during her transition out that:

I wasn't given resources. I wasn't given a goodbye. I wasn't given a, ‘hey, if you need any help,’ or ‘you need like access to different records on your file,’ or ‘if you need help with

anything VA related, reach out to so and so.' I'd gotten none of that. I'd gotten my car and left. And that was the end of it. I mean, there was nothing given.

Olive described the hardest part for her during the separation was the official exit:

I don't think I took the time to really understand the separation thing. I was retired, my family came, we celebrated, everybody got on an airplane. The next day I drove to [city], and started this, whole new, literally whole new part of my civilian career.

While there was a lack of communication with participants during their transition out, service members often experienced intense emotions related to the end of their service. As Vera explained, "It was grief at first, because I really missed the soldiers. I really, really, really missed the soldiers and I worried about them." Vera's use of "really" emphasized the pain and emotion she felt. Jenna similarly mentioned feeling a sense of grief during the transition process:

Emotionally, it was kind of like, grieving-ish. It was very much sad, in a sense, as far as leaving friendships and knowing you won't ever meet anyone like you do in the military. Those people, the, the bonds you make with them, knowing that if you were ever in a situation that they would literally, I guess, die for you. You never meet that type of friendship ever.

For Carla, who was planning on completing 20 years but had to leave early due to a joint military situation (i.e., both people in the relationship are active-duty members of the military), the unexpected nature of her transition left her feeling surprised and caught off guard. Carla explained, "all of a sudden reality hit like, 'oh, shit, now, you're gonna have to get out. And you're getting out in six months'." Robin likened the process of leaving to a marriage. Robin described:

So it's a lot harder to get out than it is to go in. It's kind of like a marriage, right? You can do it at the courthouse with a couple 100 bucks, and you're married. And then a divorce takes like years, it's insane. There's so much paperwork, and you really have to start thinking about it, like a year or two ahead of time, which sometimes, you know, you just, you don't want to, and so you can kind of, I know I made it harder on myself because I kind of kept dragging my feet.

Intense emotions were often associated with the process of separating from service, and participants described how they often did not have the space to communicate these emotions with their peers. As noted by Dina, “I think all veterans who are coming out, go through this wave of depression because you're on your own.”

Overall, the negative communication experienced, the anticlimactic end of the relationship to the military as an active duty service member, and intense feelings of grief and sadness related to leaving active duty compounded for participants. As Wilma mentioned, “I hardly remember anything. And then that was it. Like I was just out.” Nora similarly explained, “it was really fast. Um, so I was like in school and I found out that I was being medically discharged. And then it's like, four months later, I was a civilian.” Ultimately, Irene summed up the experience of transitioning out:

All I remember is that you don't know anything. You don't know anything. People don't tell you anything. You just show up for appointments and you just hope you say the right key words, right buzzwords. And then you're separated. It was a very fast process. No, it was slow. Like it's a slow process like snail mail. But in the moment, it is so fast and uncontrollable, that you have no idea what's going on. And then when you try to ask questions, either you're a hindrance, or no one can send you to the right place.



The lack of communication and the overwhelming nature of the out-transition process left a lot to be desired for participants who had given so much of their time and life to the institution. As Alta argued, “If you can break them down and give them the skills to be in the military, you should help them return to their position before they joined, you should help them be more human again.”

### ***Communication of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Resources***

While participants were experiencing negative communication from peers and leadership, as well as difficult emotions during their transition out, they were also expected to retain all of the information provided by the transition assistance program (TAP) related to civilian life such as finding a job in the civilian world, managing finances outside of the military, and signing up for Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare. Ella stated, “I think, the problem is you get like a day to go through TAPs, but it feels like it's absolutely nothing. And so the information I was getting wasn't helpful. It was just sort of compounding things.” Tracy mentioned that, “from Air Force as a whole? No, I didn't [feel adequately supported]. I think what they offered was just to baseline level.” Rosa and Robin both mentioned that the “transition assistance program (TAP) is garbage, absolute garbage.”

When recalling her experience with TAP, Wilma explained that while she had “those couple of days of like briefings and PowerPoints and a bunch of packets of information, it felt so hard to understand it or sift through.” Rebecca explained that you rushed through TAP and so it wasn't helpful. As Carla described, “it was an overflow of information. It felt like a fire hose. And I only held on to the things that were going to be relatable to me for that moment in time.” Carla explained:

If I were the TAP queen for a day, I would extend TAP well beyond a service member's career, let's say like five years, right? Because what a service member is focusing on while they're going through the transition, there's so many things that they're not going to pick up on.

Fran similarly explained, “you don't know if it's useful until after you've gotten out into the civilian world.” She further explained TAP, “might show you how to write a general resume, but even that is probably not going to help you. I acknowledge that they're trying to help and trying to do their best but the whole TAP program could be revamped.” Rosa mentioned, “I would have liked to see more time off to actually retire, because that's a full time job if you do it correctly.” Eleanor explained that she felt she was “on my own for a lot of things” during the transition process.

Quinn and Alta specifically mentioned the lack of transition resources geared towards women. Quinn explained, “when you meet another veteran, that is a woman, you can share in some of the different experiences. The conversations are just a little bit different. It would have been nice if they would have had some of that representation” at TAP. Alta described that none of the programming was geared towards women and so they “don't teach you how to dress for interviews after wearing the same outfit every day [for years].” She went on to explain that for people who spend 20 years in the military, “they get out and they look so goofy. The women they dress like, this is gonna sound conservative, but they dressed too provocative, because they want to feel feminine because they have not been allowed to feel feminine.” Overall, in the rush of complete everything during the separation process, participants felt underprepared by the current resources provided by the military. Once officially out of service, they felt as though the military left them to fend for themselves.

## **Changes to Long Term Communication Behaviors**

For many of the participants, their military service fundamentally changed how they communicate. Specifically, participants mentioned that their communication became more direct, and they gained intercultural and strategic communication competence from their time in service.

### ***Direct Communication and the Military Dialect***

Many participants asserted that their communication behaviors were informed by their time in service and became more direct. For example, Ella explained, “I was never a super direct person. But I became a very direct person.” She explained that during her time in the Air Force, it was “just sort of like picking up an accent” to become more direct in her communication. Robin explained, “in the military, you kind of step up and be a male, essentially. Especially like, my communication skills are male. And I, you know, I talk like a male, I cuss with the best of them.” After leaving service Robin explained that:

[while in] I was able to adjust a little bit and become kind of more male, which is, unfortunately, the default gender in the military. But it became more marked when I came out, which was, I found, I wasn't expecting that.

Due to the communication behaviors participants acquired while in service, they often needed to “tone down” or “check” the directness of their communication after leaving service as it was not well-received in the civilian world. While participants found their direct communication to be positive, they grappled with it being unacceptable in the civilian world. As Grace stated, “I am more blunt and more directive sometimes in my talking, and that's not always well received. People sometimes will say you're pushy.” Rosa, Morgan, Robin, and Ella all mentioned how they did not realize their communication behaviors changed until they left active duty service. Once they interacted more with the civilian world, all four participants mentioned that people

were “shocked” by their communication style. Rosa explained, “I’m single now. I have heard this, I don’t know how many times when I’ve went out on a date, and I just had this conversation with a guy. And they’re like, ‘you’re very direct. You’re intimidating.’” Morgan similarly explained how she has needed to change her communication style since leaving the military . Morgan stated that in the military “it is an active voice. It is a command, directive type of voice, especially being an officer. It is, ‘you will go do this now.’” However the command, directive voice, especially coming from a woman, was not well received in the civilian world. Morgan explained:

But in the civilian world is like, ‘hey, is there anybody that might be available later on? I need like, I don’t know, like, 6 people that would be great. But if there’s like maybe 10 people that could come and help me that would be amazing. Yeah, I’ll buy pizza, you know?’ You can’t be assertive. Unless you’re in a profession that requires assertiveness, or it’s blue collar or it’s male dominated.

This was echoed by Robin and Ella who also mentioned, “when communicating via email I now mentally have to go back and soften my language.”

Ultimately, as Robin explained, the military has its own “dialect”. She explained she is, “very grateful that I have that experience, and that I have that language, you know, being able to fall back on military dialect is fun.” Robin, who works with military service members, continued on to explain that her use of military speak surprised people and she was able to “kind of fall back on how I used to talk to general officers. And it’s so lovely, because the line of communication just opens.” Wilma similarly mentioned that her ability to speak in the military dialect enhanced her credibility in her current job with active duty service members and other

people within the DoD. Thus, time spent in the military shaped participants' overall approach to communication.

### ***Intercultural and Strategic Communication Competence***

In addition to more direct communication patterns and military speak, many participants explained that their time out of the country on deployments or Outside of the Contiguous United States (OCONUS) orders provided opportunities for them to build their intercultural communication competence and taught them the value of strategic communication. Rebecca explained that she had to alter her communication while working with Iraqi forces because of the cultural expectations surrounding the role of women. Rebecca explained:

There had been plenty of times where I had to change, not my, not my views, per se, but I had to tone it down, you know, I couldn't just go in and be like, 'Hey, I'll come help you with your radio.' Um, I had to let the men talk to each other while I talked to my interpreter to get done what needed to get done.

Similar to Rebecca's story, Morgan shared how she had to approach her work and communication differently when working with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. Morgan described a situation in which she completed a task in two weeks which was slotted for four months. Morgan's foreign affiliated Lieutenant Colonel at the time took her to get coffee to "explain how this works." As Morgan described, "So he took me to coffee and is like 'you need to slow down'. So that was a whole different world." Other participants like Vera similarly mentioned having to change communication and work styles when working with NATO. Ultimately, for Vera, some of the most valuable experience she gained from military service was, "being exposed to different cultures, and learning about different, just different cultures and how they do things." Yvette, who spent 5 and ½ years stationed in Asia explained

that she was grateful for her time in Japan, as she was able to fully immerse herself in a new culture. She expressed, “My Japanese friends would be like, ‘You're more Japanese [than me]’, which I took as a compliment.”

Engaging in strategic communication was also an important skill participants cultivated during their time in service. Charlotte explained how vital communication was for building relationships with colleagues she never met in-person. Charlotte described:

When I was in Africa I never met most of the people that I worked with, you know, it was either over the phone or via email. . . so you kind of have to build relationships with each person and also understand that you're only getting like a percentage of what that relationship or communication could be.

Charlotte continued to say, “just being super professional, and trying to find common ground in the things that you're doing” became vital for building those relationships and getting the job done. Fran explained some of the most important lessons she learned while at a service academy related to communication. Fran stated:

Good things that were taught to us at the academy, especially by like, NCOs about ‘don't talk down to people, don't treat them like you know everything because you don't,’ and all that sat well with me and it played out well for me using those kinds of techniques. I just carried that with me through life and in the civilian world.

Similarly Grace explained, “I've learned my lessons, you might say, on how to approach situations differently, how to pay better attention not only to what things are said, but how they're said, voice inflection and stuff like that.” Overall, their time in service taught participants the importance of “trying to find the best way to get your point across and somehow creating a good relationship with whoever you're communicating with.”

## **Communication Performance Differences Between the Air Force and Army**

The third theme to answer research question three was the difference in communication performance expectations between the Air Force and Army. While some participants perceived communication differences based on what they viewed on social media and the reputation of each branch, other participants had first-hand experience working in joint service environments and witnessing differences in communication expectations between branches. Thus, this theme is characterized as how participants perceived communication expectations between the Air Force and Army.

One of the differences participants perceived related to communication performance was due to the different missions of each branch. As Robin explained, “I think that the sub-missions of the branches are really important.” Tracy similarly stated, “I think every branch has something unique about them. So I think there are elements of the military that apply to every service, but every service has a different way of doing things.” This different way of doing things to meet the different mission requirements was further explained by Ella who noted, “so for me, [the Air Force] a lot more mental service to the country. So like, I got to do some really cool strategic thinking.” Nora similarly mentioned, “[the] Army and the Marines, they break you down so you follow orders without like, thought. But at least in the Air Force, they hire you because of the way you think and your intelligence.”

The difference between participants' descriptions of what it means to be an Airman or Soldier also illustrated differences in communication expectations between branches. Those who served in the Air Force often referenced the Airman's creed in response to what it means to be an Airman. For example, when asked what it means to be an Airman, Quinn responded, “without citing Airman's Creed [chuckle]?” Helen explained, “it does sound so cheesy, but we had an

Airman creed that we would say, you know, like the Air Force song and all that kind of stuff, that I still know by heart.” Scarlet similarly mentioned “what is it? Service before self? Excellence in all you do? Integrity first? Oh, I did it in the wrong order, but I remember the Airman's creed, they like pop that into your head pretty early on.” Although there is a soldiers creed, none of the Army participants interviewed mentioned the soldiers creed in response to what they felt it means to be a soldier. Instead, those who served in the Army like Dina and Morgan mentioned that to be a soldier meant to, “to protect and defend and uphold American morality” and “defend the American people.” Fran similarly mentioned that to be a soldier meant, “serving your country . . . to achieve the mission.”

Participants also explained that communication about the different branches played a role in how they perceived each branch. For example, Lidia stated in the Air Force, “we work smarter, not harder. Everybody calls us the ‘chair force,’ But you know, I'd rather be sitting down doing my job.” Other participants who served in the Air Force also mentioned being called the “chair force” by other branches. Paige explained:

The quality of like workforce, I saw more quality in the Navy and the Air Force. Um, sometimes you would have some other services that were, it just seemed like, the others might be less like, they were more service first, then like, what our mission was. They were more focused on doing what their service needed [vs. the larger mission of the joint task force].

Ella similarly described a situation during her time in tech school that she felt illustrated the difference between the Air Force and the Army. As Ella started:

The Army is just its own beast. I was in [tech school], where the temperature is a cool seventy degrees all day, every day. It doesn't get hot; it doesn't get cold. And the Air



Force, the Marine Corps, the Navy and DoD, civilians, we would all do PT [physical training] in the afternoon. The Army had their ass up at four o'clock in the morning, running and just screaming at the top of their lungs, which was super annoying when you're trying to sleep because they run by your dorms.

Ella's story highlighted that the "work smarter, not harder" norm communicated in the Air Force was not always the focus in the Army. Yvette, who served in both the Army and the Air Force explained that, "Army is very much prescriptive, so your day is set out. The Air Force is more like, they treat you more like an adult, it's your responsibility to go to the gym to be ready for your PT test." Yvette started in the Army and switched to the Air Force for better benefits. She explained, "I can honestly say, like my transition from the Army to the Air Force, I think if I had done that in reverse, I would have had a harder time, I think the Army was such a harsher environment." She explained that the discipline she learned in the Army served her well after she switched to the Air Force.

Another difference in communication performance expectation expressed by participants was that the Army was more transparent about the negative experiences people might face while in service. For example Alta argued, "The Air Force was like, 'You're lucky to be here.' And the Army is like, 'no, it sucks. But like, we all get to suffer together.' I was like, 'that's better, like don't lie to me.'" Alta continued on to explain in the Air Force, however, she felt like leadership expected them to be grateful for serving. As Alta explained:

The Army really didn't really care as much, as long as you're there. They're like, 'yeah, you can be an asshole. It's fine. You're tired. Carry on, I get it.' Versus like, the Air Force [leadership] 'be chipper, be happy to be here.' You're supposed to love your job more than anything else is how the Air Force looks at it.

Alta continued by noting “the Army, I remember, their leadership was better about joking around. Their leadership would be like, ‘I don't want to be here either. But I am. So let's just do it.’” The sense of prestige communicated about serving in the Air Force left people feeling a little disillusioned over time. For example, Paige explained how the culture in the Air Force is to give everyone fives on their evaluations, no matter their actual work performance. She explained that she felt like giving everyone fives, especially those who did not deserve it, communicated a fake sense of “we’re all excellent. We’re all the best we can be,” which was not true.

Additionally, participants felt that the Army was more transparent about the potential negative experiences related to sexual harassment and assault people might face in service. As Fran explained, although she was told to expect some behaviors and communication from peers as a woman in the military from her service academy, she was surprised to have a great experience at her first duty station with a male superior. As Fran explained:

I had a male commander who treated me with respect and gave me an opportunity and that's not, what we were, as women in that [Army] academy world, were told. We were prepared, you know, to expect that ‘men are men’, and ‘they're stronger’, and ‘they're going to be chauvinistic’, and ‘they're going to be whatever’. And so you're, you're kind of tainted with this and kind of brainwashed in a way to think ‘expect this.’

Alternatively, those in the Air Force felt that the sense of prestige related to being the Air Force was a tactic used to cover up women’s experiences with sexual harassment and assault. For example, Alta described how a superior told her on multiple occasions to be grateful for what the military had provided, despite the long term negative impacts it had on her after experiencing sexual assault. Alta explained, in the Army you are told to “embrace the suck.” In the Air Force they want you to “drink the Kool-Aid”. “Drinking the Kool-Aid” is a colloquial term used in the

military to refer to embracing the propaganda pushed by the military and the government to agree with patriotism and the military without question. Overall, participants who served in the Army felt that, to a degree, the expectations related to sexual harassment and assault they might face during their time in service were clearly communicated to them, whereas that was not always the case in the Air Force. As such, participants emphasized that while there were differences in communication expectations experienced by each branch, it is important for the different branches to work together to serve the larger mission of the military.

### **Communication Dimensions of “Relationships”**

While communication played a variety of roles in participants' experiences throughout their military service, additional communication dimensions of the relationship between former women service members and the military were also identified from the interviews. Two specific dimensions were identified that played a role in participants' relational meaning making. Thus, this theme is defined as how non-reciprocal communication and time played a role in participants' perception of their relationship to the military.

#### ***Non-Reciprocal***

Communication with the military ultimately illustrated that the relationship between the military and service members is not reciprocal. As stated by Molly, “You give everything, it’s not the same in return.” Specifically, participants struggled with their transition from the military, going from dictating their almost every move to having no communication with them whatsoever following their separation. Morgan explained, “You can't, you don't say ‘no’ in the military. You don't quit in the military.” Even though participants may have thought they prepared for the dissolution of this relationship, the ultimate abruptness showed participants the one-sided nature of the relationship. Alta felt like, “it's never just here’s something good for you.

It's always you have to sell a piece of your soul in order to do what they want.” Carla similarly explained:

To a certain extent, I do feel that the military is willing to squeeze everything out of you. Or whatever you're willing to give. They will squeeze it out of you. And then when they are done with you, they are done, like ‘Okay, thank you.’ And that was very hard to swallow.

Realizing that the military was a non-reciprocal relationship was mentally and emotionally difficult for many participants. This played a role in how participants made sense of their relationship to the military as a civilian. For example, Morgan mentioned accessing all the benefits she was entitled to as retribution for her time in service. As Morgan explained:

Officially, officially, officially, it was a great organization to work for. I wouldn't change anything. I would do it all over again. Unofficially, I went back to school, so I could milk as much money out of those guys, because they sucked me dry. I have a disability check, which I cherish every month. I have a retirement check, which I cherish every month and I'm so glad that, you know, I'm still milking the military for everything I can.

Scarlet also shared that she felt, “they [the military] screwed me on active duty. They didn't do a lot right to me. . . They've done a lot of things wrong to me.” Scarlet mentioned that because of the effects of being wronged by the military, she was still in therapy unpacking her experiences. Overall, while participants were grateful for their time in service, they were still grappling with the non-reciprocal nature of the relationship that was actualized for them after separating from active duty service.

### *Time*

Time was an confounding factor in participants' relational meaning making. With the range of 20 years post service as a criterion for participating in this study, some participants separated from active duty service as early as 2005 and others as recently as 2022. Time away from the military played a significant role in participants meaning making of their experiences while in service, as well as their perceptions of their relationship to the military post service.

Immediately following separation, many participants mentioned wanting nothing to do with the military, often feeling angry and lost. For example, Tracy explained how she was offered a civilian contracting job after retiring from the military; however, “I needed a break from the culture, like maybe the culture isn't me.” Ella explained that she originally did not identify as a veteran, but overtime she did begin to embrace the veteran identity. Billie explained, “by then [her transition out] I was like, ‘I don't want to deal with the military.’” Her feelings changed over time as Billie continued to explain, “Now, if you asked me now, there's always that longing of what that brotherhood and sisterhood felt like. . . now that I'm on the other side, I guess I can see different points of view.” Participants associated time with the space needed to deconstruct some of the traumatic events they experienced that they had originally ignored at the time to survive. Eleanor shared that after leaving the military and working with a therapist she learned that, “to get through all of that madness, I ended up just being in shark mode.” She described “shark mode” as continuing to work without processing emotions. This led her to “crash” in 2020 when the world shut down because of COVID. Eleanor continued on to explain, “if you interviewed me two years ago, this would be a different interview. . . it is crazy how like after, like, the first year of being out, like I flipped completely where I am.” Vera, who had recently retired, explained that following the end of her active duty service she dissolved her relationship to the military:

I told myself whenever I chose to retire and it finally got it approved we [her family] would take a year off to recalibrate. This is what I've been calling it, recalibrating. And it's, and it's actually really fucking hard. When I made that decision, I changed my number, changed my social media. So I have new ones that I actually use and then I changed my email address and I only gave it to the people that I knew were not going to use it in a transactional manner.

Rebecca shared a similar story of wanting nothing to do with the military after separating from service and explained that she also changed her social media upon her exit. Rebecca explained, “I ended up deleting a lot of friends on my Facebook, who were you know, military who I just didn't really talk to you. ‘I was like, I don't care to keep up with you. Delete, delete’.” Rebecca mentioned that she was angry and upset because “I just felt so shunned. It was very, very strange. Because, again, I've given so much and I'm not getting anything, like nothing. I felt, I felt betrayed.” Ella similarly explained that when she got out she “cut it [her relationship to the military] off.” Ella and her family moved to a place where they were not surrounded by service members and she explained that, “I think that sort of helped the transition for me, but only because I was like, angry.” Irene mentioned, “Whenever I first got out, I wasn't involved in the veteran community at all. Just because I felt for a long time, I just didn't need to be a part of the veteran community.” Ultimately Irene explained, “It's been five years? It took me four years to figure this shit out [being a veteran].” She continued on to explain, “I describe it as that chapter of my life is closed, it's closed. And sometimes, once a year, maybe I open it to review the memories. But I don't talk about it.” Scarlet explained:

I collect my disability, I go to my appointments, I try to pretend like nothing happened.

That is the point where I am at now. I am not proud of my service. I am not ashamed of

my service. I try to forget it as a bad, bad memory that just was all in the past. A terrible nightmare. Yeah. With some good dreams mix them because I did get the opportunity to see Japan.

Alta similarly explained that the longer the time away from the military, the more she started to question:

Next year will be five years since I've been out and every single year I'm more different and like I have more and more like not great feelings towards the military because I'm like breaking free of certain molds that they've, like they give you Stockholm Syndrome on purpose.

Alta concluded that when people get out of the military they should “get a therapist and Prozac and you'll be alright. It'll take a few years.”

While for many participants the immediate reaction was to dissociate from the military and veteran identity upon leaving service, some participants slowly returned to the military community. Thus, time away from the military provided increased clarity on their relationship. Kaya mentioned that she is “still like processing” her time in service. Wilma similarly mentioned continuing to reflect on her relationship to the military, specifically with a therapist, “in talks with my therapist, and she was like, ‘So I noticed that you don't really like to call yourself a veteran. But you are a veteran. So like, what's going on there?’” Rebecca similarly stated that, “a couple years after the fact, I did not think this when I first got out, but the more and more I think about it, the more and more it's worth the struggle to have that experience to say, you know, ‘I'm a veteran’.” After some time away from the military and military community, Rebecca, Ella, Wilma, and Irene explained their transition back into the military community. As Rebecca described:

So my relationship now, right? Like, I didn't want to be associated for the longest time. And it wasn't until my last two semesters at school. I was like, 'oh, I want to do something. I'm bored.' I like, I want to get involved. I want to be involved and it was this longing of the brotherhood again, you know, 'how do I become involved again.' I started volunteering, and then ended up getting hired under the Student Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement, you know, like civic engagement leadership, kind of the same realm of the military.

Eventually, her work in the Leadership and Civic Engagement Center led her to become a member of the Veteran's Center on her college campus. Ella and Irene also returned to the military community via their college Veteran's Centers. Ella explained how a service member she was tutoring at her university writing center brought her to the Veterans Center and, "it was just, it was cool people, men and women. Nobody, like was harping on about their service. Nobody was like, 'Ooh-rah combat' whatever. They're just hanging out eating doughnuts." Irene also joined the Veterans Center at her university because, "it was a sense of community." Wilma explained that her current job led her to get back into the military world. As Wilma explained:

I think it's pushed me into a place of like thinking a lot more, reflecting a lot more about like, 'Well, yeah, who am I now and as a veteran, and what happened then, and how does it feed into now?' And so it's actually been a really cool experience to be in a military environment again, without having had to, like, reenlist.

Time away from service and the military created space for some participants, like Carla, to process how much of an "emotional roller coaster" it was for them to transition out of active duty service before they wanted to. While Fran explained she had a decent relationship with the military, it took her a while in the civilian world to become as confident as she was in the



military. Fran explained, “I think the one of the hardest things having come out is having to start over. . . I finally feel as confident as I was when I left the military because I've been doing this for eight years.” Eleanor explained, “I'm sure in a few years when I've, like, digested the nonsense from the past couple years, like, I probably won't claim to be a veteran as much.” The longer she was out, the farther from the veteran identity Eleanor felt. Overall, time played an important role in participants' relational meaning making to the military.

### **Summary**

Communication played a variety of roles in participants' meaning making of their relationship to their respective military branch. Communication was used throughout the relationship to convey different messages at different points in participants' careers. For example, in the beginning of the relationship, communication was used to recruit participants and reinforce the hegemonically masculine norms of the military culture. After participants separated from active duty service, the abrupt end to the relationship communicated a difference in perceived relational intensity. Moreover, military service changed communication style among participants, as women had to embrace a direct style of communication in the military that did not always transfer within the civilian world. Additionally, the opportunities to work with people from other cultures in different geographical locations helped participants to hone their intercultural and strategic communication skills. Further, from participants' descriptions, it was identified that within the military, each branch has different communication expectations. Finally, the communication dimensions of non-reciprocity and time play a role in participants' relational meaning making.

**RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Air Force or Army)?**

Four overarching themes were identified to answer research question four. The first theme to emerge related to explicating the *veteran identity*. This theme is characterized as how people's engagement in veterans groups after separating from service was often based on their own definitions of the term "veteran". The second theme identified to answer research question four characterizes the significant *discrepancy in engagement* with military-affiliated groups among participants. This theme is defined as how participants either did not engage/minimally engaged with veterans groups or were highly engaged. There was no middle ground. The third theme, *not having adequate resources*, is defined as how participants perceived the lack of available resources needed to support them as former service members. Furthermore, participants identified two additional resources deemed critical: support from the military related to the transition out of service and healthcare resources. Finally, an unexpected theme of *space to talk* emerged. This theme emerged unprompted from the interview protocol. This theme is defined as how after thanking participants for their time and sharing their story with me, 10 participants thanked me for providing the space to talk about their story, as participants stated that they felt there was no space for them to talk about their experiences in the military, civilian, or veteran worlds.

**Veteran Identity**

Participants' engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active duty service was bound by their own definitions of the term "veteran". This theme is defined as how participants defined the veteran identity and the levels of engagement participants had with their

veteran identity. For a majority of participants, while they were proud of their time in service, they did not boast about or outwardly show their identity as a veteran. Some participants actively did not embrace the veteran identity. Although not all participants chose to embrace the veteran identity, all participants were willing to be a resource for other military members. Finally, some participants described how others defined their veteran identity for them.

### ***Definition of Veteran***

Participants had a wide range of definitions for the term “veteran” that varied from very specific to broad. Some participants with the most specific definitions of the term veteran argued that, “having served in the military does not, in my eyes, automatically constitute as a veteran.” As further explained by Helen, “I think having some type of risk” such as a deployment or serving in other hostile environments was necessary for a person to assume the veteran identity. Jenna described that “when I see someone wearing like Vietnam or anything like that, I'm like, ‘oh, yeah, that's a real old school veteran. Like those are like tough guys.’” Paige explained how the veteran identity was a “very contentious thing for me.” Paige explained that her grandma considers her cousin a veteran; however, her cousin dropped out of bootcamp. To Paige, “if you served an enlistment or as an officer, like whatever, like you're a veteran, right? Like you gave some type of service to the military, but if you dropped out of basic training, like doesn't count to me.” Nora similarly mentioned that to her a veteran had to pass basic training and tech school. Robin deferred to the official Department of Defense (DoD) regulation stating, “I define it as someone who served over, I think it's like 120 days of service or something like that. I forget the actual regulation. But a veteran is someone who served you know, and it doesn't matter.” As a retiree, Olive made the unique distinction that, “Veterans are different than retirees. Any person

who has served is a veteran.” However, you have to serve 20 years or more to be considered a retiree.

Some participants had a broader definition of what it means to be a veteran. For example, Quinn explained, “I feel that a veteran is somebody who has served in the service at some point, you know, and then, you know, I think the definition says was honorably discharged.” Tracy similarly explained:

I would keep it simple, like, just anybody who has served in the US military. I don't think it's a matter of time. I don't think it's a matter of, you know, even if somebody came away with dishonorable discharge, I think they're still a veteran, because they served. Maybe they made a bad decision, but they've still served.

### ***Proud of Veteran Identity***

Although participants' relationship to the military after service ranged from dissolved to highly engaged, they were all proud of their military service. As Dina explained, “once you're a soldier, you're always going to be one. . . you have to earn that uniform.” Grace similarly mentioned, “I also know that it takes a lot to get up every day and put on the uniform every day.” As Helen explained, “I'm still very proud of it. . . There's some aspects that you don't want to go through, but it's definitely something I will cherish for sure.” Kim explained, “I had a great experience in the military. I really did. It was, yeah, it was the best. It was the best choice I could have made.” Lidia mentioned being proud to be part of the 1% that has served. Yvette explained, “I have to admit with a point of pride that I am proud to be the first girl [to serve in her family].”

Participants mentioned that although they were proud of their service, they were prideful in silence. For example, Billie explained, “I'm just in silence. I'm a veteran. That's not something that I'm like, walk around speaking or saying to people. If they ask, I mean, I'm not ashamed of

it. I am proud of it.” Robin similarly mentioned having a “sense of quiet pride. Not boastfully but this quiet pride to say, ‘I did that, I helped society.’”

### ***Not Identifying as a Veteran***

Some participants chose not to embrace their veteran identity, even in silence. For example, when asked if they identified as a veteran, both Vera and Alta replied, “do I look like I identify as a veteran?” Their rhetorical questions acknowledged the stereotypical images related to being a veteran and that to embrace the veteran identity meant to fit those stereotypes. As Molly explained when asked about identifying as a veteran, “Did I mention anything about bitterness? I have no desire whatsoever to be involved in anything military. I just ignore it, other than the fact that I get monthly checks from the VA for disability.” Molly continued on to explain:

I don't think about being a veteran all the time. You know, I've tried as much as possible to put it out of my life. Because it's just not who I am anymore. And I would say 10% of me recognizes myself as a veteran. For the most part, I avoid it.

Isabella similarly mentioned not identifying as a veteran and keeping her medals and diplomas in boxes in her garage. At the start of her interview she was hesitant to even share her experiences, declining to be recorded and mentioning that she did not live with or immerse herself within the veteran identity unless it benefited her family. Scarlet explained how she struggled with identifying as a veteran on job applications. Scarlet stated:

I'm starting to question whether to like, when I apply for jobs, there's that little checkbox, 'Are you a veteran?' And I sit there and stare at it for like a good few minutes. I'm like 'do I want them to know?'

Rosa explained that she does not wear veteran memorabilia or park in veteran parking spots. She explained, “I certainly don't go out on Veterans Day and get all the free shit.” Ultimately, Rosa mentioned feeling like she was already different enough as a woman in law enforcement with a strong personality, so she didn't want to draw any extra attention to herself. Wilma explained that because she felt like her deployment was not as dangerous as other service members, she struggled with identifying as a veteran. As Wilma explained, “I felt like by calling myself a veteran, I was putting myself at the same level, and I didn't feel comfortable with that. So I would often downplay [it].”

For some of the participants, their struggle to embrace the veteran identity made it difficult for them to feel worthy of using VA healthcare resources. Even those that saw combat felt guilt when using VA resources that they were entitled to as a veteran. For some participants, it took over five years for them to apply to use VA services, either after they deconstructed their guilt or because other forms of healthcare ran out. Dina explained how she originally thought she did not need to use the VA healthcare or get a disability rating. As Dina explained, “there's so many other people that struggle to even get 10% of compensation. So I totally felt like, I don't deserve that.” Alta similarly explained, “I was like, ‘I didn't deploy. I didn't have like anything violent happen to me, I am not broken.’ And then I went and I got 100% disability.” Alta argued, “they tell vets not to go get disability because they still have all their limbs, like mental health is just as important.” Kim also struggled with claiming her disability. Kim explained that it took her best friend, a fellow veteran, about three and a half years to convince her to get her disability rating. Kim explained, “I was like, ‘I am perfectly healthy. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me.’ She's just like ‘but it's there for you. And you're not depriving anybody else of it.’” Thus,

participants expressed feeling complex emotions surrounding embracing the veteran identity and accessing potential benefits that come with the veteran status.

***Always Willing to Connect with a Veteran and be a Resource***

Even though participants either quietly embraced their veteran identity or chose not to embrace their veteran status, it is important to note that all participants mentioned being willing to engage with a veteran in need. For example, Morgan explained:

I try to use my military experience now to help young kids if they want to join the military, like the route to go, or if there's people that need help and advice on what they need to do. I will help individuals do that and navigate the system. I will make phone calls to people I still know in order to help get answers, and use my knowledge to help people now.

Jenna similarly shared that she tried to help any person who might have questions related to schooling after leaving service. Jenna explained, "I either know the answer, or I could find out super-fast." Further, Jenna added that learning from other veterans was important in the transition process. Jenna explained:

You kind of have to learn from other veterans like, what to do and where to go and who to meet and what to say and all that stuff. . . I don't think I had any veteran friends and I was my friend's first veteran friend, so I helped them.

Helen explained that she and her husband had a passion for helping veterans after seeing the veteran homelessness crisis in their city. Nora explained, "I'll like always help even if it's like, 'Hey, dude, just talk to someone'." Even Alta and Scarlet, who expressed having mostly negative feelings towards the military, acknowledged that they helped those transitioning out of service. For example Alta explained, "I work with female veterans by word of mouth, if that makes

sense. So like if people like have questions, I'm like, 'Yeah, feel free'." Scarlet mentioned that, "because I've been around the block when it comes to mental health and hospitals and all that sort of stuff, I try to guide younger people who are experiencing mental health crisis."

Within their civilian workplaces, Olive and Yvette mentioned that they tried to be advocates for veterans applying to work at their company. For example, Olive explained, "I do try to make sure that when we have someone, especially someone in our employment pipeline who's a veteran, if there's some help that I can provide that person I do. That's still part of your military family." Yvette explained that at a previous company she was a veterans representative. At her current company she goes to job fairs to recruit veterans.

### ***Having Their Veteran Identity Defined by Others***

Some participants shared that they had their veteran identity defined by others. Participants described having their service dismissed because people did not expect a woman to be a former service member. Some people only associate men with the veteran identity; as a result, participants often had their veteran identity dismissed. For example, Robin explained, "in my experience, a lot of times, I am invisible. And it's kind of one of those things where nobody ever asks you. I've never been asked, Are you a veteran? Ever. I've had to self-identify." Morgan explained that while out her husband was often assumed to be the veteran. Luckily, he was a good advocate, telling people, "Don't thank me, thank her." Morgan continued to describe one incident in detail where she was given an auxiliary form (i.e., form for military dependents) when she tried to join her local Veterans of Foreign War (VFW). The woman handing out the forms assumed that she was the dependent and not the service member. Eleanor similarly described how she had been mistaken as a dependent and not the former service member. Grace explained that her local veteran community was largely male, "when I go into the local VA I feel



weird in there because everyone's in there with their spouse and so it's like you're between worlds, you might say you're in limbo.”

Fran mentioned the need to “educate” the civilian sector about the veteran experience and the value of veterans. She explained that civilians often do not understand or have any idea about the experiences of veterans. Morgan similarly called for educating the public, as she explained:

When you're out, you still carry yourself like you're in and people can kind of be like, ‘Hey, I think I think he was in the military’, because just the way they talk to them. For women, it's a lot harder. So I think if there was a way to help educate society, that there are a ton of women veterans and we don't have to wear our hair in a bun anymore, we don't have to look like an ice queen anymore. We can wear our hair down and still be a veteran. We can be young and still be a veteran. We, you know, we can be a single mom and still be a veteran. It's not just a guy thing anymore.

Yvette described the burden of civilian expectations of disabled veterans. As a disabled veteran herself, she explained:

The pressure that I feel now is a little different because I'm a disabled vet. So one of the things I feel pressure about is, with jobs, if I fail, is the next disabled veteran, be they male or female, are they going to get an opportunity? Or are they going to say, ‘well, oh, look at that veteran, you know, she didn't succeed at that, we shouldn't even take a chance.’

Yvette felt stigma from the civilian community about what disabled veterans are capable of and felt that her performance as a disabled veteran could impact civilian colleagues future perceptions of veterans.

### **Discrepancy in Engagement**

Based on participants' definition of the veteran identity and how they made sense of their own veteran identity, a discrepancy in engagement with military affiliated groups was identified. Participants either did not engage/minimally participated in veterans groups or were highly engaged; there was no middle ground. Participants' level of involvement in these groups was often based on how much they wanted to embrace their veteran identity.

### ***Not Participating***

Because of the love/hate relationship participants experienced with the military, some of the women interviewed did not engage with veterans resources or communities. Specifically, 13 out of 30 participants stated they did not participate in any military affiliated or veterans groups. As explained by Molly, "I don't want to identify as a veteran or partake in any of the military community." Quinn explained that she does not engage with veterans groups but "quietly" works on her degree.

### ***Highly Engaged***

For those who were engaged in veterans groups or communities, 17 out of 30 participants mentioned being highly engaged. Participants mentioned being engaged in a variety of types of groups, such as Veteran's Centers on college campuses, golf clubs, VFWs, American Legions, Student Veterans of America (SVA), and working as service academy admissions reps. Participants who participated in military affiliated groups mentioned that these groups played an important role in their relationship to the military. Dina, for example, explained that her participation in veterans groups was "helpful for making sense of [the] identity loss" following the separation from service. Helen mentioned that "you just kind of like instantly gravitate towards each other [people with military service experience]. And I think that alone is something you can't recreate." Being engaged in veterans groups was important for creating a "healthy

community” and providing a similar sense of “brother- or sisterhood”. As Billie explained, “It's similar, not the same, but it's similar to what you've been through.” Lidia mentioned that her friend group was mostly veterans. As Irene explained, veteran communities like the SVA provided a professional outlet related to military service that filled some of the aspects she missed from active duty service. Irene stated, “one of the things that I really liked about SVA is like they were able to give me the sense of community and also professionalism.” Fran served as an admissions representative for former her service academy. She explained that this afforded her the opportunity to give back. Overall, as explained by Dina, her veterans groups were important for, “shar[ing] resources and mak[ing] sure that we take care of each other.”

### **Not Adequate Resources**

Overall, outside of participating or not participating in veterans groups, participants felt that the military did not provide adequate resources for them as former service members. Participants mentioned that they wanted additional resources from the military related to the transition out of service, as well as for healthcare. Participants mentioned that, “you do it [leaving service] on your own, so there really isn't any, there's not a lot of assistance provided when separating from active duty.” Thus, when asked about advice they would give to other service members leaving active duty service, a majority of participants mentioned that it was important to have a plan when you are ready to separate. For example, as Kim stated, “[for] retirement, you pretty much have to do that yourself. Especially at the higher levels.” As Scarlet stated, “have a job lined up, have a place to live lined up, that would be the biggest thing. Know where your money is going to come from.” Tracy explained, “I think there's a lot of organizations with good intentions. But, there's too many potential cracks. So, we all have to advocate for ourselves, too. You can't just rely on a helping agency to do it for you.”

As explained early, participants felt like they did not gain much from TAP because of the stress of the transition period. Furthermore, participants felt that they would not know what resources were useful from TAP until they actually arrived in the civilian world. As a result, participants felt as though they had been left to fend for themselves. As such, participants like Carla and Fran mentioned that extending the time frame for accessing TAP could be a helpful step for veterans once the emotional rush of the transition period ended.

Regarding healthcare, participants felt that while the VA was improving its services, it was still not equipped to take care of women's health. Grace explained:

There are more services that are starting to be available to female veterans. Because, you know, our physical makeup is a lot different from men. There are different physical conditions that are starting to be more recognized by the VA.

However, the VA has much room for improvement as participants often mentioned being discriminated against by VA doctors. For example, Grace explained, "when I first got out, and I was meeting with a service officer. I heard from a few other females that this particular service officer was not very friendly to females." This resulted in Grace having to fight for her VA rating and to receive adequate healthcare. Scarlet mentioned that she, "started to specifically request female doctors, because, and you know, I can't prove any of this, but I have felt with male doctors a stark contrast in the way I was treated." Scarlet described how during an experience with an older male doctor at the VA he "did not take me seriously at all. He asked like three questions about me. I was trying to talk, he would cut me off, he talked over me." Scarlet felt as though her health concerns went overlooked during this interaction. Due to the PTS she acquired from her time in service Scarlet described this interaction, with a male doctor in uniform who did not take her seriously, was "a little bit triggering." Eleanor explained that she had to fight for

about a year after leaving active duty service for her disability claim. As Eleanor explained, “there's times like I get fidgety. And he [a doctor] yelled at me saying my anxiety didn't matter, because I didn't deploy, it didn't matter what I went through because I didn't deploy.” She felt that the VA was, “kind of quick to deny, like trauma related issues.” Olive described her current challenges with the VA:

[I can't get the] VA and the Air Force to agree on what are the issues that somebody needs to take care of. . . the challenge that [I'm] having now is reaching back into the records to pull out the details around illnesses and ailments and that kind of stuff.

The burden was placed on Olive to prove through previous records when, where, and how ailments she is currently dealing with may have occurred during her time in service. She continued on to explain, “So that's really challenging, because there's not a good roadmap for how to get those things accomplished.”

Kaya explained that she “still struggles with my mental health.” Even though once she was out she finally felt, “you're no longer a liability. Like, you're out. It's okay for you to talk to somebody,” Kaya explained that she felt there were still barriers people encountered when seeking mental health care, especially through military-affiliated resources like the VA. Ultimately, Molly's struggle to receive adequate mental health care encompasses many participants' struggle with the current VA healthcare system:

I wasn't getting the answers that I wanted or that I needed from the military or from the VA. The support is not there. They want to support you, but the services for mental health are almost nonexistent, specifically focused on a woman. Women make up 50% of this planet. The percentages of women in the military are increasing daily, women are in combat now. . . I don't think that the military or the VA is actually set up or equipped to

deal with women that have PTSD and emotional or mental health issues. I'm speaking from experience, I have PTSD, I am diagnosed, that is part of my rating from the VA. I used to go up to the VA in [city] for regular counseling sessions. Almost none of the counselors up there had any military experience. And so I'm not going to try and explain [military jargon] like, you should already know what I'm talking about. . . . Because men and women go through different things. It would be really beneficial for them to have experts in, you know, women's experiences.

As Alta argued, "I think the military should have to provide you therapy, as soon as you get out. Like it should be mandatory for a year for you to go to a therapist." As Alta continued on to explain, "A whole experience can be a traumatic event, like little things adding up being in the military. I guarantee you most people have PTSD." Rosa stated, "pay attention to your medical health, pay attention to your health period. And don't expect that the military is going to take care of you."

### **The Space to Talk**

At the end of some of the interviews, an unexpected, unprompted theme emerged unrelated to the interview protocol. After ending the interview recording and thanking participants for their time and their willingness to share their story with me, 10 participants thanked me for providing the space to engage in this research and share their story. Because participants shared their thanks after the interview recording was stopped, direct quotes were not recorded; however, I tried to capture some general sentiments from those who thanked me. For some participants, our interview was the first time they had shared their experiences with sexual harassment and assault or negative gendered experiences within the military outside of one or two other people. For example, Scarlet mentioned that I was one of the first people she shared

her story with, and she hoped her story would be relevant to making important changes. Robin expressed thanks for providing the space to share her story and engage in research about military experiences. Although Isabella was reluctant to participate, she thanked me for being willing to do this work and hoped that something would come out of it. Overall, in their thanks, participants communicated that they felt there was no space for them. Within the military, participants perceived that other service members did not want to acknowledge women's issues. Within the civilian community, participants perceived that people were uncomfortable when they shared their challenges with gendered experiences and sexual violence when in service. For those who grappled with embracing the veteran identity, veteran spaces were overwhelming or often too focused around the masculine military experience.

### **Summary**

As explained above, former women service members described grappling with the decision to embrace the veteran identity. Participants explained that their individual definitions of the term veteran, which were highly varied, impacted if participants felt they were worthy of taking on the veteran identity regardless of their official regulation. Participants reported that their level of engagement in veteran or military affiliated groups after separating from service was often a result of embracing or not embracing the veteran identity. A gap in resource access and availability for former women service members was also identified from participants response. Finally, some participants expressed gratitude for being able to share all aspects of their story, as they perceived that women's negative experiences in military service often made others feel uncomfortable in military, civilian, and veteran spaces.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

As the USM continues to increase its efforts in facilitating diversity, equity, and inclusion among its ranks and recruiting a more diverse population of service members in response to recruiting needs and public accountability (Garamone, 2022; The White House, 2022), scholars and military leadership alike must identify challenges to service brought on by the hegemonically masculine and totalistic nature of the military by beginning with the lives and lived experiences of the marginalized. While a variety of standpoints, or social locations based on identity markers, such as race and ethnicity or sexual orientation, impact the experience of military service, this dissertation sought to explore former women service members' experiences from the standpoint of gender. In the chapters above, I set the foundation for this dissertation, including a synthesis of knowledge based on current literature of women's experiences in the military, explained the methodology employed to answer the research questions<sup>8</sup>, and illustrated the findings of the data through overarching themes and participants' direct quotes.

From facilitating 30 interviews with former women service members who served in either the Air Force or the Army and separated from active duty service within the last 20 years, I sought to contextualize and uncover the everyday interactions that contribute to and negatively impact women's access and ability to communicate within a totalistic, hegemonically masculine institution as a starting place for change. By co-creating knowledge with participants, I sought to provide the space for participants to reflect on their experiences and identify standpoints,

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<sup>8</sup>RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?

RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?

RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches (Air Force or Army)?

RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch (Airforce or Army)?



influenced by gender, related to their military service experiences and transition back to civilian life. Due to the unique structure of the military as a hegemonically masculine and totalistic institution (TI), understanding women's experiences in this institution is increasingly important for generating new knowledge related to current gaps in dominant ideological structures (e.g., ability to engage in parenthood or the effect of policies based on gender differences).

Furthermore, in response to calls for research to explore gender as more than a variable for analysis within public relations scholarship (Buzzanell, 1994), this dissertation considered how gender can be both an identity and a stratification of power inherently built into institutions that can play a role in how messages are communicated and received in institution-public relationships (IPRs).

In the findings section above, a variety of themes were identified from participants' responses to answer the four research questions posed at the conclusion of the literature review. Overall, related to research question one, findings demonstrate that participants perceived a difference in gender performance expectations for men and women while in service that left lasting impressions on participants' sense of self. From the findings identified to answer research question two, experiences based on gender, such as ability to take on additional identities and experiencing structural inequities based in gender, played a significant role in how participants made sense of their relationship to the military during and after service. In response to research question three, communication was found to play a variety of roles in participants' meaning making of their relationship to their respective military branches, ranging from being used to reinforce institutional cultural norms to how communication expectations among branches differed. Finally, answering research question four, former women service members often grappled with the decision to engage in veteran or military-affiliated groups following their

separation from service because of the many complexities surrounding the “veteran” identity and the space created, or not created, for former women service members in these groups.

Gender and gender expectations are not inherently bad. Gherardi (1995) argued that gender is an inescapable part of human life and does not necessarily imply inequity. However, when people are forced into performing behaviors under the guise of gender or when one gender seeks to subjugate another that gender becomes an element to stratify power producing inequity. Thus, the ultimate goal of this research is not to explore how to make the military a gender neutral institution or “degender” the military (Britton, 2000). Instead, through the lived experiences of women with military service experience, this dissertation sought to uncover the ways in which the USM may make gender a less oppressive structural and cultural element, such as by allowing a wider variety of gender performances or through acknowledging the value of femininity within the military. As such, by identifying the challenges to service experienced by women based on the stratification of power through gender, we can seek to challenge oppression communicated through gender.

Moreover, as participants mentioned in their interviews, the military is not that different from the civilian world. When asked about their experiences in the military, participants like Molly and Kim expressed that they encountered similar experiences based on gender in the civilian world. As such, it is important to underscore that the sexism, bias, and discrimination experienced in the military, while perhaps on a more intense level, can be found in today’s civilian world. As Yvette described, “understand you are going to deal with hardships that women deal with in the civilian world, kind of like on steroids.”

In the rest of this chapter, I situate the knowledge co-created from the findings of this dissertation within the broader academic literature to provide theoretical extensions, practical

implications, and recommendations. This chapter closes with an explanation of the study's limitations, as well as areas for future research.

### **Theoretical Extensions**

Theoretical extensions are important for challenging and extending the value of theory in scholarship (Ferguson, 2018). From the findings in chapter 4 of this dissertation, theoretically I argue (1) to extend the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory through the elements of time and coping strategies, (2) to identify additional dimensions for qualitatively understandings relationships, and (3), to offer the idea that IPRs occur on a spectrum.

### ***Feminist Standpoint Theory***

Regarding feminist standpoint theory, the findings from participants' lived experiences emphasized two elements not currently considered related to feminist standpoints, the role of *time* and *coping strategies*. Current iterations of feminist standpoint theory contain four main tenets: (1) That society is structured by power relations which create unequal social locations for women and men, (2) that these social locations generate knowledge and those within subordinate social locations are more likely to generate "more accurate" knowledge, (3) that the position of outsider-within is a privileged epistemological position, and (4) that standpoints do not just refer to a location or experience, but require a critical understanding and reflection on the effect of social location for sharpening experiences. These current tenets, however, do not take into account how cultural institutional structures, such as being hegemonically masculine or totalistic, may prevent women from genuinely reflecting on their experiences and social location. As argued in the literature review, standpoints do not necessarily arise from being a woman; on the contrary, they require critical reflection on the social location of women (Wood, 2005). Scholars have argued that standpoints are not "rigid or permanent stabilization of perspective, but rather a fluid

and dynamic negotiation of experience and point of view that can be temporarily stabilized in order to interrogate dominant ideologies” (Lenz, 2004, p. 98; see Buzzanell, 2017). This dissertation seeks to take this argument a step further and consider the effect of time and coping strategies on the reflections individuals are able to engage in to make sense of their standpoints. I argue *time*, as in where an individual is positioned within the institution (e.g., new member, seasoned, not part of the institution) may play a role in an individual's ability to engage in reflection. Moreover, I consider the value of *time* for identifying changes in standpoints. Relatedly, *coping strategies*, such as defensive othering, which seek to deflect stigma onto others as individuals attempt to distance themselves from stigmatized categories (Armstrong et al., 2014) and overcompensation, may also play a role in the reflection individuals are able to engage in. These two elements are considered in more detail below.

**Time.** Findings from this dissertation demonstrate that institutional cultural complexities play a significant role in individuals identification of feminist standpoints. *Time* becomes an important element for consideration. Within institutions that are totalistic, requiring complete member fealty, as well as those that are hegemonically masculine and requiring the performance of hyperpolarized masculinity, time may be an important element to consider in regards to *when* individuals are able to reflect on and access their standpoints. In these types of institutions, the outsider-within epistemological position may be affected by where an individual is positioned within the institution (e.g., new member, seasoned, not part of the institution). For example, for new and seasoned members, priorities related to survival (e.g., avoiding sexual harassment, mitigating the potential for career retaliation) may result in an inability or desire to engage in reflection. When in service, women may brush off experiences of sexual harassment and assault because they occur on such a frequent basis or because the stakes of reporting are too high

(GAO, 2022). While some women may recognize sexual harassment and assault as issues in the moment, the true gravity of the situation may not be actualized until they are fully separated from the institution. Additionally, from participants' responses, as women rose through the ranks, constraints related to job position responsibilities and insight into high level policy changes (e.g., how they occur and what is prioritized) left them feeling disillusioned about the institution. Thus, *time* may play a significant role in people's abilities to identify standpoints.

As demonstrated by this dissertation, time away from active duty service provided feelings of increased clarity for participants to engage in reflection on their social location and experiences while in service. For many participants, while in the military, energy was focused on survival, and thus they were unable to reflect or ruminate on their experiences based in gender at the time. Especially because some participants' standpoints were impacted by their race and ethnic identities, such as Carla who felt she had to represent her race as well as her gender, time is an important consideration for acknowledging what knowledge people may have access to. Ultimately, it was only after leaving the totalistic, hegemonically masculine institution that women were able to fully reflect on their military experiences as their energy was not solely focused on trying to survive and thrive. Thus, *time* is an important element to consider for understanding feminist standpoint theory and uncovering marginalized experiences.

**Coping Strategies.** In relation to time, the *coping strategies* women use when marginalized is another important element for consideration. The second tent of feminist standpoint theory argues that the social locations of women, or those in subordinate locations, are more likely to generate "more accurate" knowledge (Harding, 2004). While I acknowledge that a critical requirement of identifying standpoints is to understand and reflect on the effect of social location for sharpening experiences, accounting for the coping strategies used by women in

hegemonically masculine institutions may be important, as some of these coping strategies seek to lessen the oppressive effects of the dominant on the subordinate. Moreover, these coping strategies may have long-term effects on an individual's sense of self even after they leave an institution. For example, participants in this dissertation described engaging in defensive othering (Armstrong et al., 2014) and overcompensation to survive and thrive in the military. Some of these coping strategies even carried over into their civilian lives.

While women can acknowledge and understand that they are placed in lower social locations because of their gender, the participants described feeling like men's behavior did not affect them because they had distanced themselves from the category of "woman". Deflecting and distancing yourself from stigma, while leaving a last impression, may also affect a person's perception of their standpoint. The intersection of defensive othering and feminist standpoint theory has been described in a study of women rugby players. Ezzell (2009) argued through the use of feminist standpoint theory, the women in their study engaged in defensive othering to cast themselves as "exceptions to the stereotype" (p. 124) of butch lesbians and reinforced dominant heterosexist ideology, creating masculine versus feminine structures of inequity among their team members. Therefore, viewing yourself as an exception to a rule may impact the knowledge you have access to and the reflection you engage in.

Similarly, overcompensation may also affect reflections on standpoints. For example, the women interviewed in this dissertation were often focused on assimilating or accommodating to meet and exceed the masculine standards predetermined for them. Employing overcompensation could affect an individual's standpoint as people internalize (un)conscience bias related to gender performance expectations (Orbe, 1998). Because individuals are striving to meet the dominant groups expectations, the double-consciousness of outsider-within may become blurry as

overcompensation becomes viewed positively. For example, viewing additional training to beat men's run time or number of push-ups could be viewed as beneficial for overall health and not seen as an unequal burden of performance solely placed on women. In this case, the need to overcompensate may be seen as physical and mental feats of excellence. Therefore, when considering the knowledge identified by those in the subordinate group, it may be important to explore and consider the effects of coping strategies on individuals' concepts of self and social location.

**Time and Coping Strategies Related to Public Relations.** Considering the element of time and coping strategies may have some important potential implications for public relations scholarship and practice. Related to time, the value of reflecting and documenting the changes in feminist standpoints over time can help pinpoint critical relational moments. In line with previous research, findings from this study demonstrate that feminist standpoints are dynamic and change over time (Buzzanell et al., 2017). However, research using feminist standpoint theory tends to capture a singular standpoint in time (Harding, 2004; Wood, 2005). While this study did capture a singular standpoint in time, the holistic interview protocol approach asked participants to reflect on the entirety of their experiences from before joining service until the day of the interview allowed participants to talk through the changes in their experiences over time. Participants' responses from this dissertation provide invaluable insights into the evolution of feminist standpoints people experience and the effect these changes of standpoints have on relational meaning making. For example, Eleanor mentioned that if the interview had taken place two years prior, "it would have been a completely different interview." For some participants who had completely cut their relationship to the military, over time they eventually came around to participating in military affiliated groups. Thus, considering and documenting the changes in

feminist standpoints over time could help to identify key moments in the standpoint development process. For some participants, their relationship to the military while in service changed based on external factors such as wanting to become a wife and mother. After separating from active duty service, for some participants, time away from the institution led to more mixed feelings about their relationship to the USM. For others, time away from the institution actually led them to repair their relationship to the military. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that while research tends to capture a specific standpoint in time, discussions with participants can uncover how time shapes standpoints. The changes of standpoints participants express could provide valuable insights into critical relational meaning making points as public relations scholars and practitioners consider how to cultivate quality IPRs.

Related to coping strategies, this dissertation demonstrates the complexities of being labeled in one category but viewing yourself as “other”, as well as internalizing inequity. Through the use of coping strategies like defensive othering, participants struggled with labels like “woman Airman” and “veteran”. Through overcompensation, unequal burdens were placed on women but viewed as making them stronger and more resilient. For public relations practitioners and scholars, how labels and names are used could play a role in how publics receive information and make sense of IPRs. Further, how gender inequities are framed (e.g., romanticizing overcompensation) can affect how publics make sense of institutional norms and expectations. Ultimately, considering the effect of coping strategies on perceived social location and experiences may provide important extensions for better understanding and capturing the lived experiences of the marginalized.

Overall, through the use of feminist standpoint theory, participants in this study often expressed that their relationship to the USM went through dramatic changes during and after



active duty service. Time and coping strategies played a significant role in these changes over time. Thus, scholarship using feminist standpoint theory should consider the role of time and coping strategies on individuals' reflections related to social location and gender.

### ***Qualitative Dimensions of Relationships***

Theoretically, through the findings of this dissertation, I identified three additional qualitative dimensions of relationships for public relations scholars and practitioners to consider in relation to IPRs. Previous research about IPRs has identified quantitative and qualitative dimensions of IPRs. From a quantitative perspective, scholars like Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified and operationalized variables as trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment. From a qualitative perspective, scholars like Grunig (2002), Hung (2007) and most recently Storie (2018) identified dimensions such as control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and interdependence (see Table 1 p. 53, for more information). Based on participants' responses, I identified three additional dimensions to take into consideration regarding IPRs: gender, totalism, and time.

**Gender.** Ni and Wang (2011) contributed scholarship that demonstrated the role of culture in relational meaning making for IPRs and argued for future scholarship to consider cultural factors outside of race and ethnicity. Answering this call for scholarship, this dissertation demonstrates that gender, as institutional culture, can be a dimension of relationships that plays a role in institution-public relational meaning making. I define the dimension of *gender* as how expectations of gender performance are communicated by both parties (e.g., institution and public).

Institutions are inherently gendered (Acker, 1990, 2015). As demonstrated by the findings of this dissertation, the gendered nature of institutions can affect the relationships that

individuals cultivate with an institution. For example, participants' responses described that the hegemonically masculine culture of the military limited what was considered "acceptable" gender performance of women in service. Participants felt that while men also had to perform gender, they were allowed more freedom in their gender performance and behaviors. Overtime, having to perform gender in such narrow ways, as well as often having to perform gender as reactionary to the men around them played a role in participants' mixed feelings about the military.

Ultimately, because institutions are gendered, adding to the theory of gendered institutions (Acker, 1990, 2015; Bates, 2022), the findings from this dissertation uncover the role of gender performance between institutions and stakeholders on relational meaning making. Discrepancies in gender performance expectations or an institution communicating oppressive gender performance expectations can result in the (re)production of gender inequities and negatively impact the IPR. For example, participants shared how structure and policy inequities related to health, as well as implicit hegemonically masculine cultural norms, led women to feel othered in the military. Because the military culture expected gender to be performed as the hegemonically masculine warrior identity, characteristics associated with femininity (e.g., emotions, caretaking) were dismissed and those who engaged in those behaviors were looked down upon and ostracized (Van Gilder, 2019). Therefore, through the communication of institutional gender expectations, this dissertation illustrates that gendered institutional culture can result in similarly gendered relationships between individuals and institutions. As institutional processes and structures (re)produce gender, gender becomes a defining dimension when considered relational meaning making. Moreover, gaps in gender performance expectations between institutions and individuals create a power dynamic impacted by gender

that also reproduces gender inequity, as evidenced by participants' experience of gender performance expectations within the hegemonically masculine military culture.

Outside of the military, the dimension of gender may manifest in institutions with similarly hegemonically masculine culture like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or male-dominated skilled trades that may require similar gender performance expectations from its members (Bridges et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2022). In “pink collar” jobs (i.e., those dominated by women like nursing and teaching), men may also feel oppressive gender performance expectations (McDowell, 2015). Overall, the dimension of gender may play a role in individuals' relational meaning making of IPRs.

**Totalistic.** Scholars, such as Grunig (2002) and Cheng (2018), have sought to add types of relationships as dimensions for assessing IPRs. Grunig (2002) argued for categories of exchange relationships or communal relationships, while Cheng (2018) provided a continuum from competing relationships to cooperating relationships for assessing IPRs. Extending these arguments further, this dissertation seeks to add the dimension of totalism for qualitatively understanding IPRs.

Similar to the findings of Cheng (2018), this dissertation finds that not all relationships are equally balanced. Women in this study mentioned that their relationship to the military was not equal, which led to feelings of bitterness. Because participants gave so much of themselves and their lives to the military, they felt intense feelings of anger and betrayal when the same courtesies were not returned. From the findings of this dissertation, I argue for the addition of totalism or a totalistic dimension for assessing IPRs. I define *totalism* as the extent to which the institution controls the individual and affects relationships outside of the singular IPR (e.g., with family, friends, other institutions). The dimension of totalism is different from control mutuality

which is characterized as the degree to which the parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship (Grunig, 2002). Control mutuality assumes that individuals have some level of control over the institution. For example, a consumer could stop buying from a company until they saw changes in workplace policy, or a person could quit their job on the spot if they do not agree with leadership decisions. Within TIs, however, individuals have little agency or control over the institution. Specifically related to the military, as Morgan explained, “You can't, you don't say ‘no’ in the military. You don't quit in the military.” The dimension of totalism make effect all parts of the IPR from the beginning to the end of the relationship. For example, many participants shared that they did not have control over when they were able to separate from the institution or how the separation occurred (e.g., initiated without their consent). The limited control individuals had over the military resulted in difficult experiences and complex emotions during the separation process. Furthermore, the rapid shift from being a member of a totalistic institution one day to complete separation the next led to intense feelings of loss and effected women’s relational meaning making as former service members. Thus, the dimension of totalism is important for assessing how publics may engage in relational meaning making when they have little to no control over the institution.

The dimension of totalism could be assessed in other TIs, like the Fundamentalist Baptist Church; however, it may also impact IPRs for institutions that are not considered totalistic but may employ elements of totalism. For example, the effects of socio-economic status and market monopoly may make it so that people *have* to have a relationship with an institution. In these contexts, people may not identify themselves as members of the institutions; however totalism will play a role in how publics engage with and view their relationship to the institution.

**Time.** Previous research on the qualitative dimensions of relationships has identified time as an important factor for assessing IPRs. For example, Ledingham et al. (1999) identified time as an indicator of the perceptions and behaviors of members of a key public (e.g., in a crisis, time may affect how key publics choose to support an institution). However, time has traditionally been conceptualized as time “in” relationships or the length of a relationship between an institution and public (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Storie, 2018). From the findings of this dissertation, I argue a new conceptualization of the dimension of time. I argue the dimension of time, as in the progression of time. In other words, in the passing of time. A relationship can evolve and change due to time and be effected by experiences inside and outside of the relationship. In the context of this study, in the passing or progression of time, participants felt that their relationship to the military while in service could be chunked into phases based on the goals in their personal (e.g., single, married, parenthood) and professional (e.g., promotion, awards) lives. Therefore, the passing of time in participants’ personal lives played a role in how they made sense of their professional lives and their relationship to the institution. When participants were young and single, they encountered fewer barriers as they were able to contribute more of their time to the institution without sacrificing any personal relationships. As time progressed in the relationship and their personal goals outside of the relationship changed, participants described a more tenuous relationship with the institution as their priorities had shifted, but the needs/requests of the institutions had not.

Further, this dissertation demonstrates that time passing can play a role in people’s decision to return to a relationship. For example, participants in this study explained that they needed time away from the military culture and community to process their experiences and emotions. For some participants, after some time had passed, they were able to return to the

relationships from a new perspective. After time had passed, some participants mentioned choosing to reactivate their military affiliation by joining veterans groups, sharing their military experiences with others, or enrolling in VA healthcare. Time passing while the relationship is strained allowed participants to take the space they needed to engage in the relationship at their own pace. As such, time, such as the progression of time and important points in time for publics, played a role in their meaning making of the IPR.

Outside of the military, the dimension of time may be seen after an institution undergoes a crisis. Based on the type and severity of the crisis, time away from the relationship to the institution may allow publics to reorient themselves to the relationships. Thus, the dimension of time presents a longitudinal perspective for public relations scholars and practitioners to view IPRs.

### ***A Process Perspective of the Spectrum of Institution-Public Relationships (IPR)***

As argued in the literature review, previous scholars have described the dimensions that comprise an IPR and contribute to its perceived “quality” among publics (Grunig, 2002). Dimensions such as trust, satisfaction, and commitment have been used to identify gaps between institutional output and public expectations from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective (Hung, 2007; Ledingham et al. 1999). Lessening the difference in expectations and actions can result in what public relations scholars consider “quality” or positive IPRs. Although limited scholarship has sought to define negative institution public relationships (NIPRs), some scholars have identified dimensions that may contribute to NIPRs such as dissatisfaction, distrust, control dominance, and dissolution. Overall, however, these perspectives of IPRs view the relationship in singularity of extremes (i.e., positive or negative, often based on a moment in time) (Moon & Rhee, 2013).

From the findings of this dissertation, I argue that IPRs should be conceived of as a dynamic spectrum including positive and negative, similar to our conceptualizations of gender. While we may currently view IPRs in a binary sense, this dissertation demonstrates that they exist on a spectrum. For example, this study demonstrates that while some participants cut ties with the military upon their active duty separation, they still felt proud of their military service. In this example, the dimensions of relationship dissolution and satisfaction contributed to the meaning making of a “bittersweet relationship”. In current binary conceptualizations of IPRs, the idea of a love/hate or bittersweet relationship is not considered as the categorizations are positive or negative. Viewing IPRs as a spectrum opens up new perspectives for understanding IPRs.

Previously Dougall (2006) identified the state of IPRs on a conflict continuum. Their continuum related to how the flow of information between an institution and a public could result in a change in relationship from cooperation to conflict. Cheng (2018) presented a continuum of relationship types ranging from competing to cooperating termed contingent IPRs or CIPR. In this continuum, the dimensions of the relationship come together to determine the type of relationship perceived between the institution and the individual. These conceptualizations of IPR continuums take a product perspective, as in what type of relational outcome is produced. I argue we need to view IPRs from a process perspective (Mehta et al., 2021) verses a product perspective. In other words, through a spectrum, IPRs are a process of, not a product of, public relations practices. Because IPRs are a spectrum and not a product or ends of a continuum, we can acknowledge how publics’ perceptions of their relationship to an institution might change based on their understanding of many relational factors (e.g., trust, satisfaction, commitment, gender).

Moreover, from a process perspective (Mehta et al., 2021), the findings from this dissertation support the idea that small, frequent, compounding negative interactions with an institution can result in a negative IPR. From a process spectrum perspective, institutions may be able to repair the IPR through strategic communication, or publics may return to the relationship on their own accord. In viewing IPRs from a process perspective, the type of relationship is not the outcome (e.g., cooperative, competing), instead the quality of the IPR from the perspective of the public is the focus.

### **Practical Implications**

Practically, this dissertation extends our understanding of former women service members' experiences during and after their time in service. As we continue to face a recruiting crisis across all military branches (Seck, 2022), understanding women's experiences and how they might play a role as ambassadors for the institution is increasingly important. Findings from participants' experiences demonstrate (1) how branch cultures play a role in gender performance expectations and perceptions of satisfaction after service, (2) the importance of feminist standpoint theory in totalistic and greedy institutions, and (3) the role of communication in relational meaning making.

#### ***Branch Cultures Play a Role in Expectations***

Within the military community, through interpersonal communication and social media, stereotypes of each branch are often used to jest and highlight commonalities in military experience. Even within the academic literature, explanations of the differences between the cultures of each branch highlight some of the distinct common stereotypes, e.g., Air Force the "chair force" or the rigidity of Army rules over logic (Mastroianni, 2006; Thomas, 2004). This dissertation identified that branch reputations, whether true or not, inform expectations of



behavior among service members. These expectations, which are often based in stereotypes, can play a role in how participants perceive their relationship to the military after separation based on the difference in expected experiences and actual experiences while in active duty service. For example, in the interviews, participants mentioned that much of the culture within each branch is dictated by its sub-mission. For the Air Force a focus on technological advancement has cultivated a progressive reputation. The Army, alternatively, presents a rough and tumble aesthetic with its mission based on ground force operations.

Interestingly, however, although the Air Force may be considered a more progressive culture for technology and gender inclusivity, participants descriptions from the findings of this dissertation found that the culture of the Air Force still perpetuated and emphasized a hegemonically masculine ideology and was similarly challenging for women to navigate as those of ground operations branches (e.g., Army or Marines). In a comparison of Air Force and Army culture, Mastroianni (2006) writes that the, “superficial gentility of the Air Force masks a leadership culture that is fundamentally authoritarian as that of ground forces or even more so” (p. 84). Findings from this dissertation support this assertion that the Air Force’s reputation as the most progressive branch was not how participants experienced the culture. Mastroianni (2006) continues on to argue, “perhaps the superficial gruffness of the ground forces exists in a culture which embraces human interaction in a more sophisticated way than meets the eye” (p. 84). This is also in line with participants' descriptions of their perceptions of the Air Force and the Army. For example participants felt that the Army was more transparent about the negative experiences service members might face. Alternatively, those in the Air Force were expected to consider themselves lucky to be serving. The discrepancies in the reputation of each branch communicated to participants and their lived experiences within the branch ultimately played a

role in their relationship to the military following their separation from service (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Lange et al., 2011).

Reputation management of branches is important to consider because gaps in experiences may result in dissatisfaction of lived experience (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Lange et al., 2011). For example, participants who served in the Air Force mentioned that they felt they were hired for their intelligence. When their talents were not used or they were put down by superiors, it violated their expected versus perceived experiences. Moreover, for women who entered into the Air Force expecting a more progressive gender inclusive culture, they often encountered frequent and compounding sexist experiences, in-line with the experiences of women in the Army, which left them with mixed feelings about their relationship to the military. This led some of the participants in the study to actively discourage military service to others, especially to women. Furthermore, this affected women's willingness to embrace their veteran identity. As such, these gaps in expectations affected how former women service members communicated about the military and their time in service, affecting the reputation of the USM overall.

### ***Feminist Standpoint Theory in Totalistic and Greedy Institutions***

Previous research has used feminist standpoint theory to uncover power inequities in a variety of types of organizations, i.e., pink collar, academic, corporate (Halpern, 2019; Pompper, 2007; Rolin, 2007). To date, no research has sought to use feminist standpoint theory to explore the role of power inequities in relational meaning making of totalistic and greedy institutions. While Howe and Meeks (2019) used feminist standpoint theory to uncover and compare the experiences of men and women in two totalistic institutions, the USM and the Independent Fundamental Baptist Church, they did not consider the effect of gender performance and totalism on women's relational meaning making to the institution. Moreover, they argued that future

scholarship, “should actively examine the role of gender and/or sex in TI research” (Howe & Meeks, 2019, p. 63). In response to this call for future research, this dissertation extends the examination of gender performance in totalistic and greedy institution research. From the findings of this dissertation, I argue that feminist standpoint theory is an important theoretical framework for uncovering women’s gendered experiences in gendered, totalistic, and greedy institutions. Furthermore, by viewing institutions as totalistic, greedy, and gendered (Acker, 1990, 2015; Coser, 1974; Hinderaker & Howe, 2018), this dissertation demonstrates that gender performance expectations can affect people’s individual expectations of gender performance even after separating from the institution, seeping into all facets of an individual’s life (e.g., personal, professional, spiritual).

**Uncovering Gendered Experiences in Totalistic and Greedy Institutions.** Totalistic and greedy institutions are unique in that they extend past a person’s professional identity, into all aspects of their identity. Previous research found that totalistic and greedy institutions are difficult institutions to both gain entry into and exit due to their all-encompassing nature (Coser, 1974; Davies, 1989; Hinderaker, 2015; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018). However, as the all-encompassing nature of work increases in a variety of sectors, including tech, academia, and finance, (Kaufman & Gerson, 2012; May & McDermott, 2019; Mickey, 2019), and as institutions seek to ingrain jobs into people’s personal identities through the narrative of the “ideal worker” (Kossek et al., 2021; Peters & Blomme, 2019), understanding how people make sense of their experiences within totalistic and greedy institutions becomes increasingly important. The “ideal worker” narrative asserts that people should prioritize their job ahead of every other part of their life (Brumley, 2014). The ideal worker is a gendered narrative, based around the assumption that men go to work and women stay home to take care of the household

and children. Therefore, integrating the idea of gendered institutions into totalistic and greedy institutions deconstruct participants' perceptions of gender performance expectations and subsequent relational meaning making, as the components of totalistic and greedy institutions embrace and perpetuate gender constructs often in line with traditionally masculine ideals such as dominance, power, and control.

Overarchingly, institutional processes and structures cannot be divorced from the people who comprise them (Acker, 1990). Thus gender is expected and performed on both an institutional and individual level. Through the use of feminist standpoint theory, findings from this dissertation demonstrated that participants perceived a difference in gender performance expectations between women and men. Participants described exemplifying traditional gender roles as dictated by military culture and adopting coping strategies to fill gaps in their natural gender performance to meet the expectations (re)produced by the institution (Acker, 1990, 2015). For example, in line with hegemonic masculinity, some men performed gender by viewing women as objects and using power through language, policy, and retaliation to subjugate women. Previous research has found that men use power and aggression to realign people to prescriptive gender roles if they feel a person has "stepped out" of what they consider acceptable gender role behavior (Hearn, 2012; Locke, 2013). For men, gender performance often involved finding ways to put women "in their place" through power or belittlement or to view women as inept and needing protection. Men's performances of gender perceived by the women in this study exemplify hegemonic masculinity, subjugating women (Donaldson, 1993). Others performed gender in line with the expectation of men as the protector or savior, seeing themselves as brothers or father figures. Scholars have termed this benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism describes the implicit suggestion of women's inferiority through the guise of

kindness or paternalism (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Glick & Fiske, 1996). As defined by Dardenne et al. (2007), benevolent sexism “is a more positive attitude (often paternalistic, but not necessarily) toward women that appears favorable but is actually sexist because it portrays women as warm but incompetent or weak individuals in need of men’s protection and support (p. 764).” Although benevolent sexism can be beneficial for women (e.g., protection from other hostile men), this perspective continues to uphold and reinforce gender inequity. For example, the myth of protection naturalizes power inequity (Åse, 2018) and research has found that benevolent sexism can sometimes be more psychologically detrimental than hostile sexism (Dardenne et al., 2007). However, findings from this dissertation reinforce similar findings related to research on benevolent sexism, that benevolent sexism is less likely to be recognized as sexist, although its perpetuation of gender inequity is just as harmful as hostile sexism (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005).

Further, through feminist standpoint theory as identified in the military, gender performance for women was often predetermined and participants often shifted their behavior to be reactionary to the men around them. In order to succeed in this hegemonically masculine and totalistic culture, women often engaged in defensive othering as a strategic gender performance tactic (Armstrong et al., 2014). Participants explained how they perceived they were different from other women in that they always got along better with men. Some participants became underground enforcers of gender performance expectations, judging other women for displaying behaviors considered “feminine” (e.g., crying). Others engaged in coping strategies such as overcompensating in physical feats to meet the demands of the institutional culture. Similar to the work conducted by Tracy (2000) related to emotional labor and totalism institutions, this dissertation demonstrates that women in hegemonically masculine and totalistic institutions felt

an increased pressure to engage in emotional regulation and performance, often divorcing themselves from their emotions as a result. Over time, this led to burnout and dissatisfaction among some women service members.

By using feminist standpoint theory, this dissertation demonstrates how participants made sense of gender performance expectations in a totalistic and greedy institution. Integrating the idea of gendered institutions, findings from this dissertation demonstrate that gender expectations were different for men and women within the USM, often defined by the behaviors associated with traditional gender roles. In addition to performing gender within traditional gender role expectations, the “ideal worker” narrative (Kossek et al., 2021; Peters & Blomme, 2019) added additional pressures on women such as the effects of unpaid labor (e.g., overcompensation), emotional labor (e.g., the mental activity required to manage emotions in order to present oneself in a certain way such as divorcing themselves from emotion entirely or providing emotional support to others), and gendered stereotypes (e.g., bitch, slut, or pushover), were unequally burdened onto women service members. In line with findings from Howe and Meeks (2019), this dissertation also finds that within TIs and TI relationships, “not only do women have to learn new roles in these organizations but that they have more expectations with fewer rewards” (p. 60). Ultimately, the gendered culture of the institution, paired with the totalistic nature created a segregation of work based in gender, that was both created by institutional processes and reinforced through member behavior (Acker, 1990).

**Long-Term Effects on Sense of Self.** After separating from active duty service, participants acknowledged through reflection that the gender performance expectations set forth for them and the totalistic nature of the military continued to inform their sense of self and their own understanding of their gender performance. Importantly, this dissertation finds that

conceptions of gender behavior and expectations within the military have lasting impacts on individuals' sense of gender expectations. Similar to Acker's (1990, 2015) argument that institutional processes can impact individual gender identity, I argue through the findings of this dissertation that the role of institutional processes and culture on individuals can create long-term effects on people's meaning making, even after they have left the institution. For example, participants described that they had to adopt a more direct and masculine communication style in the military. In the civilian world, however, this direct communication was not well-received. This adds to women's burden when transitioning back to civilian life. Other participants explained how their experiences with gender in the military ultimately affected their other identities such as motherhood.

Although their military experience did provide them with the opportunities to enhance their independence and confidence, expectations related to how gender should be performed impacted how both men and women perceived expectations related to gender performance. Overtime, curating their own gender performance changed their understanding of their own gender identity. As such, this highlights that through communication, culture is (re)produced and through feminist standpoint theory, especially in TIs, we can provide the space for uncovering inequities in experiences based in gender. From these discoveries, we can then begin to identify strategies and interventions for lessening the oppression of gender in institutions.

### ***Communication and Relationships***

Communication, or lack thereof, plays an invaluable role in people's experiences during and after military service. Taking a communication as process perspective (Nastasia & Rakow, 2006) the process of communication can play a role in individuals' perceptions of relationships to institutions. Therefore, practically, this dissertation extends the importance of the

communication the USM engages in with stakeholders. As described in chapter 4, immediately following their separation from service, many of the participants took time to completely disassociate from the military community and identity. During this time, participants mentioned increased feelings of isolation, anger, and depression. The disassociation from the military may be a critical time for providing support services (e.g., mental health services, career support, reintegration support) and improving communication with former service members. Improving communication with women during and after service is important because, as the findings from this study demonstrate, women service members may not talk about their service openly following their separation from active duty service due to their negative experiences during service and with civilians. Although women in this study were proud of their service, disassociation from the veteran or former military service member identity may send a negative message to the civilian community about women's military service experiences. Some potential strategies for supporting former service members, specifically women, during this time may be to both improve communication with service members while in service, as well as improve communication following service.

**Improving “In Service” Communication.** Regarding communication while in service, three main areas were identified for improvement from the findings of this dissertation. Providing increased support services and opportunities for interpersonal connection during permanent change of stations (PCS), inviting women to co-create policies related to meeting gender-based disparities, and working to change the culture of communication around embracing gender-based identities (e.g., motherhood).

First, in training settings like basic training, the military cultivates a strong sense of community among its members (Halvorson et al., 2010). This sense of camaraderie has been



known to be invaluable to service members (McCormick et al., 2019). When asked to reflect on the military as a whole, participants in this study often mentioned that when considering “the military”, the individuals who make up the military cannot be separated from the institution. Thus, interpersonal relationships play a significant role in people’s military service experiences and are often mentioned as a factor in people’s decisions to stay or leave active duty military service. Although not all interpersonal relationships are positive, overall, participants explained that direct relationships with peers and leaders at individual bases contributed to feelings of comradery and connectedness to service that positively influenced their perception of their relationship to the military. Therefore, one area of communication that can be improved based on participants' responses is the communication during PCS. Participants mentioned that after reaching a new base or post, they sometimes struggled to connect with other service members. Participants also explained that having to switch to a different team, for any number of reasons, resulted in feelings of isolation and “otheredness”. The USM is challenged to consider ways to improve people’s experiences during PCS or the switch of shifts to make service members feel a stronger sense of belonging. One avenue might be to emphasize the role and value of interpersonal communication and relationships within leadership training schools. Because peers and leadership play a significant role in military service experience, finding ways to enhance interpersonal communication, especially during critical career points, may assist in retaining service members.

Second, findings from this dissertation demonstrate that although many policies have been developed to help or support women, these policies did not always result in support as intended. For example, participants shared that policies, such as the buddy system on deployments, put increased burdens on women. Although women on deployment had the same

level of risk as their male counterparts, they had the additional stress of meeting policy requirements (e.g., being with your buddy) while being targeted for being women within larger social, cultural, and institutional norms. Moreover, participants described that the policy of separating women into different tents put them at higher risk for sexual harassment and assault. Participants felt more comfortable sleeping in tents with the men they trained with, who they felt would protect them. Participants explained that putting women from different teams together in one tent put them at higher risk for sexual assault from men they did not know. Thus, while policies like separate sleeping quarters may sound good in theory, in practice, from participants' lived experiences, this was not the case. Although these policies were developed to support women, they did not take into account women's realistic lived experiences. Furthermore, while women want to be and should be treated equally, there are some differences, like body composition, that need to be taken into account in order to ensure that women service members are as mission ready as their male peers. For example, as participants explained, height and weight requirements that do not take into account the body diversity of women or equipment that is only made for men's bodies put women at a further disadvantage. Some of the regulations related to women's weight while in service can result in eating disorders that are carried with them after service (Bartlett & Mitchell, 2015; Forman-Hoffman et al., 2012; Masheb et al., 2021). This was also mentioned by participants who mentioned they were sent to counseling for eating disorders for looking underweight, but were technically overweight by policy standards. Previous research has found that strict weight and physical fitness requirements, as well as military sexual trauma and combat exposure increase the risk of developing eating disorders (Bartlett & Mitchell, 2015). Participants also described having health issues after separating from service due to ill-fitting gear that was designed around male bodies. Even if gear was made

smaller for women's bodies, simply modifying men's versions of gear did not adequately equip women for service. Oftentimes policies or gear made for men will be applied to women with slight modifications, however women's bodies and experiences are different and may require completely different designs. Therefore, improving communication with women while in service by listening to and inviting them to co-create policies, especially policies that seek to lessen disparities based in gender, is critical.

Finally, the anthesis of service and other gender-based identities communicated by the military through policies and cultures is an important element for the USM to change. Common says such as "bitch, slut, or pushover" or that people get pregnant to avoid deployments and trainings undermine the role of women in the military. Additionally, the ability to embrace other gender-based identities outside of the service member identity is crucial for supporting retention rates. Often, if women decide to join at a young age like 18 or 19, as women come up on their 10+ year reenlistment, they are making critical decisions related to marriage and parenthood. Around the time of 10 years in service, service members are required to make an indefinite reenlistment if they would like to continue in the military (RAND, 2007; Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2019). The indefinite reenlistment policy:

Requires all soldiers reaching the rank of E-6 with ten years of service to reenlist indefinitely. Their new separation date becomes either the year they are required to leave the service if not promoted or their retirement date, whichever occurs first (p. xiii).

With this policy, at 10 years of service, service members are required to sign a contract for at least another 10 years of service. If a woman decides to serve a full 20 years, she may separate from service around the age of 40 which is considered a geriatric pregnancy, also called advanced maternal age, with higher risks and potential for complications (Callegari et al., 2015;

Correa-de-Araujo & Yoon, 2021). Within the current military culture and policy, men engage in fatherhood while retaining the service member identity without repercussions, but the same cannot be said for women who want to have a family. The USM is challenged to shift how it communicates to women their ability to take on alternative identities, and the support it provides for women service members who want to embrace these identities, such as parenthood, while in service.

**Transition Out and Separation From Service.** Related to the transition out of and separation from service, three areas of communication improvement were identified from participants' responses. Changing the communication surrounding active duty separation and the communication of transition assistance resources, improving the communication between the military and the VA, and working to communicate clearer definitions of the term veteran and what it means to be a women service member.

First, participants mentioned a significant challenge they encountered in the transition process was the feelings of abruptness related to the transition out of service. For example, as participants described, one day you are a service member, the next day you are civilian. Upon this transition, participants mentioned feeling isolated as communication with the USM ceased completely. Considering ways to keep the line of communication open with former service members, instead of completely cutting ties from the perspective of the institution may help to lessen feelings of bitterness and dissatisfaction. Within this recommendation to open a line of communication with former service members, changing the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) could lessen the shock experienced as a civilian. For example, participants mentioned that receiving resources during the TAP was impacted by people's mental and emotional states during the transition process. Within the current TAP program, the potentially difficult emotions

that may arise during the transition out are not currently considered. Providing resources for supporting service members' mental health and emotional status during this time could help the relational meaning making that occurs when they officially become civilians. As Alta explained, a similar all-encompassing process to basic training but for civilian reintegration could provide much needed support for service members. Moreover, because the transition experience is so hectic, allowing former service members to access the TAP resources for at least five years post service, may help veterans feel more supported. As described by participants, service members often do not know what TAP resources they need until they are in the civilian world.

Second, participants described experiencing challenges in accessing their Veterans Affairs (VA) resources. Thus, the communication during the hand-off from active duty service to the VA needs improvement. For example, from participants' responses, difficulty in receiving the care they needed, as well as access to documents for receiving disability ratings posed considerable challenges. Much of the hegemonically masculine culture they experienced while in active duty service also carried over into the VA. This lead participants to experiences similar incidents of sexism and discrimination as they did in active duty service. Continuing to challenge gender performance expectations among VA staff could help women veterans to feel more supported and heard<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the transition and communication between the USM and VA, as well as implementing strategies to lessen inequities in gender-based experiences within the VA may provide key avenues to improve former service members' outlook on their relationship to the military after service.

Finally, unclear expectations around terms like "veteran" or what it means to be a current or former women service member were found to significantly impact participants' relationship to

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<sup>9</sup> This is explained further in the first recommendation.

the military. Interestingly, none of the participants defined “veteran” in line with the official regulation 38 U.S.C. § 3.1, “The term "veteran" means a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.” Some participants added time requirements, others added their own requirements related to risk. As such, communication with service members by the military related to crucial terms and identity markers could be improved as the effect of murky definitions surrounding terms such as “veteran” led some participants to not embrace the identity and miss out on the benefits entitled to them. Because of the complexity surrounding the term “veteran” services, groups, and institutions that included the term veteran were immediately written off by some participants. For example, because of the unclear agreement among participants related to the term veteran, some felt that the VA would not be a useful resource or that they were not worthy of the VA benefits they were entitled to. Related to Veterans Centers on college campuses, the use of “veteran” in the title presented a barrier for some participants to use the resource. Therefore, the unclear expectations surrounding some important identity markers like the term “veteran” may impact people’s perception of sense of place and belonging.

Ultimately, improving communication while in and out of active duty service may lessen the potential need for participants to disassociate from the military identity and community upon separation. Moreover, improving USM communication may help to better meet the expectations of former service members so that people do not develop a bittersweet relationship to the military following their service. Through the communication based strategies suggested above, the USM may be able to improve its relationship with former service members, specifically, women, and build a stronger reputation of the USM overall.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations for this dissertation are based on participants' lived experiences and the current academic literature in an attempt to make gender a less oppressive element in the USM structure and culture. Recommendations are important for facilitating tangible change from scholarly findings. These recommendations include: improving women's healthcare, changes to the transition assistance program, and creating spaces for former women service members.

### ***Improving Women's Healthcare***

As mentioned above, the healthcare options and treatment of women with military service experience left a lot to be desired. This is a common finding within the academic literature, as well as that currently veterans' services are not adequately meeting the needs of women veterans (Brunner et al., 2019; Kehle-Forbes et al., 2017, Marshall et al., 2021; Mattocks et al., 2020). Previous research has argued that many of the same experiences and challenges expressed by participants including medical provider bias, the need for gender-specific healthcare, and the lack of mental health resources for veterans. Because the literature has already argued for these changes, I present a new recommendation identified from participants' responses, that the USM needs to connect with women to see what gender-specific policies, regulations, and standards help or hinder their health while in and out of active duty service. For example, participants explained that some of the equipment they were given was not fit for women's bodies, which led to further health complications down the line. Relatedly, policies while in service such as the buddy system, used to mitigate the threat of experiencing sexual violence, placed increased burdens on women and may not actually assist in solving the problem of sexual violence. Participants further mentioned that creating separate spaces for women on military bases and posts made them more of a target. Thus, the USM is challenged to invite women service members and veterans to talk candidly about gender-specific policies that do not

work. Allowing service members to engage in policy creation, especially related to health and safety, is an important step for providing more comprehensive healthcare in and out of active duty service.

### ***Changes to the Transition Assistance Program***

In addition to providing more comprehensive healthcare, changing TAP may provide another avenue to better support women former service members. The two main changes to TAP that may provide increased help and support is to (1) allow people access to TAP resources up to five years after their separation from service, and (2) include gender-specific transition resources.

As mentioned above, an interesting find from this dissertation that may not require much additional work for the USM is to allow people to engage with TAP resources after their final separate date from service. As most of the participants described, “you don’t know what will be useful from TAP until you are out in the civilian world.” Moreover, the emotional and mental burdens experienced during the transition process as a whole, making retaining important information from TAP difficult. Ultimately, this is a disservice to service members and impacts the reputation of the program. Although there are resources for veterans in the civilian world, often created by veterans, many barriers exist to accessing those resources such as money, not embracing the veterans identity, and the male-dominated nature of veterans spaces. Extending access to TAP could fill this crucial gap. As institutions shifted to provide services online in the height of the pandemic, TAP was facilitated virtually for those separating from service. Continuing this model and allowing former service members to access online modules and connect with TAP personnel could be an important step for supporting the transition into the civilian world. While a quick internet search shows easy and open access to TAP resources such as video and pamphlets, extending TAP services, such as access to individual program



facilitators, career counselors, college advisors, and in-person TAP sessions may be more impactful for former service members after their exit than just relying on asynchronous video modules.

Second, providing gender specific resources may help ease the additional burdens placed on women during the transition process. As argued by Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015), women veterans have unique transition needs that are often based around finding child care and balancing home life demands. Having child care and support at home can be significant factors in women veterans retention in higher education, as well as the workforce. Thus, the USM is challenged to consider how gender specific TAP resources, such as child care, may aid women veterans during the separation process. Moreover, as participants described, some of the norms and behaviors learned in service are not accepted in the civilian world. As Robin explained, “in the military, you kind of step up and be a male, essentially. Especially like, my communication skills are male. And I, you know, I talk like a male, I cuss with the best of them.” After leaving service Robin explained that:

[while in] I was able to adjust a little bit and become kind of more male, which is, unfortunately, the default gender in the military. But it became more marked when I came out, which was I found, I wasn't expecting that.

Therefore, additional programming related to communication in the civilian workplace may further assist women in their transition into the civilian workforce. Finally, participants mentioned that the transition process was extremely emotional. However, no resources existed that took into account the mental and emotional toll of leaving the military. Similar to the work by Tracy (2000) the totalizing nature of emotional regulation required in TIs may require unique approaches to mental health support, especially for women when reintegrating into civilian life.

Going forward, TAP should include additional resources related to mental and emotional health to those going through the program and after their official separation from service.

### ***Creating Spaces for Former Women Service Members***

Finally, the USM, civilian, and veteran spaces are challenged to create places for former women service members to feel included, heard, and accepted. Participants in this study mentioned feeling as though there no was space for them in the military community, the civilian community, or the veteran community. Therefore, the final recommendation is that we need to create spaces for former women service members. Feminist standpoint theory allows us to deal with discomfort in experiences by giving voice to those in the subordinate social locations. Findings from this dissertation highlight that women’s experiences in the USM tend to be silenced both inside and outside of the military, often labeled “uncomfortable” or “unfit” for the context. Following the conclusion of some of the interviews in this dissertation, participants thanked me for providing the space to talk about their experiences, mentioning that there was no space for them to discuss their experiences inside or outside the military.

First, veteran communities need to provide the space for women to be accepted without having to adhere to oppressive gender behavior expectations. Although veteran spaces may seek to create similar cultures to that of active duty service, women may be tired of adhering to strict gender performance expectations and not find these spaces welcoming or useful. Veterans spaces online and in-person are challenged to consider how they might better integrate the lived experiences of women veterans into their communities to promote greater participation of women in these spaces.

Second, there needs to be an increase in education among the civilian population about women in service, especially related to what military service looks like and the experiences of

women veterans. Because of the particular way the military seeks to socialize its members to train, work, and live in isolation from civilian culture, a veteran-civilian divide is well-documented (Eichler & Smith-Evans, 2018; McCormick et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2020). Presently, fewer people have connections to the military than ever before. For example, in 1995, 40% of youth had parents who had served in the military and in 2017 only 15% of youth had parents who served (Garamone, 2019). Fewer connections between the military and civilian world may intensify the military-civilian divide as family connections to the military result in different perspectives on topics related to patriotism such as the military and national security (Garamone, 2019). Thus, increased education about military service is needed. Specifically, the role of the military, what military service actually looks like, and the diversity of the military service experience can lessening the stigma around veterans. People may stereotype veterans based on depictions in popular culture that often showcase veterans as conservative, White males. However, military service members are far more diverse, from their gender identity and ethnicity, to their political affiliation and background. Expecting only White men to be veterans dismisses and diminishes the service experiences of all others. Increasing civilians knowledge of this diversity, as well as the value of military service for increasing confidence and leadership abilities may lessen current stigmas associated with military experience. As Fran argued, there needs to be increased education in the civilian sector about the veteran experience and the value of veterans, especially within the workplace.

### **Limitations**

Although I used Tracy's (2010) big tent criteria to develop the protocol for a quality, qualitative research study, there were some limitations based on scope and feasibility of the project. In this section, I explain some of the major limitations of this dissertation and suggest

avenues for future research. The main limitations of this study include: the critique of feminist standpoint theory, intersectionality, the limitation of using gender in the binary sense, branch affiliation, and the limitation of a singular coder.

### ***Feminist Standpoint Theory***

One limitation of this dissertation is that the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory has previously been critiqued by scholars. The two main critiques of feminist standpoint theory are that feminist standpoint theory, (1) assumes that acknowledging new knowledge gleaned from research will result in tangible change, and (2) that the perspective of standpoint theory can only lead to unchecked, radical relativism (i.e., if all knowledge is situated, there is no way to know whether any knowledge claims are “true”).

Andermahr et al. (1997) argued that feminist standpoint theory assumes the knowledge produced from its inquiry will lead to adopting the best political strategies. As an interpretivist, critical scholar, I agree that we cannot simply identify issues through research. Rather, action needs to be taken as knowledge can both control and liberate (Tracy, 2019). To mitigate this limitation, I provide both practical extensions and recommendations for improving the IPR between women veterans and the USM. These practical extensions and recommendations can be used by the academic, civilian, and military communities alike to improve the experiences of women in the armed forces.

The second critique of feminist standpoint theory is that it will lead to “unchecked, radical relativism” (see Wylie, 2003 for an overview of contentions about standpoints). Critics argue that if all knowledge is situated, there is no way to know whether any knowledge claims are “true”. However, scholars like Halpern (2019) have argued that “we can still hold knowledge claims to high standards without insisting they are objectively, universally true” (p. 3). As an

interpretivist, critical scholar who views knowledge and reality as connected to historical and cultural contexts and often mediated by power, I agree with the argument made by Halpern (2019) that we do not need feminist standpoint theory to uncover universal truths. Instead, feminist standpoint theory is an invaluable framework for identifying situated truths via communication as process of relational co-creation between individuals and institutions.

### ***Intersectionality***

Fully explicating the effects of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2006) is another limitation of this study. Although some participants mentioned how some of their experiences with gender were compounded by their race and ethnicity, experiences based in race and ethnicity were not the focus of this dissertation and there were no questions in the interview protocol that specifically asked participants about their experiences based in race or ethnicity. However, as people have many memberships within society, their standpoints and social locations can be complex (Buzzanell et al., 2017). For example, a White woman and a Latina woman within the same institution may have different experiences, although they occupy a similar gender-based social location (Wood, 2005). Previous research has found specifically that patriarchal effects among US institutions are worse for Women of Color because they “disappear” in the gap between “women” (often considered White) and “minorities” (often considered male) (Reuther & Fairhurst, 2000, p. 237). When considering race/ethnicity in the military, women service members are more diverse than their male counterparts. Collectively 71.4% of active duty men across branches are White compared to 56.7% of women (MilitaryOneSource, 2020). However, racial discrimination is prevalent as a survey of active duty service members of color found that 1 in 5 experienced racial or ethnic harassment within the past year (Lam, 2021). In an article published by National Public Radio (NPR) in 2021, Army veteran Crystal Ellington stated that if

she had known about the racial disparities in the military, she would have never joined. The effects of racism on women in the military can also be seen through the Vanessa Guillén case, a Latina woman who was sexually assaulted and murdered for speaking out against her attacker (McDermott & May, in review). Vanessa's case went viral on social media and the League of United Latin American Citizens President Domingo Garcia urged Latinas not to join the military (Lopez, 2020).

In exploring intersectionality, the racial breakdown of participants was a limitation as it did not reflect the demographic breakdown of the Air Force and Army. The most recent DoD demographics report for the year 2021 (published in 2022), found that one-third (31.1%) of active duty personnel self-identified with racial minority groups, while 68.9% identified as White and 3.7% identified as "unknown". A total of 17.7% of active duty members identified as being Hispanic or Latino. The demographic breakdown of participants in this study did not mirror the number of Asian or Black/African American service members in either the Air Force (Asian 4.2% enlisted, 5.5% officer; Black or African American 16.9% enlisted, 6.2% officer) or the Army (Asian 4.9% enlisted, 6.5% officer; Black or African American 23.3% enlisted and 12.4% officer). Additionally, the representation of White participants (73%) in this study was higher than that in the Air Force (White 68.5% enlisted, 71.6% officer) and Army (White 66.9% enlisted, 72.7% officer). However, 20% of participants did identify as Hispanic/Latina which is higher than the percentage in both the Air Force (Hispanic or Latino 16%) and the Army (Hispanic or Latino 17%). Thus, because the interview protocol did not ask about experiences based on race and the participants demographics did not reflect the racial breakdown of the Air Force or Army respectively, intersectionality was not evaluated in depth in this dissertation.

### ***Gender as Binary***

Another limitation of this study was the perspective of gender from a binary lens. Although viewing gender in a binary sense of men and women for this study was in-line with the DoD regulations (Norquist, 2019), this perspective erases the lived experiences of those who are gender diverse. Specifically, during the recruitment phase, a transgender woman reached out to see if she could participate in this study. She explained that she was a man while in service and once she separated from service she transitioned to become a woman. As such, because the criteria of this study explored the experiences of women in the military, the experiences and voices of gender-diverse people were not explored.

### ***Branch Affiliation***

Through the use of convenience sampling and snowball sampling I recruited and interviewed 30 participants which is in line with current published research related to women's experiences in the military (Mattocks et al., 2012, 2020; McGregor, 2020; Monteith et al., 2021). However, a limitation of this study is that I only explored the experiences of former women service members from two branches. Although researching the experiences of more than two branches was outside the scope of this dissertation, recruiting from more than two branches or researching different branches (e.g., Navy and Marine) may yield different findings. Additionally, of the two branches I recruited, there was an unequal representation of branch affiliation among participants. Of the participants, 17 out of 30 served in the Air Force with one participant serving in both the Air Force and the Army. Because of the discrepancies in branch breakdown, findings from this dissertation describe more of the experiences related to serving in the Air Force. Moreover, I chose not to offer compensation for participation because of the controversy surrounding compensation within the literature (Groth, 2010; Millum & Garnett,

2019; Singer & Bossarte, 2006). While this may have been a limitation to recruitment, the participants I was able to recruit and interview participated because they shared similar goals for the potential outcome of this research to change women's experiences in the military (Millum & Garnett, 2019).

### ***Singular Coder for Qualitative Analysis***

Finally, a major limitation was that I was the only coder for data analysis. Thus, there was no intercoder reliability. Some scholars have argued that intercoder reliability can strengthen the rigor and quality of qualitative scholarship (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). However, the same level of rigor and quality can be achieved with just one scholar if a few important steps are enacted throughout the research process. First, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the entire research process. In this reflexivity, I sought to situate myself within the research, acknowledging my previous knowledge of the military and potential biases, as well as my limitations as a military dependent and not a former active duty service member. Second, I used a semi-structured interview format to allow conversation to emerge and flow organically. From these co-created conversations, during the data analysis and write-up process, I used participants' direct quotes to exemplify the research findings. In the use of participant quotes, I sought to avoid "putting words" in participants' mouths (Walford, 2007), to accurately represent their lived experiences. Third, by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis, I became intimately familiar with the data and the guiding theoretical framework to engage in constant abductive comparison to maintain the integrity of participants' responses. Through the use of the six steps, I was able to analyze the data by reviewing it in comparison with larger theoretical frameworks and the broader scholarly literature to support and enhance the findings.



## **Future Research**

From the findings and discussion of this dissertation, as well as the limitations explicated above, I propose a few different avenues for future scholarship. Based on the findings of this research, scholars should explore how feminist standpoints may be affected by memberships in different groups over time. Moreover, scholarship should also consider how coping strategies used in TIs, like defensive othering or overcompensation, may play a role in individuals' abilities to engage in critical reflections of their standpoints. Specifically related to the military, future scholarship should seek to identify if and how men who identify at different degrees of masculinity also engage in coping strategies like defensive othering. Future scholarship could also consider how gender and power are enacted in women dominated MOS as gender may be performed differently.

Regarding race and ethnicity, future scholarship should take a more granular perspective to evaluating how intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2006) may play a role in women's experiences during and after military service. As demographic breakdowns of race within the armed services show that it is more diverse than its civilian counterparts (DoD, 2022a), a better understanding of the social location of race and ethnicity would provide important information to add about women's experiences in the military.

Relatedly, future scholarship should explore the experiences of transgender service members and veterans. It is estimated that over 134,000 American veterans are transgender and that there are over 15,000 transgender individuals serving in the armed forces today (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2023). Furthermore, research shows that 20% of transgender individuals have served in the military (US Transgender Survey USTS, 2015). As such, this is an

important voice for future research to capture to assure that transgender service members and veterans are receiving the support they need.

In addition to the gender diversity of service members, gender diversity of spouses requires further inquiry. As argued above, the whole family serves in the military. Although spouses were not a main focus of this research, one participant, Yvette, brought up an element that deserves additional scholarship. Because the military is dominated by men traditionally in heterosexual relationships, women make a majority of the military spouse community, about 90.5% (DoD, 2022a). However, Yvette mentioned that for her female Airmen, their male husbands not in the military struggled to connect with the military spouse community. Moreover, when women had to go on deployments, men became the singular caretaker. As Yvette explained:

A female military spouse is a little different than being a male military spouse. . . So I think that's something that is a unique challenge to being, you know, a woman in the Air Force, or in the Army is that if you're married to another military member, or your spouse is a husband, that he needs to be made aware of all the things that are available to him too.

Therefore, future scholarship should seek to capture the male spouses' experiences to understand how gender performance expectations outside of the military, such as in personal relationships, may affect women service members' ability to perform in the military.

## Conclusion

This dissertation sought to identify the challenges to military service experienced by former women service members based on the stratification of power through gender. Through interviews with 30 former women Air Force or Army service members, the present study used feminist standpoint theory to uncover inequities in experiences to find ways in which to make the totalistic and hegemonically masculine culture of the military less oppressive on women. Findings from this dissertation demonstrate that gender performance expectations differed for men and women and these differences in expectations were often in line with traditional gender roles. Because of the traditional gender role expectations, participants experienced structural and cultural inequities that placed increased burdens on women to survive and thrive in the military. Throughout their time in and out of service, communication was used to communicate norms and values significant in military culture. Because of women's experiences during and outside of their time in active duty service, veteran identity was a complex identity for women to embrace. From these findings I present theoretical extensions related to feminist standpoint theory (e.g., time and coping strategies), additional dimensions for qualitatively evaluating IPRs (e.g., gender, totalism, and time), and argue for the perspective of IPRs as a spectrum. Practically, I consider the role of branch culture and communication in women veterans' meaning making process, as well as consider the importance of standpoint theory for understanding totalistic and greedy institutions. Based on these theoretical extensions and practical implications, I recommend improving women's healthcare, changes to the transition assistance program, and creating spaces for former women service members to improve women's experiences during and after military service. By inviting women into gender-inclusive, non-retaliatory spaces, such as the academy, we can co-create gender specific knowledge and policies related to military service to improve

the lived experiences of women service members. Moreover, from the knowledge uncovered, we may find new avenues forward for researching and reducing the oppression of gender in society at large.

## Appendix A: IRB Approval



1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-5125  
TEL 301.405.4212 FAX 301.314.1475 irb@umd.edu  
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

DATE: November 7, 2022

TO: Victoria McDermott  
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1974792-3] Women's Former Military Service Experience in the US Air Force and Army

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: November 7, 2022

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7, *Waiver of Consent Documentation, 45CFR46.117(c)*

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to final approval of this project scientific review was completed by the IRB Member reviewer.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate Amendment forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

**Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study today. I would like to begin by starting with an overview of the research study and informed consent.** [Researcher will then overview the informed consent form.]

**Do you agree to participate and have this call recorded?** [If the participant agrees to participate and be recorded the researcher will continue to the interview questions. If the participant agrees to participate but not be recorded, the researcher will continue to the interview questions. The researchers will not record the interview but will take notes. If the participant does not agree to participate the interview will end.]

**If you agree to participate and have this interview recorded, please state the following to confirm you are at least 18 years old and are giving consent to participate in this study and have the interview recorded:** “Yes, I am at least 18 years of age; I have read the consent form or have had it read to me; my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.”

### Interview Questions:

#### Rapport building

1. How did you decide to join the military? Your branch specifically?

#### Generating questions

2. Describe active duty service when you first joined it.
  - a. Was it what you expected? Different? How?
  - b. How, if at all, did your experience change over time?
3. Provide a summary/overview of your military career.
  - a. MOS? Duration? Locations? Officer or enlisted?
  - b. What were some major milestones for you?

#### Directive Questions

4. Describe to me in your own words, your respective branch?
  - a. What does it mean to be a soldier or airmen?
  - b. Important values?
  - c. Expected behaviors? How, if at all, do you perceive these to be different for men vs. women?
5. Describe to me in your own words, the military?
  - a. Important values?
  - b. Expected behaviors? How, if at all, do you perceive these to be different for men vs. women?
  - c. How does this compare with the values you shared about your own branch?
6. Tell me what you liked about your time in service.
  - a. How did this time contribute to your goals (personal, professional, academic)?

7. Describe some of the challenges you faced while in service?
  - a. What were the basis of these challenges (e.g., structure of leadership, values, gender, all-encompassing nature)?
8. How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your military service experience?
  - a. What expectations (e.g., behavior, feelings, job responsibilities) were there because of your gender?
  - b. How, if at all, were expectations different for men vs. women?
  - c. What challenges did you face because of it? Can you provide an example?
  - d. How, if at all, did you have to change how you acted because of expectations based in gender roles? Can you provide some examples?
  - e. How, if at all, did others change their behavior based on these expectations? Can you provide examples?
  - f. How, if at all, do you perceive gender to play a role in how people communicate with? Can you provide some examples?
  - g. How, if at all, did any expectations of gender roles/behaviors make you feel? Related to your identity as a service member?
  - h. How do you perceive your relationships to other women service members? How is this similar or different to your relationships with men service members?
9. Describe how you experienced communication was while in service.
  - a. What did average communication between peers look like? From leadership?
  - b. Who did you communicate the most with? Why?
  - c. How, if at all, did you witness or receive positive communication? Can you provide an example of some of the positive communication you experienced?
  - d. How, if at all, did you witness or receive negative communication? Can you provide an example of some of the negative communication you experienced?
  - e. What, if any, communication norms (e.g., word choices) do you feel are different from when you were in military service and when you transitioned out of service? (examples to prompt if necessary: Types of jokes made, cursing.)
  - f. How, if at all, could communication be improved?
10. Describe the process of leaving service.
  - a. Why did you decide to leave?
  - b. How did you feel supported throughout the process?
  - c. How did you feel transitioning services supported you (e.g., financial aid training, transition assistance program)? Did you feel like these services were made for you?
  - d. What would have better supported your transition out of service?
11. Describe in your own words, your relationship with the military.
  - a. Immediately after leaving service what did you do regarding employment or education? How did this impact your relationship with the military?
  - b. How, if at all, has your perception of your relationship with the military changed over time?
12. How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your transition out of service? In your time out of service?
  - a. What expectations (e.g., behavior, feelings, job responsibilities) were there because of your gender?



- b. How, if at all, were expectations different for men vs. women?
  - c. What challenges did you face because of it? Can you provide an example?
  - d. How, if at all, did you have to change how you acted because of expectations based in gender roles? Can you provide some examples?
  - e. How, if at all, did others change their behavior based on these expectations? Can you provide examples?
  - f. How, if at all, do you perceive gender to play a role in how people communicate with? Can you provide some examples?
  - g. How, if at all, did any expectations of gender roles/behaviors make you feel? Related to your identity as a former service member?
  - h. How do you perceive your relationships to other former women service members? How is this similar or different to your relationships with former men service members?
  - i. How do you define the term “veteran”?
13. How do you define “relationship”?
- a. How would you describe your relationship to your specific branch?
  - b. How, if at all, has this relationship changed overtime?
  - c. What does this relationship mean to you?
  - d. What has been positive about this relationship?
  - e. What has been challenging about this relationship?
  - f. How if at all do you view this relationship as reciprocal?
  - g. What, if anything, would you like to change about this relationship?
14. Describe the military-affiliated groups you are a part of since leaving active-duty service.
- a. Why did you decide to join these groups?
  - b. Are there groups you joined and left? Are there groups you were not allowed to join?
  - c. What role do these groups play in your life?
  - d. How often do you engage with these groups? What effects your level of engagement/or involvement?
  - e. How, if at all, do they affect your relationship with the military?
  - f. How do you communicate with these groups?
  - g. How, if at all, do any of the communication norms (i.e., word choices) differ between military-affiliated groups and non-military-affiliated groups you are a part of?

### **Closing Questions**

- 15. What would you have liked to see different during/after your time in service?
  - a. Additional support services?
  - b. Changes to culture?
  - c. Changes to gender behavior expectations?
  - d. Military-affiliated groups?
- 16. What advice would you give to someone thinking about entering into the military? Your specific branch? Those in the military? Those leaving the military?
- 17. What, if at all, would you like to add to further this research?

## **Demographic Questions**

1. What is your race?
2. How long did you serve?
3. What is your age?

## **End**

Thank you so much for your participation in this research project. If you know of anyone else who may be interested in participating in this research project and meets the participant criteria, please feel free to send them the participant research call or my email address

[vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu).

## Appendix C: Recruitment Materials

### *Email - Call for research participants - Women who have served in the US Air Force or Army*

Peers and Colleagues,

I am Victoria McDermott, a doctoral candidate and military spouse at the University of Maryland. Supervised by Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson, I am conducting research as part of my dissertation to understand how women who have served in the US Air Force or the Army perceive their time during and out of active-duty service.

This study seeks to understand how the US Air Force and Army, specifically, may better support women during and after service. Currently, I am recruiting women with military service, who served in either the US Air Force or Army and who have transitioned out of active-duty service within the last 20 years to participate in a 30 to 60 minute interview.

If you meet the following inclusion criteria or know of someone who does, please consider participating in this study. Inclusion criteria include the following:

- Identify as a woman
- Transitioned out of active duty service within the last 20 years
- Have served in the US Air Force or Army
- Must be 18 years or older to participate

If you meet the inclusion criteria and are interested in participating in this research, please contact Victoria McDermott at [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu) or 516-404-5828 to schedule an interview. I would like to audio record the interview but audio recording is not a requirement for participation. No information from this study will be shared with the US Air Force, Army, or Department of Defense.

Please contact Victoria McDermott at [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu) or 516-404-5828 with any questions and concerns. To contact the UMD IRB office, email [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu) or call 301-405-0678.

Best,  
Victoria McDermott

### *Listserv Message*

Victoria McDermott, [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu),

Call for Research Participants - Women who have served in the US Air Force or Army

I am Victoria McDermott, a doctoral candidate and military spouse at the University of Maryland. Supervised by Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson, I am conducting research as part of my

dissertation to understand how women who have served in the US Air Force or the Army perceive their time during and out of active-duty service.

This study seeks to understand how the US Air Force and Army, specifically, may better support women during and after service. Currently, I am recruiting women with military service, who served in either the US Air Force or Army and who have transitioned out of active-duty service within the last 20 years to participate in a 30 to 60 minute interview.

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Please contact Victoria McDermott at [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu) or 516-404-5828 with any questions and concerns. To contact the UMD IRB office, email [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu) or call 301-405-0678.

### ***Social Media Recruitment Messages***

I am Victoria McDermott, a military spouse and doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland. Please consider participating and/or sharing this call for participation.

Thank you!

#military #veteran #womenveterans

====

I am Victoria McDermott, a doctoral candidate and military spouse at the University of Maryland. Supervised by Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson, I am conducting research as part of my dissertation to understand how women who have served in the US Air Force or the Army perceive their time during and out of active-duty service.

This study seeks to understand how the US Air Force and Army, specifically, may better support women during and after service. Currently, I am recruiting women with military service, who served in either the US Air Force or Army who have transitioned out of active-duty service within the last 20 years to participate in a 30 to 60 minute interview.

If you meet the following inclusion criteria or know of someone who does, please consider participating in this study. Inclusion criteria include the following:

- Identify as a woman
- Transitioned out of active duty service within the last 20 years
- Have served in the US Air Force or Army
- Must be 18 years or older to participate

If you meet the inclusion criteria and are interested in participating in this research, please contact Victoria McDermott at [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu) or 516-404-5828 to schedule an interview. I would like to audio record the interview but audio recording is not a requirement for participation. No information from this study will be shared with US Air Force, Army, or Department of Defense.

Please contact Victoria McDermott at [vmcdermo@umd.edu](mailto:vmcdermo@umd.edu) or 516-404-5828 with any questions and concerns. To contact the UMD IRB office, email [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu) or call 301-405-0678.

## Appendix D: Research Question Interview Protocol Map

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### **RQ1: How do women with military service experience in the Air Force or the Army make sense of gender performance?**

---

Describe active duty service when you first joined it.

- a. Was it what you expected? Different? How?
- b. How, if at all, did your experience change over time?

Provide a summary/overview of your military career.

- a. MOS? Duration? Locations? Officer or enlisted?
- b. What were some major milestones for you?

Describe to me in your own words, your respective branch?

- a. What does it mean to be a soldier or airmen?
- b. Important values?
- c. Expected behaviors? How, if at all, do you perceive these to be different for men vs. women?

Describe to me in your own words, the military?

- a. Important values?
- b. Expected behaviors? How, if at all, do you perceive these to be different for men vs. women?
- c. How does this compare with the values you shared about your own branch?

How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your military service experience?

- a. What expectations (e.g., behavior, feelings, job responsibilities) were there because of your gender?
- b. How, if at all, were expectations different for men vs. women?
- c. What challenges did you face because of it? Can you provide an example?
- d. How, if at all, did you have to change how you acted because of expectations based in gender roles? Can you provide some examples?
- e. How, if at all, did others change their behavior based on these expectations? Can you provide examples?
- f. How, if at all, do you perceive gender to play a role in how people communicate with? Can you provide some examples?
- g. How, if at all, did any expectations of gender roles/behaviors make you feel? Related to your identity as a service member?
- h. How do you perceive your relationships to other women service members? How is this similar or different to your relationships with men service members?

How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your transition out of service? In your time out of service?

- a. What expectations (e.g., behavior, feelings, job responsibilities) were there because of your gender?
-

- b. How, if at all, were expectations different for men vs. women?
- c. What challenges did you face because of it? Can you provide an example?
- d. How, if at all, did you have to change how you acted because of expectations based in gender roles? Can you provide some examples?
  - a. How, if at all, did others change their behavior based on these expectations? Can you provide examples?
  - b. How, if at all, do you perceive gender to play a role in how people communicate with? Can you provide some examples?
  - c. How, if at all, did any expectations of gender roles/behaviors make you feel? Related to your identity as a former service member?
  - d. How do you perceive your relationships to other former women service members? How is this similar or different to your relationships with former men service members?
  - e. How do you define the term “veteran”?

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**RQ2: How, if at all, does gender play a role in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches?**

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Tell me what you liked about your time in service.

- a. How did this time contribute to your goals (personal, professional, academic)?

Describe some of the challenges you faced while in service?

- a. What were the basis of these challenges (e.g., structure of leadership, values, gender, all-encompassing nature)?

Describe in your own words, your relationship with the military.

- a. Immediately after leaving service what did you do regarding employment or education? How did this impact your relationship with the military?
- b. How, if at all, has your perception of your relationship with the military changed over time?

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**RQ3: What role does communication play in relationships between former women service members and their respective military branches?**

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How did you decide to join the military? Your branch specifically?

Describe how you experienced communication was while in service.

- a. What did average communication between peers look like? From leadership?
- b. Who did you communicate the most with? Why?
- c. How, if at all, did you witness or receive positive communication? Can you provide an example of some of the positive communication you experienced?
- d. How, if at all, did you witness or receive negative communication? Can you provide an example of some of the negative communication you experienced?
- e. What, if any, communication norms (e.g., word choices) do you feel are different from when you were in military service and when you transitioned out of service? (examples to prompt if necessary: Types of jokes made, cursing.)
- f. How, if at all, could communication be improved?

Describe the process of leaving service.

- a. Why did you decide to leave?
- b. How did you feel supported throughout the process?
- c. How did you feel transitioning services supported you (e.g., financial aid training, transition assistance program)? Did you feel like these services were made for you?
- d. What would have better supported your transition out of service?

How do you define “relationship”?

- a. How would you describe your relationship to your specific branch?
- b. How, if at all, has this relationship changed overtime?
- c. What does this relationship mean to you?
- d. What has been positive about this relationship?
- e. What has been challenging about this relationship?
- f. How if at all do you view this relationship as reciprocal?
- g. What, if anything, would you like to change about this relationship?

What would you have liked to see different during/after your time in service?

- a. Additional support services?
- b. Changes to culture?
- c. Changes to gender behavior expectations?
- d. Military-affiliated groups?

What advice would you give to someone thinking about entering into the military? Your specific branch? Those in the military? Those leaving the military?

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**RQ4: How, if at all, does engagement with military-affiliated groups after leaving active-duty service play a role in former women service members' perceived relationship with their respective military branch?**

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Describe the military-affiliated groups you are a part of since leaving active-duty service.

- a. Why did you decide to join these groups?
  - b. Are there groups you joined and left? Are there groups you were not allowed to join?
  - c. What role do these groups play in your life?
  - d. How often do you engage with these groups? What effects your level of engagement/or involvement?
  - e. How, if at all, do they affect your relationship with the military?
  - f. How do you communicate with these groups?
  - g. How, if at all, do any of the communication norms (i.e., word choices) differ between military-affiliated groups and non-military-affiliated groups you are a part of?
-



## Appendix E: Consent Form



### Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu)

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>Women’s Former Military Service Experience in the US Air Force and Army</i>
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by <b>Victoria McDermott</b> at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a woman who has served in the US Air Force or Army and has transitioned out of active-duty service in the last 20 years. The purpose of this research project is to understand how women with military experience perceive the military after leaving military service.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<i>The procedures involve participating in a virtual interview. There is no compensation for participating in this study. I will ask to audio record this interview but you may decline to be recorded and still participate in this research. The interview will take 30 to 60 minutes to complete, and will ask you questions about your experience during and after military service. Example questions include, “How did you decide to join the military?; How, if at all, do you think gender may have played a role in your military service experience?; Describe the process of leaving service.” During data analysis, any identifying information will be removed from the data set.</i>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<i>Participation in this research is expected to result in minimal risk, such as experiencing discomfort while answering questions. Discomfort may arise when talking about difficult military related experiences. In order to mitigate this risk, you can skip questions that you do not want to answer. Additionally, there is a risk of breach of confidentiality. Efforts to mitigate this risk are described in the Confidentiality section below.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, I hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through an improved understanding of women’s experiences serving and transitioning out of the military. Additionally, this knowledge could lead to improved</i>

	<p><i>policies and trainings for better supporting women with military experience in the US Air Force or Army.</i></p>
<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by using pseudonyms to refer to participants. The principal investigator will assign a pseudonym to each participant and participant names will not appear in transcribed interview data. Only the principal investigator and faculty advisor will have access to the key linking participants' real names to the pseudonyms. This separate file will be kept on the principal investigator's computer in a folder away from the interview data. Data will be securely stored on the principal investigator's password-protected personal laptop.</i></p> <p><i>In addition, the audio recordings of the interviews will be saved to a password-protected UMD Box account. At the time of upload, the audio recordings will be deleted from the digital recording device. The protected audio files will then be transcribed and de-identified by the principal investigator. Specifically, each transcript will be numbered and any identifying information (e.g., interviewee's name) will be removed. Once transcriptions are completed and analyzed which is scheduled for Spring 2024 the audio files and the key linking participant names will be deleted from the password-protected UMD Box account and destroyed. Only the principal investigator and faculty advisor will have access to the audio files and resulting transcripts.</i></p> <p><i>No information will be shared with the US Air Force or Army.</i></p> <p><i>If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. Additionally, only the principal investigator, <b>Victoria McDermott</b> and the faculty advisor, <b>Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson</b> will have access to view your interview responses.</i></p>
<p><b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b></p>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any</i></p>

	<p><i>benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><b><i>If you are an employee or student, your employment status or academic standing at UMD will not be positively or negatively affected by your participation or non-participation in this study.</i></b></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <i>Victoria McDermott  Ph.D. Candidate  Department of Communication  University of Maryland  2130 Skinner Building  College Park, MD 20742  vmcdermo@umd.edu  516-404-5828</i> </p>
<p><b>Participant Rights</b></p>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"> University of Maryland College Park  Institutional Review Board Office  1204 Marie Mount Hall  College Park, Maryland, 20742  E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a>  Telephone: 301-405-0678 </p> <p><i>For more information regarding participant rights, please visit:</i>  <a href="https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants">https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants</a></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>
<p><b>Statement of Consent</b></p>	<p><i>Please repeat the following phrase to give your verbal consent to participate in this study:</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I am at least 18 years of age; I have read the consent form or have had it read to me; my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.</i></p>

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