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# PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL AND PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY: EXPLORING WOMEN VETERANS' MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN CAREER TRANSITION

Tundra Gatewood

# PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL AND PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY: EXPLORING WOMEN VETERANS' MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN CAREER TRANSITION

by

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ABSTRACT

The veteran human capital remains integral to the U.S. workforce and sustainment of its competitive advantage (Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017). Women constitute 17% of 1.4 million servicemembers and 10% of 18.4 million veterans, with a projected population growth of 18% by 2040 (Defense Manpower Data Center [DMDC], 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Each year, an estimated 30,000 ex-servicewomen enter the national labor force (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Most of these ex-servicemembers turned veterans must navigate the military-civilian divide and negotiate their economic worth in highly divergent and comparatively unstructured workforce systems (Carter, Kidder, et al., 2017; Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017). Empirical evidence reveals that veterans, specifically the women cohort, consistently struggle with civilian reintegration (Grogan et al., 2021; Office of Transition and Economic Development [OTED], 2020).

The military-to-civilian career transition characterizes as a tripartite (physical, socio-cultural, and psychological) process involving multiple life domains concurrently (Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020)). Personal resources prove essential in transitions to cope with inherent stress (Fernandez et al., 2008; Heppner, 1998; Latack, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). Research reliably demonstrates that veterans underestimate the psychological and emotional dimensions of the military-to-civilian career transition relative to adjustment and adaptation (OTED, 2020; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovation, 2017). Extant literature on women veterans, specifically, focuses predominantly on health (physical and mental), sexual trauma, poverty, homelessness, and suicide (Eichler, 2017; Exec. Order

No. 13822, 2018; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Reppert et al., 2014; Thom & Bassuk, 2012). Contrarily, less remains known about the cohort's post-military career transition experiences (Bush & Craven, 2017).

As such, this qualitative study explores 14 women veterans' lived military-to-civilian career transition experiences and the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis lens, data elucidated the salience of the subjective side of the military-to-civilian career transition underscoring the role of intrapersonal resources. Findings corroborated that *transition struggles* are normative in the complex, multidimensional military-to-civilian career transition—pointing to the criticality of transition preparedness and coping competence. Furthermore, findings reaffirmed that human capital acquisition and employability support bolster perceived employability and employability confidence. Moreover, findings concluded that adopting the protean career attitude is critical in effectively managing military-to-civilian career transitions, establishing value-based career pathways, and traversing the military-civilian divide. The study may prove useful to veteran-serving organizations (governmental and nongovernmental) relative to policy, programming, and service delivery. More proximally, servicemembers and veterans may benefit from understanding the criticality of personal strengths and adaptive coping in mitigating transition stress.

*Keywords*: Women veterans, military-to-civilian career transition, psychological capital, perceived employability

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On this academic journey, I was not alone. For those who never left my side, I am most grateful to you. You know who you are. I love you, always. To the women veterans who participated in this research, thank you for lending your voices to research to inform and inspire strategic change. More importantly, thank you for your service and sacrifice in defense of our nation and its democracy. Above all, I give honor, praise, and glory to God, my Lord, and my Savior.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to women veterans—past, present, and future. Posthumously, I dedicate this work to Senior Master Sergeant (Retired) Davonda D. Santiago and Chief Master Sergeant Divina D. Riley—two dear colleagues and friends who perished together in an automobile accident on October 4, 2015, in San Antonio, Texas. As life would have it, I defended my dissertation on the remembrance date—October 4, 2022. I sincerely believe that *nothing happens by chance* apart from the Will of God.

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| | |
|---|---|
| *APA* | American Psychological Association |
| *BPW* | Business and Professional Women |
| *DACOWITS* | Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services |
| *DAV* | Disabled American Veterans |
| *DMDC* | Defense Manpower Data Center |
| *IRB* | Institutional Review Board |
| *MDAH* | Mississippi Department of Archives & History |
| *SHRM* | Society of Human Resource Manager |
| *SWAN* | Service Women's Action Network |
| *TAP* | Transition Assistance Program |
| *OECD* | Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development |
| *OTED* | Office of Transition and Economic Development |
| *VETS* | Veterans' Employment and Training Services |
| *VUCA* | Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous |

# CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Veterans' employment outcomes remain central to the sustainment of the U.S. economy and its all-volunteer military force (Carter, Kidder, et al., 2017; Haynie, 2016; Schafer et al., 2016). Women constitute almost 50% of the potential recruitment population for the U.S. Armed Forces—an institution that McDonald (2020) posits provides the "largest, unified human capital investment in the United States" (p. 248). In contrast, less than 0.005% of women serve in the active military, amounting to nearly 17% (231,000) of the 1.4 million-member population (DMDC, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Annually, 30,000 servicewomen transition from the military into the domestic labor market (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2019). Principi (2006), former U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, summates that "the ultimate measure of successful transition from military to civilian life is long-term, sustained employment" (p. 6).

Empirical research reveals that women veterans typically *struggle* with civilian readjustment and reintegration and, thus, remain more vulnerable than men veterans (Albright et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Eichler, 2016; Grogan et al., 2021; Kintzle et al., 2016; Schafer et al., 2016). Contemporary women veterans, who skew more educated, racially and ethnically diverse, and younger than their men and non-veteran women cohort, overrepresent the unemployed, underemployed, and working-poor populations in the national labor market (Bahtic et al., 2020; Barrera & Carter, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2021; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c; Lofquist, 2017, 2018; Nanda et al., 2016; Richman, 2018; U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Vespa, 2020). Moreover,

adverse transition risks (e.g., poverty, homelessness, and suicides) occur with a higher probability among women veterans, comparatively, compounding the reintegration experience (DAV, 2018; Grogan et al., 2021; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Richman, 2018; Thom & Bassuk, 2012; Thomas & Hunter, 2019). Further, with nearly 300,000 of 1.9 million women veterans in rural labor markets, the effects of rurality likely contribute to socioeconomic challenges affecting transition and reintegration (Albright et al., 2018; Greer, 2017; Szelwach et al., 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2018). These findings provide crucial context to the often underestimated psychological and cultural dimensions of the military-to-civilian transition process (Bahtic et al., 2020; Boyle et al., 2020; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

A cross-sectional study reveals that over 50% of 4,834 U.S. veteran participants found the military-to-civilian transition "more challenging than expected," which, for some, led to "mental health issues" (OTED, 2020, p. 5). Along this line, Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) argue the importance of holistically framing the military-to-civilian adjustment experience to include transition stress—an understudied psychological factor. Such concomitant factors influencing the reintegration process and perceptual experience become relevant to the career transition discourse. Moreover, the magnitude of change (psychological and physical) and intersectional realities demand a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of vulnerable subpopulations—namely, women veterans.

Women have profoundly different experiences than men negotiating distinctly masculinized military and veteran spaces (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Eichler, 2017; Meade, 2020; Reppert et al., 2014; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). While

the military-to-civilian transition remains relatively well-studied, much existing research narrowly attends to *gender* as an analytical category (Eichler, 2017). Dodds and Kiernan (2019) further highlight that "just 2% of the literature," ranging from 1970 to 2018, references women (p. 294). Notably, women veteran-centric scholarship mainly focuses on physical health, mental health, sexual trauma, poverty, homelessness, and suicide (Eichler, 2017; Exec. Order No. 13822, 2018; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Reppert et al., 2014). Furthermore, *gender*, an instrumental explanatory variable, remains largely absent in most veteran employment research, resulting in undifferentiated analysis (Disabled American Veterans [DAV], 2018; Eichler, 2017; Veterans' Employment and Training Services [VETS], 2015).

Therefore, this study investigates women veterans' perceptions of their lived experiences using an interpretative phenomenological approach. The guiding research question explores how women veterans experience the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon. *Transition* is a psychological process (Schlossberg, 1981). Thus, a subsequent question focuses on the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on career transition. These intrapersonal resources may facilitate or impede adjustment and adaptation, influencing one's coping process.

The remainder of Chapter I presents the study's background and problem statement, posturing the research within the broader context of extant career and employment literature. Next, the purpose statement, research questions, and research objectives specify the study's intended focus. Furthermore, the conceptual framework illustrates the interrelations of the understudied constructs. The study's significance, delimitations, assumptions, and definitions of terms describe the importance, scope, and

influential factors of the research, respectively. Lastly, the definition of terms facilitates a shared understanding of operationalized terms and a brief chapter summarization.

## Background of the Study

The U.S. Department of Defense represents one of the nation's largest employers, comprising 1.4 million active-duty servicemen and servicewomen, 1.1 million guardsmen and reservists, 700,000 civilians, and about 600,000 contractors (DMDC, 2021; The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; WorldAtlas, 2018). Prominent and seminal research affirms that the military invests substantially in its active-duty human capital stock, yielding substantial economic performance value in the civilian labor market (Becker, 1964, 1993; Haynie, 2016; McDonald, 2020; Schafer et al., 2016). Becker (1964, 1993), credited for the human capital theory, refers to human capital as the economization of knowledge, skills, and abilities representing individuals' work value in the labor market.

In the military context, McDonald (2020) submits that, in 2019, servicemembers' accumulated human capital had an estimated $89.8 billion national economic growth impact. Corroborative survey findings show evidence that veteran talent acquisition offers businesses a viable and differentiated source of competitive advantage (Haynie, 2016; Pollak et al., 2019; Schafer et al., 2016; Society of Human Resource Manager [SHRM] Foundation, 2018; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2016; VETS, 2020). As noted, veterans' employment integration has important strategic human resource development policy implications (Haynie, 2016; Lampka & Kowalewski, 2017; SHRM Foundation, 2018; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2016).

Effective integration and reallocation of veteran human capital in the national workforce system remain critical to sustaining the nation's economy and veterans' well-being (Haynie, 2016; Schafer et al., 2016). Each year, 200,000 to 250,000 servicemen and servicewomen matriculate into the national workforce, becoming net contributors to local economies (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Vespa, 2020). Shifting veteran human capital to the civilian labor market involves multidimensional and intersecting factors complicating human capital conversion and career trajectories.

In many cases, military-conferred education, training, skills, and experiences suitably match many civilian-equivalent occupations (Hardison et al., 2017). However, research reveals that skills mismatch, unpreparedness, poor adjustment, stereotypes, and unrealistic expectations affect veterans' labor market experience (Bahtic et al., 2020; Barrera & Carter, 2017; Boatwright & Roberts, 2019; BPW Foundation, 2007; Hardison et al., 2017; OTED, 2020; Parker et al., 2019). Results from one cross-sectional study across three cohorts (six months, 12 months, and three years) indicate that over half (56%) of 2,599 respondents found military skills translation to civilian job requirements problematic (OTED, 2020). Other studies reveal that veterans feared not finding sustainable employment, felt unprepared to transition, and held unrealistic expectations about civilian job prospects (Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Kintzle et al., 2016; Zoli et al., 2015).

The probability of finding and maintaining qualitatively sustainable employment, referred to as *perceived employability*, remains crucial for many transitioning veterans (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Zoli et al., 2015). The literature shows that disproportionately

higher unemployment and underemployment complicate the military-to-civilian career transition narrative (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Lampka & Kowaleski, 2017; Mahnken, 2020). While unemployment presents as normative in the transition experience, underemployment emerges as persistently concerning (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Mahnken, 2020; Schafer et al., 2016). In a large-scale study of 1 million resumes and 54,000 job-seekers interviews, data reveal that veterans' underemployment trended 15.6% (one-third) higher than non-veterans (Barrera & Carter, 2017). In this study, Barrera and Carter (2017) characterize *underemployment* as full-time work considered below veterans' experience and education. Similarly, another study of 1,284 Post-9/11 veterans reports that 42% felt overqualified in their first post-military job (Parker et al., 2019).

Although the first job might be stop-gap employment for many veterans to bridge income loss, Schafer et al. (2016) contend that underemployment may be normal to accumulate employer-specific human capital. Mahnken (2020) submits that the multi-faceted underemployment phenomenon relates prominently to the longstanding and widening military-civilian divide—that is, geographical, cultural, and social chasms. The stark cross-cultural differences often inhibit the effective conversion of veteran human capital in civilian labor markets (Atuel et al., 2016; Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017). To reinforce this notion, 54% of 400 human resource practitioners lack sufficient military awareness to strategically leverage the veteran human capital (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2016). Further, in a Pew Research Center study, 48% of 1,284 Post-9/11 veterans reported difficulties with civilian cultural adjustment (Parker et al., 2019).

Workforce cultural adaptation remains integral in facilitating the civilian reintegration process (OTED, 2020; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). Elnitsky et al. (2017) conceptualize *reintegration*, using the ecological model, as a dynamic process encompassing individual, interpersonal, community, and societal domains. Veterans' employment integration, sometimes synonymously referenced as career transition, situates as a consequential domain in the complex civilian reintegration process (BPW Foundation, 2007; Burgess, 2018; Elnitsky et al., 2017).

Louis (1980) and Schlossberg (1981) describe *transition* as a life shift, either voluntarily or involuntarily, necessitating reorientation in relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions within oneself and the world. Schlossberg (1981) postulates, in her seminal human adaptation to transition analysis model, that the magnitude of the pre- and post-transition environment differences and stress intensity dictates adjustment requirements. The shift from the military, a totalistic institution with deep permeability into servicemembers' value systems, necessitates psychological and cultural renegotiation (Hinderaker, 2015; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

Career transition in the national labor market represents a normative work-life experience (Louis, 1980). However, the traditional employment-to-employment notion differs distinctly from the military's post-exit phase. The military-to-civilian career transition—a phenomenon unique to less than 1% of the nation's population—describes a complex, multidimensional process of readjustment affecting the biopsychosocial-cultural domains simultaneously (Elnitsky et al., 2017; MITRE Corporation, 2019; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017;

Whitworth et al., 2020). In addition to employment challenges, transitioning from military service to civilian life can result in precarious financial situations.

Empirical data on veteran employment show that many veterans leave the military without employment prospects expecting to find jobs commensurate with their military salary and benefits (Albright et al., 2018; Bahtic et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Kintzle et al., 2016; Zoli et al., 2015). The military affords its membership merit-based pay and opportunities as well as benefits and allowances (e.g., housing, sustenance, cost-of-living, clothing, childcare, health insurance, and tuition), which may influence salary expectations (Schafer et al., 2016). Notably, the transition from the military directly into unemployment often results in economic insecurity with potentially blighted effects for vulnerable subpopulations (Gould & Obicheta, 2015; Schafer et al., 2016).

To buttress veterans' economic stability, the U.S. Department of Defense, in collaboration with the U.S. Departments of Labor, Veterans Affairs, Education, Homeland Security, Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management, administers the government's transition assistance program (Kamarck, 2018). Congress invests an estimated $12 billion in education benefits and, more specifically, $100 million, per annum, in transition services across 206 worldwide locations, emphasizing national career readiness standards (Collins, 2018; Kamarck, 2018). The week-long workshop facilitates servicemembers' (re)entry into employment, entrepreneurship, higher education, and/or occupational training (Transition Assistance Program [TAP] for Military Personnel, 2016). In addition to private-sector efforts, roughly 45,000 non-profit organizations endeavor to support veterans' reintegration and, more specifically, bridge economic gaps (GuideStar, 2015).

While many veterans (re)enter the civilian workforce successfully, not all do. In the employment literature, meta-analytic evidence reveals that unemployment and underemployment strain psychological capacities, and concomitant stress influences reemployment (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). The relative salience of factors influencing adjustment and coping depends, to varying degrees, upon one's personal resource reservoir and, equally important, perceptions (Berntson et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Bahtic et al. (2020) assert that the "nature of the transition is far more complex psychologically than often recognised [*sic*], and this needs to be considered when discussing the transition process" (p. 3).

Schlossberg (1981) posits that a "transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's *perception* of change" based on situation, self, support, and strategies (p. 7). Similarly, Bridges (2003) argues that *change* and *transition* are not synonymous. Veterans' studies scholars further elucidate that the key difference "is that transition is, at its core, a psychological process precipitated by change, not only the change itself" (Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017, p. 2). In essence, change represents an external event, while transition involves internal processes.

From the outset, the military-to-civilian transition construct has been relatively well-investigated. The literature systematically illustrates that a meaningful number of veterans persistently *struggle* with civilian reintegration (Boyle et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019; Kintzle et al., 2016; MITRE Corporation, 2019; OTED, 2020; Parker et al., 2019; Schafer et al., 2016). Cantril (1965) classifies struggling as a moderate or negative outlook of one's present or future life situation in the

notional sense of well-being that likely manifests as worry and stress. The military-to-civilian transition, in this context, inherently produces indices of psychological changes entailing losses: economic stability, equity and equality, identity, cultural fluency, sense of purpose, and, among others, social network (Atuel et al., 2016; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

As such, scholarly criticism of the government-sponsored transition assistance program often centers on its reconceptualization, merging *preparation* (readiness) and *adjustment* (psychological) dimensions—a paradigm shift (Anderson et al., 2012; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). Whitworth et al. (2020) argue that the program fails to address "multiple, interrelated biopsychosocial-cultural, individual, and experiential factors" shaping the transition process (p. 24). Other scholars aver that veteran transition programs neglect the prevalence of the transition stress that many veterans may experience (Burgess, 2018; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

Transition stress, a non-psychopathological correlate, can cause difficulties with adjustment and adaptation due to resource-deficit balance shifts, as Schlossberg (1981) notes. The shift from military service to the civilian workforce demands adaptive capacities to mitigate the cumulative stressors associated with life-space changes (Boyle et al., 2020; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). Exploring the multidimensionality of human capital (namely, attitudes and behaviors), thus, becomes crucial in understanding the influence of personal adaptive capacities necessary to manage the complex military-to-civilian transition.

Human capital, broadly, describes "the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social, and economic well-being" (Keeley, 2007). This study views the psychological transition and concomitant stressors as the object of internal resources influencing coping and, in turn, well-being. Therefore, personal protective resources (e.g., psychological capital) remain essential to buffering the effects of the stress-laden civilian reintegration process (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Correspondingly, research synthesis shows that psychological capital functions as an antecedent, at the individual level, for negative work-life experiences and gender-role orientation (Newman et al., 2014). This evidence reveals that psychological capital (1) correlates with stress and perceived resource constraints and (2) moderates minority group status as well as human and social capital (Newman et al., 2014). Specifically, Chen and Lim (2012), in their study of 179 retrenched professionals, conclude that psychological capital positively associates with perceived employability.

Using the psychological approach, Vanhercke et al. (2014) describe perceived employability as one's subjective probability to engage and navigate the labor market to find and maintain qualitative employment. Berntson et al. (2006) assert that *perceptions* become acutely important in uncertain employment situations, concluding that one's appraisal—positive (challenge) or negative (threat)—remains relevant to well-being. Correspondingly, Chen and Lim's (2012) findings further show that perceived employability positively relates to problem-focused coping, which, in turn, positively associates with active job search (Chen & Lim, 2012). Both psychological capital and perceived employability situate at the *micro* or individual level instead of the *macro* or

organizational level, underscoring the criticalness of perceptions (Luthans, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014).

## Statement of the Problem

Veterans' strong economic outcomes remain strategically imperative to the nation's economy and its all-volunteer military force (Collins, 2018; Haynie, 2016; Kamarck, 2018; McDonald, 2019; Schafer et al., 2016). As such, the federal government's transition assistance program's statutory intent encompasses the *holistic* transition of 200,000 to 250,000 veterans into the civilian labor market, per annum, to advance economic growth, independence, and well-being (Kamarck, 2018; OTED, 2021b; TAP for Military Personnel, 2016). In ideal environments, veterans possess the human capital capacity and strengths to (re)integrate into the civilian workforce with relative ease (Burgess, 2018; Haynie, 2016, 2021; Zoli et al., 2015).

However, despite an unprecedented support ecosystem, Post-9/11 era women veterans remain at the highest risk of adverse transition outcomes (Boyle et al., 2020; Gould & Obicheta, 2015; Grogan et al., 2021; Schafer et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Military transition-related literature intimates that women veterans overrepresent the unemployed, underemployed, and working-poor populations (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2021; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c; Richman, 2018; Vespa, 2020). As for tangential effects, meta-analytic evidence substantiates that unemployment, underemployment, and poverty impair psychological well-being and threaten reemployment efficacy (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; McGhee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Further, research consensus indicates that women *struggle* with civilian readjustment (e.g., skills

transferability, employment security, financial independence, time-to-employment, and pay inequity) more than their men veteran cohort (Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Gould & Obicheta, 2015; Grogan et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2015; Hire Heroes USA, 2019; Kintzle et al., 2016; Nanda et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019; Schafer et al., 2016; Thom & Bassuk, 2012; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2016).

Consequently, adverse transition outcomes result in career development disruptions, labor market underutilization, and human capital depreciation (Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017; Greer, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2015). At the societal level, long-term public health implications exist and associate with homelessness, poverty, and suicides among contemporary veterans—all life outcomes more pronounced among women veterans (Evans et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2021; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Suitt, 2021; Thomas & Hunter, 2019).

Veterans' economic success remains mainly attributable to positive military-to-civilian career transition outcomes (BPW Foundation, 2007; Schafer et al., 2016). Failure to decipher the differential gender calculus (e.g., resocialization, adjustment pattern, inequity, and intersectionality) and nonpecuniary effects (e.g., stress response and subjective well-being) of the military-to-civilian transition neglects risks disadvantaging women veterans (DAV, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2021; The George W. Bush Institute, 2015). Furthermore, scholars submit that adverse transition outcomes remain implicative to military recruitment and retention (Haynie, 2016; Kamarck, 2018; McDonald, 2019; Schafer et al., 2016). Despite the subpopulation's continuing growth, women veterans' career transition remains sparsely addressed in the scholarly literature

(DACOWITS, 2018, 2016; DAV, 2018; Prokos & Cabage, 2017; Reppert et al., 2014; SWAN, 2017; VETS, 2015).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experience and understand the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on women veterans' career transition. Post-service employment represents the most salient need for many veterans—one that strongly influences transition outcomes (Barrera & Carter, 2017; BPW Foundation, 2007; Zoli et al., 2015). Transitions, in general, may manifest as either psychological strengths or psychological deficits, or aspects of both (Schlossberg, 1981). Consistent with the notion of the military-to-civilian transition as a multifactorial *process*, internal resources can either facilitate or impede veterans' ability to cope with the confluence of individual-level stressors—economic, psychological, psychosocial, and cultural (Atuel et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2015; Kamarck, 2018). As such, this study may fill knowledge gaps in scholarship about the psychological dimensions of the military-to-civilian career transition and inform stakeholders' policies, programs, and practices (Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

## Research Questions

Research questions distill and operationalize the purpose of the study, structure the literature review, and inform various aspects of the methodology, including research design, data collection, and data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011; Trochim, 2020). In alignment with the study's purpose, the overarching research question is: How do women veterans experience the military-to-

civilian career transition? A subsequent research question related to protective personal resources and adaptive capacities becomes: What influence do psychological capital and perceived employability have on women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition?

## Research Objectives

The investigator, guided by relevant literature, frames the following five research objectives to address the aforestated research questions.

*RO1* – Describe study participants' characteristics to include race and/or ethnicity, age, marital status, employment status, education level, military branch, rank, years of military service, and disability status.

*RO2* – Explore the influence of psychological capital on women veterans' career transition.

*RO3* – Explore the influence of perceived employability on women veterans' career transition.

*RO4* – Explore women veterans' perceptions of career transition.

*RO5* – Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.

## Conceptual Framework

According to Miles et al. (2020), the "conceptual framework explains, graphically and/or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—for example, the key factors, variables, phenomena, concepts, and participants—and the presumed interrelationships among them—as a *network*" (p. 15). Put differently, conceptual frameworks allow for the linkage of concepts or variables to comprehensively understand a phenomenon—moving from *why* to *who, what,* and *how* (Jabareen, 2009; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt,

2019). The constructs that constitute the conceptual framework in Figure 1 include women veterans (participants), psychological capital, perceived employability, career transition (core concepts), and, indirectly, employment outcome. The model depicts *psychological capital* and *perceived employability* as salient intrapersonal antecedents influencing career transition behaviors—whether positively or negatively. The plus (+) and minus (-) signs signify resources and deficits relative to the career transition experience (Schlossberg, 1981).

The framework embeds the study's five research objectives, solidifying the scope of the research. First, objective 1 identifies the participant's demographic characteristics. Then, objectives 2 and 3 explore the psychological capital and perceived employability influences, respectively. Next, objective 4 explores the participants' career transition. Finally, objective 5 investigates the interrelatedness between the three constructs—psychological capital, perceived employability, and career transition. The conceptual interrelatedness proves useful in defining the study's research problem, informing the literature review, and framing the research questions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

The military-to-civilian career transition points to a complex nexus of economic, cultural, and psychological challenges likely influencing veterans' internal resources and adaptive capacities (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). The conceptual framework design, thus, incorporates multiple research disciplines to address the phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009). The guiding theoretical perspectives undergirding this research include Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981),

Luthans et al. (2007) Psychological Capital Theory, and Vanhercke et al. (2014) perceived employability framework.

*Transition Theory*

Career transition describes a shift in employment, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, requiring reorientation in relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions (Louis, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981). The integration of Schlossberg's Theory of Transition, thus, serves to illustrate the military-to-civilian career transition adjustment process. Schlossberg (1984) frames transition as a process for coping with anticipated or unanticipated events predicated on the individual's perception of the experience. Coping resources include *situation* (transition features), *self* (personal outlook), *support* (resources available), and *strategy* (actions taken)—bynamed 4S (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1984). Built on Schlossberg's (1981) human adaptation model, the 4S framework considers the biopsychosocial-cultural factors intermediating between transition and not just adjustment but adaptation ultimately. Said differently, the theory accounts for *what* changes are happening, as defined by the individual allowing for the appraisal of coping resources and strategies. So, importance lies in positioning the transition experience in the context of individuals' resources and deficits, given its inherent complexity.

*Psychological Capital Theory*

Following Luthans' (2012) recommendation, the investigator extends the psychological capital application beyond the confines of the organization to the inherently difficult military-to-civilian career transition—an exit process. Psychological capital, which situates under positive psychology, fuses four independent and well-

researched psychological capacities—hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Hope and efficacy function as gain-oriented resources to build and sustain motivation and drive (Luthans et al., 2007). Concertedly, resilience and optimism function as loss-oriented resources to protect against loss and distress (Luthans et al., 2007). Consistent with this notion, psychological capital's protective effects may facilitate coping strategies to effectively manage stress and labor-market establishment, which, in turn, improves well-being (Berntson et al., 2006; Cole et al., 2009).

*Perceived Employability*

Fugate et al. (2004) introduce employability as a multidimensional construct embodying career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. These four personal factors position the individual at the center of the employment experience, which warrants sufficient personal agency and resources. While employability remains a well-researched concept at the macroeconomic level, Fugate et al.'s (2004) perspective situates in the micro-level (individual) context primarily because "individuals have virtually no input into employers' hiring criteria" (p. 16).

Adopting a micro-level psychological perspective, Vanhercke et al. (2014) renew the original concept of perceived employability by defining the concept as "the individual's perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment" (p. 594). Said differently, individuals' appraisal of the career transition likely affects the nature of the experience based on perceptions. Corroborative research elucidates that adverse employment outcomes (e.g., unemployment, underemployment, and poverty) imperil psychological capacities affecting one's perception (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Vanhercke et

al.'s (2014) view on perceived employability, thus, comports ideally with psychological capital in the context of career transition.

Psychological capital characterizes a positive psychological state of development concerned with an individual's strength, perceptions, attitudes, and general outlook on life (Luthans et al., 2007). Perceived employability, a psychosocial resource, concerns the subjective probability of finding and maintaining sustainable employment commensurate with qualifications (Fugate et al., 2004; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). In the transition frame, Schlossberg (1981) explains that personal resources, based on situational particularities, either facilitate or impede coping schemas and strategies.

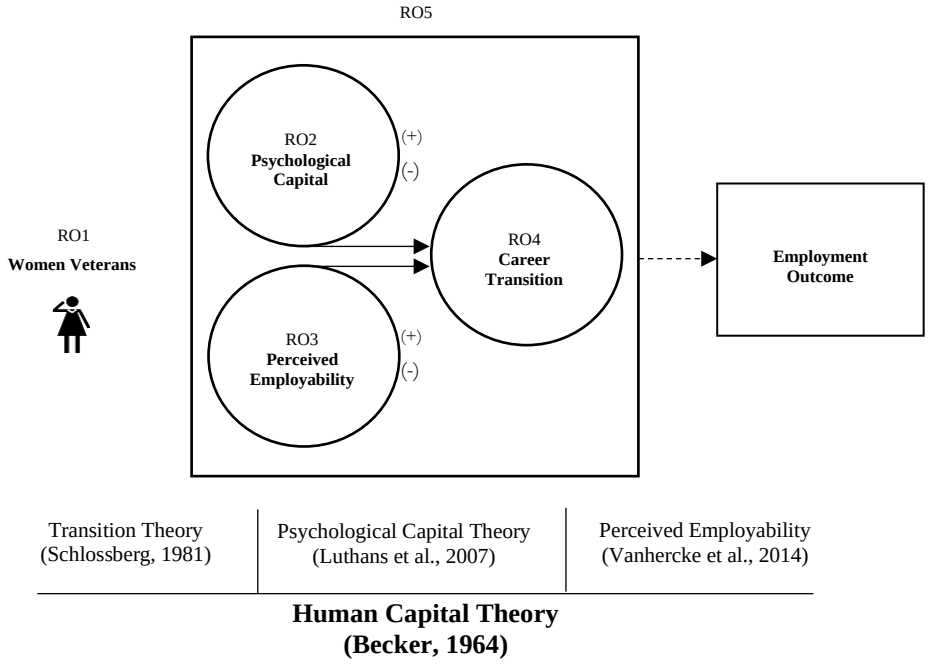


*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework*

## Significance of the Study

With an investigative focus on career transition, psychological capital, and perceived employability, the study's findings can potentially have theoretical and

practical implications enriching theories and informing policies, programs, and practices. From a theoretical viewpoint, the study's findings may close an incremental gap in the career transition literature by exploring the lived experiences of an understudied subpopulation undergoing growth (Prokos & Cabage, 2017; Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). The study may also extend the psychological capital construct to different domains (i.e., career transition) using other research methods—e.g., quantitative or mixed methods (Burhanuddin et al., 2019; Luthans, 2012; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017; Salanova & Ortega-Maldonado, 2019). Moreover, given that career transition management requires *self-regulation*, the study may support scholarly discourse on the military-to-civilian transition phenomenon relative to the role of *personal resources* (Bahtic et al., 2020; Boyle et al., 2020; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Elnitsky et al., 2017; MITRE Corporation, 2019; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

From a practical perspective, the literature indicates that psychological capital presents as malleable and, thus, can be developed, modified, reconstituted, and leveraged as a sustainable competitive advantage (Luthans et al., 2006; Luthans et al., 2007; Luthans et al., 2008). Accordingly, there exist important implications for employers, veteran-facing stakeholders, and women veterans. First, human capital scholar-practitioners may interpret the findings as instructive for planning, designing, or modifying talent management strategies to support veterans' employment integration (SHRM Foundation, 2018). Second, for veteran stakeholders (federal, regional, state, local, and grassroots), the findings may have salience in designing gender-sensitive interventions to support women veterans' unique career transition needs (Boyle et al., 2020; DAV, 2018). Third, the study's outcome might elicit valuable context to enhance

women veterans' self-knowledge relative to the management of transition-related stress (Boyle et al., 2020; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). Furthermore, by deconstructing women veterans' military-to-civilian transition experience and giving voice to this cohort's lived experiences, the study could fulfill veteran-serving non-profit organizations' extant research agenda recommendations (DACOWITS, 2018, 2016; DAV, 2018; SWAN, 2017).

## Delimitations

Delimitations refer to researcher-imposed limitations on the scope of the study for greater manageability and feasibility (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The current study's delimitations originate from three main elements: population, sample size, and inclusion criteria. First, the study delimits the target population to include women veterans and excludes men veterans. Women veterans represent an under-investigated subpopulation warranting systematic research attention (Bush & Craven, 2017; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Second, the study delimits the sample size to a reasonable range of 10 to 15 participants congruent with the selected theoretical methodology and data saturation principles (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2018). There exist no prescriptive rules on the sample size in the interpretative phenomenology literature (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). However, scholars argue that relatively small, homogenous sample sizes ranging from one to 15 participants prove sufficient (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Third, the study delimits the selection criteria to include Post-9/11-era women veterans only, given differentiated gender and reintegration experiences (DAV, 2018; Eichler, 2017; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Reppert et al., 2014; Southwell & MacDermid

Wadsworth, 2016; U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2017). This delimitation extends to those who served at least 12 months, minimally, on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force). In context, military indoctrination involves psychological and cultural transitions influencings one's social identity—from civilian to servicemember (McGurk et al., 2006). The 12-month period accounts for the indoctrination process, including initial entry training, occupational education, and military professionalization.

Moreover, the parameters exclude women veterans from all previous military eras and those affiliated with the reserve component—except those who served on active duty meeting eligibility requirements. Based on the study's intent, design, and small sample size, population homogeneity remains salient in understanding participants' shared experiences of the understudied phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These three parameters accommodate the nature and constitution of the research study. However, assumptions remain foundational to executing the research process (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

## Assumptions

Assumptions represent an accepted or plausible truth that may not be within the investigator's control but remains important (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Central to the present study remains the assumption of information-rich cases to meet the stated research objectives. The study's data collection protocol includes single, synchronous, semi-structured interviews utilizing predetermined open-ended and probing questions aligned with the research questions to elicit detailed, organic responses (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another underlying assumption entails women veterans' interest

and willingness to participate in the research. As approved by the institutional review board, the study's recruitment information incorporates the research purpose and description, expected benefits, known risks, voluntariness, and confidentiality protection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Furthermore, plain, appropriate wording and phrases replace potentially stigmatizing (i.e., psychological capital) and unique concepts (i.e., perceived employability) for clarity and succinctness (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Moreover, there exists the assumption of participants' accuracy in retrospective recall of their military-to-civilian career transition experience. The study's eligibility criteria integrate questions to validate participants' knowledge and experience with the understudied phenomenon. In addition, pilot-testing the instrument, using one to two criteria-eligible individuals or experts, proves beneficial to refining the interview guide (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). At last, there remains an assumption of honest self-reporting. The data collection protocols include pseudonymization to safeguard participants' real names and anonymization to maintain privacy and confidentiality (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Definition of Terms

This study includes definitions of operationalized terms essential for understanding the research objectives.

1. *Active duty* – refers to full-time duty in active service in a branch of the military (DMDC, 2021).
2. *Armed Forces* – includes the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Space Force (Armed Forces, 2020).

3. *Career transition* – transitional shift in employment, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, requiring reorientation in relationships, roles, routines, and assumptions (Louis, 1980).
4. *Intersectionality* – a paradigm that identifies multiple intersecting dimensions of social identities (i.e., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability) contributing to systemic oppression and discrimination (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017; Crenshaw, 1989).
5. *Military-to-civilian transition* – refers to servicemembers' transition, voluntarily or involuntarily, from the totalistic military institution to civil society (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).
6. *Perceived employability* – refers to one's perceived ability to engage and navigate the labor market to obtain and maintain sustainable employment commensurate with qualification (Fugate et al., 2004; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014).
7. *Post*-9/11 era veterans – a group of veterans, also known as Gulf War-era II, who served on active duty in the Armed Forces from September 2001 to the present (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a).
8. *Psychological capital* – characterizes a positive psychological state of development concerned with an individual's strength, perceptions, attitudes, and general outlook on life (Luthans et al., 2007).
9. *Transition* – refers to those "occurrences or non-occurrences that elicit certain changes in the individual's perceptions (of self and the world) and that

simultaneously call for new patterns of behavior that may or may not be effective" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.7).

10. *Transition assistance program* – a comprehensive interagency program designed to *prepare* eligible servicemembers to successfully transition from military service to civilian life. The program, administered at 206 military institutions worldwide, includes employment, education, training, entrepreneur, and veteran-related benefits counseling (Kamarck, 2018; TAP for Military Personnel, 2016).
11. *Transition stress* –non-psychopathology stress experienced relative to the military-to-civilian adjustment that considers salient factors to include, but is not limited to, identity loss, cultural and environmental discontinuity, stereotypes, and socialized masculinity (Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018).
12. *Underemployment* – a measure of employment and labor utilization in the economy that reflects work availability and underutilization of skills and experiences that affect individuals' economic needs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b).
13. *Veteran* – an individual, female or male, who served in the active military and was honorably discharged (Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans' Relief, 2014).

## Chapter Summary

Veterans' effective transition into sustainable employment remains strategically imperative to preserving the nation's economic strength and all-volunteer force (Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017; Haynie, 2016; Schafer et al., 2016). However, women veterans' nuanced struggles associated with the military-to-civilian career transition might adversely influence post-service outlook on life, including employability (BPW

Foundation, 2007; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019; Kintzle et al., 2016; OTED, 2020). The present study's research problem derives from the recommendations from various quantitative and qualitative studies on career transition relative to vulnerable subpopulations (i.e., women veterans, minorities, and younger adults). Moreover, researchers readily acknowledge the need to explore psychological experiences of the military-to-civilian transition independent of psychopathological conditions and coping resources (Boyle et al., 2020; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

Chapter I explores the pluralistic idiographic experiences of women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences through the lens of psychological capital and perceived employability. The chapter provides an introduction, background, problem statement, statement of purpose, research questions and objectives, conceptual framework, the significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, and definition of terms. The conceptual framework presents the theoretical foundation and synthesizes the three primary constructs—career transition, psychological capital, and perceived employability. The study's significance highlights potential theoretical and practical implications of the understudied phenomenon. The balance of the chapters includes the literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions.

# CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter II presents the literature review entailing analysis and synthesis of the most pertinent literature related to the research topic. Machi and McEvoy (2016) describe the literature review as a process of surveying and critiquing relevant literature and, thereafter, summarizing evidence to substantiate research questions credibly. The proposed study aims to understand rather than theorize about the understudied phenomenon. Implicit in the review is the discovery of what is known and unknown or missing to identify research gaps. Research gaps represent unexplored areas with scope and implications for further research (Callahan, 2014; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

In the past decade, scholarly interest in women veterans' military-to-civilian reintegration outcomes gained traction. Much of the extant literature investigates the effects of military service in the context of health (physical and psychological), sexual trauma and assault, poverty, homelessness, and suicide (Eichler, 2017; Exec. Order No. 13822, 2018; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Reppert et al., 2014). Some scholars contend that the cohort's career transition and employment (re)integration experiences, however, remain sparsely investigated (Bush & Craven, 2017; Dempsey & Schafer, 2020; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Greer, 2017; Prokos & Cabage, 2017; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Furthermore, based on trends in the literature, strengthening adaptive capacities emerge as salient and relevant to the military-to-civilian transition (Bahtic et al., 2020; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020).

The literature review organizes thematically based on grounding theoretical concepts. Such an approach proves suitable for analyzing participants' perspectives

within and across cases, engendering new ideas and interpretations (Creswell, 2013; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Moreover, Machi and McEvoy (2016) suggest narrowly scoping the research topic—limiting research effort to core concepts, theories, and even demographics. As far as is known, no study specifically explores the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability in the context of women veterans' career transition. Beginning with a historical view of women in the military, the researcher attempts to achieve interdisciplinarity between three lines of research—career transition theory, psychological capital theory, and perceived employability.

## History of Women in the U.S. Military

Historically, women have informally supported the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), with some even disguising themselves as men, contributing substantively (e.g., cooks, water bearers, seamstresses, saboteurs, and spies) to the war effort (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016). During World Wars I (1914-1918) and II (1939-1975), however, the U.S. Department of Defense authorized women to formally serve in the military with restrictions to non-combat roles—mainly clerical and medical support (Kamarck, 2016; VETS, 2015; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c). Militarily, periods of increased conflicts required surges in manpower requirements to meet mission demands, creating and expanding opportunities for women (DACOWITS, 2018). After major conflicts, the U.S. Department of Defense reinstated manpower requirements and policies and demobilized the forces, reducing women's role in the military (DACOWITS, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Upon release, women returned to civil society but not as veterans—that is, until 1977 (DACOWITS, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs,

2011). Despite occupying civilian and quasi-military statuses and denial of equal rank, pay, and benefits, research shows that thousands of women served, and hundreds died in nearly every war conflict, as shown in Table 1 (DACOWITS, 2020).

Table 1

*Women's Service by War/Conflict and Casualties*

| War/Conflict | Number of Women | Number of Casualties |
|---|---|---|
| Revolutionary War (1775-1783) | Unknown | Unknown |
| Civil War (1861-1865) | 6,000 | Unknown |
| Spanish-American War (1898-1902) | 1,500 | 22 |
| World War I (1917-1918) | 35,000 | 400 |
| World War II (1940-1947) | 400,000 | 400 |
| Korean War (1950-1955) | 50,000 | 2 |
| Vietnam War (1964-1975) | 265,000 | 8 |
| Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) | 41,000 | 15 |
| Global War on Terrorism (2001-2021) | 700,000 | 161 |

*Note:* Adapted from DACOWITS (2020), p. 92.

*Women Armed Services Integration—Permission to Serve*

In 1901, Congress formalized the establishment of the all-women U.S. Army Nurse Corps under the Army Reorganization Act, professionalizing *nursing* as a military position (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016). Nearly 50 years later, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, renamed Army Nurse Corps, gained its *permanence* with the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016). Signed by President Harry S. Truman, the pivotal law authorized permanent military status, military service (employment) during peacetime (normal) operations, and pay equity to that of men (DACOWITS, 2018; U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). However, Congress rejected the militarization of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots due to strong opposition against professionalizing *women pilots,* disbanding the unit in 1944

(DACOWITS, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). The support unit, constituting approximately 1,000 civilian women pilots, served with, not in, the Army ferrying combat aircraft (DACOWITS, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

*Integration of the U.S. Armed Forces*

Another progressive legislation, Executive Order 9981 (1948), *Desegregation of the Armed Forces*, integrated the military by race and gender. Statutorily, as part of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, the number of women in the military remained restricted to 2% of the total force until 1967 with Public Law 90-130 (DACOWITS, 2018). Public Law 90-130 repealed the restrictions on women officers' careers in the military equalizing promotion opportunities (DACOWITS, 2018). Except for direct combat, women's roles expanded beyond administration and medical into fields such as aviation, intelligence, communications, science, technology, and cryptology (DACOWITS, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

*Convenience of the Government Discharge*

Nineteen-fifty-one marked another monumental year in history for women in the military. In April 1951, President Truman issued Executive Order 10240, *Regulation Governing the Separation from Certain Women Serving in the Regular Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force*, prohibiting pregnant women and women with children (whether by birth, adoption, custody, or otherwise) from military service (DACOWITS, 2018). Established in August 1951 by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (known as DACOWITS) purposed to provide "advice and recommendations on matters and policies relating to the recruitment,

retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces" (DACOWITS, 2018, p. i).

*All Volunteer Force*

In 1973, after the Vietnam War, Congress lost confidence in its compulsory national draft system, established by the Conscription Act of 1863, and, in turn, inaugurated the present-day's military voluntary model—referred to as the all-volunteer force (Rostker, 2006). In the all-volunteer force, the military's recruitment of women increased exponentially (DACOWITS, 2018). Once again, the military's recruitment of women proved essential to accommodate the shortage of qualified men volunteers (DACOWITS, 2018). Moreover, the military's reliance on women increased career development pathways with admission into the prestigious U.S. Military Service Academies (DACOWITS, 2018). Notably, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 remained active for 67 years (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016).

*Authorization of Veteran Status for Women*

After nearly 24 years, the U.S. Department of Defense repealed Executive Order 10240 following the Crawford v. Cushman (1976) court decision, concluding that the military policy violated due process (Marlin, 1977). As recently as 1977, the U.S. Congress, through H.R. 3277, designated the World War II Women's Airforce Service Pilots' contributions as active service—authorizing equal veteran status recognition and equal benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Benefits included health care, disability compensation, vocational rehabilitation, education assistance, home loans, readjustment counseling, burials, and more (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

*Women Veterans First Counted in U.S. Census*

In 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau captured national data on women veterans for the first time with its decennial census, recording 1.2 million responses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). The census data received strong congressional interest resulting in the call for the U.S. Government Accountability Office to audit the U.S. Department of Veterans Administration's handling of women veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011; U. S. Government Accountability Office, 1982). The U.S. Government Accountability Office (1982) agency concluded that the 742,000-women veteran population had neither equal access to entitled benefits nor sufficient access to care. A subsequent survey by the Veterans Administration (1985) focused primarily on women veterans' socio-economic status, health, and benefits awareness. Empirical findings indicated that awareness of benefits and eligibility remained problematic due to low utilization (Veterans Administration, 1985). Of 3,003 veterans surveyed in the Veterans Administration (1985) study, women skewed younger (69% between ages 18-22), educated (53% high school graduate; 18% some college, and 24% college graduate), and single—never married (87%).

*Expansion of Combat Roles—Full Military Status*

The next three decades ushered in successions of laws and policy changes related to gender equality and occupational integration. Monumentally, in 2013 and 2015, the military lifted the ban on women serving in ground service units and combat units, respectively, with exceptions (DACOWITS, 2018). In 2015, more specifically, the U.S. Department of Defense eliminated its combat exclusion policy that prohibited service in combat roles, ultimately granting women *full status* in the military (DACOWITS, 2018).

Subsequently, in 2015, Congress renewed discussions on the *Military Selective Service Act* (1948), targeting draft registration requirements for women (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016). Some argued for women's inclusion in selective service on the grounds of *equal legal rights* and *equal civic-duty responsibility*; however, the law remains unchanged (DACOWITS, 2018; Kamarck, 2016). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense expanded pathways to education and training for nearly 220,000 combat-related jobs to support its formidable mission (Moore, 2020).

*Women Serving*

The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (2018) reports roughly 376,000 women voluntarily serve in the military's active and reserve components (including Coast Guard) to maintain U.S. national security. Data indicates that women comprise 17.9% of the total military population compared to 2% before the all-volunteer force model (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2018). As described by Grogan et al. (2020) and Richman (2018), servicewomen constitute the fastest-growing segment of the military population—a first-ever in the nation's military history.

Notwithstanding, research shows that, while the growth rate outpaces the male counterpart, servicewomen's annual military attrition rate calculates at 8.2% compared to 6.1% for servicemen (DMDC, 2021). Data indicates that servicewomen resign from the military at disproportionately higher rates (28%) than their counterparts—often due to parenthood-related circumstances (e.g., childcare) and sexual assault (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). Morral et al. (2021), examining a sample population of 560,000 servicemembers, reveal that sexual assault and sexual harassment strongly associates with premature military separations. Research on servicewomen, specifically,

demonstrates that premature transitions occur at critical career junctures undercutting career development opportunities and potential lifetime earnings (Dichter & True, 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020).

*Women Veteran Profile*

Women constitute 1.9 million of the 18.4 million U.S. veteran population, of which 35% falls into the Post-9/11 era cohort (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017d; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Post-9/11 era women veterans represent the largest veteran cohort of all eras, with three-fourths serving during wartime (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Furthermore, women veterans' projected growth outpaces the declining men cohort by 16% in the next two decades (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c; Vespa, 2020).

Demographically, Post-9/11 era women veterans skew younger, more educated, and more racially and ethnically diverse than any other cohort or generation (Bahtic et al., 2020; Lofquist, 2017, 2018; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Vespa, 2020). Furthermore, 78% of women trend slightly under 45 years of age, and 38% are minorities (Lofquist, 2017, 2018). In addition, the cohort's academic achievement trends are higher than men veterans and non-veterans where data shows 40% with degrees and 45% with some college credits (Lofquist, 2017, 2018; Nanda et al., 2016).

Moreover, the women veteran population's gender-race distribution contrasts with the civilian population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). More notably, African American women constitute 13% of the U.S. adult population but represent 35% and 19% of the military and veteran populations, respectively (Lofquist, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c). Further, women veterans between the ages of

17-24 are more likely to be unemployed than their veteran and non-veteran counterparts (Nanda et al., 2016). However, Lofquist (2017) suggests that women veterans enrolled in higher education post-military at higher rates to increase their economic capacity and earning potential. Research consistently shows that women veterans struggle with the military-to-civilian transition process (Barrera & Carter, 2017; BPW Foundation, 2007; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; DAV, 2018; Grogan et al., 2021; Kintzle et al., 2016; Mulcahy et al., 2021; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c; OTED, 2020; Richman, 2018; Thomas & Hunter, 2019; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).

However, the corpus of the scholarly literature on women veterans' post-military transition focuses mainly on physical and mental health and combat-related experiences (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2021; Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). Other strong lines of research relate to the impact of social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and suicide (e.g., Suitt, 2021; Thomas & Hunter, 2019; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). However, one near-constant refrain in employment literature centers on the lack of veteran differentiation due to either the absence of the gender variable or insufficient samples (DAV, 2018; Eichler, 2017; VET, 2015). Consequently, relatively less remains known about women veterans' career transition experiences (Bush & Craven, 2017; DACOWITS, 2018, 2016; DAV, 2018; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Reppert et al., 2014; SWAN, 2017; VETS, 2015). Given the magnitude of differences between military and civilian milieus, the next section deconstructs the career transition phenomenon.

## Career Transition

From the Latin word *carrus* for chariot and, subsequent, the French word carrière for racecourse, *career* defines as "an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life with opportunities for meaningful progression (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Historical development of the career transition concept stems from the theoretical contributions of Super (1957, 1980) as an important aspect of career development. Super (1980), an influential authority on vocational behavior, defines career as a "sequence of positions occupied by a person during the course of a lifetime" (p. 283). The theorist frames the construct through the lenses of life-role, life-span, and life-space—an interdependent constellation of factors that considers the potential impingement of life demands (Super, 1980).

Similarly, Louis (1980) defines career as an "accumulation of role-related experiences over time" (p. 330). Louis (1980) further extends the career notion to incorporate movements within, across, and outside organizational structures, resulting in inter-role changes. Hall (1976) shifts the emphasis from the objective aspect characterizing career as a self-directed process contingent upon achieving subjective, or psychological, success. Hall (2004) and Hall and Chandler (2005) further elucidate the career concept defining it as a *calling*—whether religious-oriented (e.g., church) or secular-oriented (e.g., military).

In more recent literature, Chudzikowski (2012) describes the career construct as "evolving sequences of work experiences over time" (p. 298). In contrast, De Vos et al. (2021) describe career as a work-related experience acquisitioned through sequential positions. Universal career transition typologies prove essential in identifying contextual

trends and variations within the labor market environment, optimizing linkages of policies, programs, and interventions to real work-life situations (Adler & Castro, 2019; Louis, 1980). Therefore, the following discussion focuses on traditional and contemporary career transition typologies.

*Career Transition Typology*

Louis' (1980) foundational career transition typology traces through traditional and contemporary literature on career and career transitions. The scholar establishes career transition as a phenomenon and subsequently systematizes transition roles into two categories: inter—role and intra-role. Inter-role transitions encompass [re]entry, intracompany, intercompany, interprofessional, and exit, which accounts for newness and differentness in roles, orientations, and settings (Louis, 1980). Contrastingly, intra-role transitions include intra-role adjustment (resultant of experience over time), extra-role adjustment (resultant of life changes), role or career-stage transition, and life-stage transition (Louis, 1980). Louis (1980) codifies five propositions to understand career transitions, including (1) old and new role, orientation, and setting differences; (2) objective and subjective magnitude of differences; (3) magnitude of differences based on transition type; (4) typicality of coping in all transitions; and (5) coping demand analysis and facilitative intervention. Established in 1980, the model considers linear and nonlinear assumptions (Louis, 1980).

In the 1990s, Bruce and Scott (1994) adapt and validate Louis' typology incorporating career events, including entry, promotion, lateral moves, resignations, and retirements by the distinct inter-role transition type. These scholars empirically examine intraorganizational career transitions of 742 U.S. Navy aviators concluding that

magnitude and desirability dimensions varied by event type but not by strain (Bruce & Scott, 1994). Consistent with Louis' (1980) propositions, Bruce and Scott (1994) postulate that the greater the magnitude differential, the greater the felt strain. The study's sample population comprises all men—a noted limitation as career models traditionally premise on men's work patterns (Bruce & Scott, 1994). Moreover, the institution's career system reflects the traditional career construct— hierarchical, structured, transparent, and stable (Bruce & Scott, 1994).

Differently, Latack (1984) classifies the career transition as an organizational, functional, occupational, and occupational field based on the intensity of change. Latack (1984) examines the magnitude of career transitions among 78 managers within two independent organizations. Findings reveal no correlation ($r = .91$) exists between the objective magnitude of career transition and stress (Latack, 1984). Furthermore, the measure for perceived magnitude of career transition correlates at $r = .66$ ($p < .001$), which provides insight into how results might differ with increased intensity (e.g., interorganizational or expatriate career transitions). Moreover, the study illustrates a positive correlation between career transitions and personal life instability with implications for emotion-focused as opposed to problem-focused coping mechanisms (Latack, 1984).

Ashforth (2001) concludes that high-magnitude rather than low-magnitude career transitions likely result in adjustment difficulties. In terms of valence (intrinsic attractiveness), the scholar further submits that career transitions present as either positive (e.g., voluntary), negative (e.g., involuntary), or balanced (ambivalent). Valence represents affectivity which depends on one's perception (Ashforth, 2001). Further,

voluntariness and involuntariness relate to one's perceived sense of control in the situation, which, in turn, determines the degree of difficulty (Ashforth, 2001; Bruce & Scott, 1994). In essence, the research stresses that the magnitude of difference and sense of controllability influences perceptions which, in turn, informs stress processes. In the contemporary career era, labor market dynamism and fundamental shifts in careers impact the frequency of career transitions (Chudzikowski, 2012; De Vos et al., 2021).

The literature demonstrates that career transition remains normative in the global labor markets (Chudzikowski, 2012; De Vos et al., 2021; Fernandez et al., 2008). In one study, employment trend index data reveal that 41% of roughly 31,000 full-time and self-employed workers across 31 market countries expressed intentions to change careers (Microsoft, 2021). Further, trends show that the average U.S. working-age adult changes jobs 12 times throughout a lifetime (Doyle, 2020; Kolmar, 2021). Labor-related statistics show the median employee tenure as 4.1 years—4.3 years for men and 3.9 years for women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020c). Moreover, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) reports that 68.1 million non-institutionalized workers exited the labor market, either voluntarily or involuntarily, over a 12-month business cycle.

Examining objective career transitions in the contemporary era, Chudzikowski (2012) typologizes the phenomenon by boundaries as organizational (organizations and industries), functional (function, division, department), and hierarchical (promotion and demotions). De Vos et al. (2021) further characterizes career transition as movements within or across occupations, career fields, organizations, and/or work-life boundaries. From an occupational health viewpoint, Adler and Castro (2019) situate the phenomenon into three categories: transition of structure, transition of culture, and transition of

process. Implicit in these career transition typologies is the magnitude of career impact (Adler & Castro, 2019; Chudzikowski, 2012; De Vos et al., 2021). The literature on career transition demonstrates the continual interdependence between the objective and subjective aspects of the phenomenon (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Bruce & Scott, 1994; Mulhall, 2014; Volmer & Spurk, 2011). More so, the subjective perspective emerges as central to the contemporary career environment (Berntson et al., 2006; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Thus, the next section attends to the subjective transition to further facilitate the exposition of career transitions.

*Transition*

Transition derives from the Latin *transitionem*, meaning "a going across or over" (Oxford University Press, n.d.) Although used synonymously and, at times, interchangeably, the words *change* and *transition* differ (Bridges, 2001, 2003). Louis (1980) depicts transition as a change and period and, subsequently, describes career transition as the period where changes in an objective role or subjective orientation occur. Correspondingly, Schlossberg (1981) argues that a transition occurs when "an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). Furthermore, the scholar contends that "[a] transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's perception of change" and, thus, "[a] transition is a transition if it is so defined by the person experiencing it" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7).

Other scholars refer to change as an event and transition as a psychological adjustment associated with change (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Schlossberg, 1981; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). For instance, Bridges (2001, 2003) characterizes

transition as an internal process—one distinctive from change which refers to an external situation or event. The author asserts that absent transition change manifests perfunctorily or, worse case, not at all (Bridges, 2001). Moreover, Bridge's (2001, 2003) theory-to-practice transition model, designed to facilitate individual and organizational transitions, encompasses three linear phases: endings, neutral zone, and beginnings. Bridge's (2001, 2003) transition model begins with the end—a point marked by losses (e.g., identity, culture, familiarity, or control). In this view, difficulties lie in the transition rather than the change (Bridges, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981). Research further reveals that nonlinearity rather than linearity best characterizes transitions (Kralik et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981).

Other descriptors include *culture shock* (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), *status passage* (Glaser & Strauss, 1971), *convoluted passages* (Kralik et al., 2006), and *turning point* (Ebaugh, 1988; De Vos et al., 2021), given the potentially disruptive nature of transitions. As such, concurrence exists among many scholars that the transition process necessitates psychological reorientation (Bridges, 2003; Musamali, 2018; Louis, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Conversely, not all transitions are disruptive, as each individual's coping algorithm and adaptive capacity differ (Bruce & Scott, 1984; Chudzikowski, 2012; Schlossberg, 1984).

Ashforth (2001) contends that transitions remain responsive to one's cognitive appraisal—whether positive or negative. From another perspective, Bruce and Scott (1984) point to the sense of coherence (global orientation) in explaining individuals' ability to thrive in career transitions. In effect, one's sense of coherence entails marshaling coping resources and resilience behaviors in responding to stressors—a salutogenic approach (Antonovosky, 1987). Furthermore, Schlossberg (1981) argues that

similarities and differences in transition environments determine the stress engendered and subsequent coping requirements.

Relatedly, the Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation (2017), evaluating military-civilian transitions, describes the process as "a psychological and cultural evolution" (p. 2). In this view, Hinderaker (2015) and Howe and Hinderaker (2018) argue that a totalistic organization has extensive and permeative reach into its membership's lives, necessitating role and identity renegotiation. Accordingly, the Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation's (2017) study underscores the need for former military members to "find a path to reorientation and self-redefinition" (p. 2). Kralik et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis of the transition literature solidifies the salience of self-redefinition in the transition process.

In the sociology literature, Ebaugh (1988) focalizes the interplay between major role exit and identity in a study of 106 participants from varied and diverse social spheres (e.g., former nuns, teachers, transexuals, alcoholics, police officers, military members, and doctors). The sociologist defines *role exit* as the "process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and reestablishment of an identity in a new role that considers one's ex role" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 1). Implicit in Ebaugh's definition is the dynamics between the old and new role identities, shifting the attention from static-state transitions. While Ebaugh (1988) contributes valuable insight into role exit transitions, extreme role discontinuities, and self-redefinition demand, the study pertains to voluntary transitions.

Expanding Ebaugh's (1988) model, Ashforth (2001) incorporates involuntary transitions highlighting the impact on one's identity and sense of meaning, belonging, and control. Furthermore, the scholar argues that an involuntary transition often results in

increased psychological distress, given the lack of preparedness (Ashforth, 2001). Ashforth's (2001) research attends to two adverse effects of voluntary and involuntary transitions—discontinuity and liminality. Emerging research illustrates that liminality, particularly, remains relatively undertheorized in the context of career transition (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Willson, 2019). As such, the next section contains an intrapersonal viewpoint of career transitions through the lens of liminality that inhabits uncertainty.

*Liminality*

In the anthropology literature, van Gennep (1960) and, subsequently, Turner (1987) advances the concept of liminality, signifying passage between the spatial-temporal dimension construed as *betwixt* and *between*. An intrinsic element of transition, liminality refers to the existence between the familiar (stability) and unfamiliar (instability), characterized as a period of uncertainty, distress, and vulnerability (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Bridges, 2001; Rattray, 2016; Schlossberg, 1981; Turner, 1987; Willson, 2019). Willson (2019) describes the liminal state as structurally invisible or symbolically detached, positing that its persistence may complicate the transition process. Furthermore, Willson (2019) explains that those in the liminal period belong *neither* here nor *there* or are neither *this* nor *that*—a space Bridges (2003) characterizes as the neutral zone. Essentially, the liminal individual exists in a state of becoming (Turner, 1987). However, research suggests that poor tolerance for uncertainty could adversely influence transitions (Ashforth, 2001; Rattray, 2016; Turner, 1987).

Uncertainty is intrinsic transitions that influence sensemaking (interpretative) responses in new contexts (Ashforth, 2001; Willson, 2019). The notion of person-environment interactions proves theoretically relevant, given that, according to

Schlossberg (1981), transitions elicit behavioral changes. Sullivan and Ariss (2021), in line with Louis (1980), argue the importance of sensemaking to reconcile the tension (energy) between expected and actual transition experiences. Lewin (1939) describes tension in terms of valence, pointing to the tension-reductive trait of positive valence and the tension-inducive trait of negative valence. Furthermore, classic literature shows that person-environment interactions remain central to the distillation of change and transitions as understood through the context of the life-space (Lewin, 1939; Louis, 1980).

*Life-space*

The social psychology literature shows that *life-space* refers to the subjective environment (Lewin, 1939). Lewin (1939), pioneer of the field theory, illustrates the interplay between constituent elements of life-space using a behavioral equation "$B = F(P, E) = F(L\ Sp)$" (p. 878). Meaning, behavior (B) is a function of the person (P) and environment (E), which, in turn, is a function of life-space (L Sp) (Lewin, 1939). The formulaic expression depicts the inherent interdependency between the two entities, reflecting the totality of the experience (Lewin, 1939). Importantly, Lewin (1939) postulates that "the instability of the psychological environment leads, in some respect, therefore, to greater instability of the person" (p. 878). To this end, adaptation, according to Schlossberg (1981), partly depends on individuals' assumptions about their respective person-environment.

While used as an analogy, Lewin's frame of logic summates the discussion as career transitions involve patterns of interactions (person-environment) and movement across boundaries, space, and time. Van Maanen (1977) contends that space-temporal

difficulties require cognitive remapping upon entrance into new environments countering potential reality shock. This discussion acknowledges taken-for-granted characteristics inherent to major role exits. The thrust of the career transition literature focuses on organization types (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). Research by Hinderaker (2015) and Howe and Hinderaker (2018) calls attention to organization forms (e.g., totalistic vs. non-totalistic), implicating institutional membership, role exit transitions, and post-exit sensemaking. In their effort to bridge gaps in the literature, Sullivan and Ariss (2021) highlight dominant theoretical perspectives, as shown in the following section.

*Career Transition Theoretical Perspectives*

Sullivan and Ariss (2021), in an empirical analysis of 242 publications, catalogs career transitions along the lines of theoretical perspectives, including career stage, decision-making, adjustment, relational, and identity. In brief, the career stage perspective focuses on linearity, stability, and predictability (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021; Super, 1957), whereas the decision-making perspective centers on factors influencing the career transition process (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). Further, the adjustment perspective prioritizes adaptation, emphasizing factors influencing coping mechanisms (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). Essentially, the relational perspective attends to the social domain—e.g., engagement, functioning, and support (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). The identity perspective provides two viewpoints—individual narrative (who and how) and individual identity (impacts and change) (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). Explanation of these theoretical perspectives enables further understanding of career transitions.

Although theoretical significance exists across all perspectives, veteran-related literature reveals that the adjustment perspective proves particularly salient (Boyle et al.,

2020; Elnitsky et al., 2017; OTED, 2020, 2021a; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). According to Sullivan and Ariss (2021), interdependent relationships exist between and among all theoretical perspectives. For instance, the adjustment perspective may involve the identity (e.g., self-re-identification) and relational (e.g., social readjustment) perspectives. Notwithstanding, Sullivan and Ariss (2021) highlight the paucity of research on understudied demographic groups experiencing growth. Relatedly, Dodds and Kiernan (2019), in research on contemporary women veterans, reveal that "just 2% of the literature" from 1970 to 2018 references the demographic group (p. 294). Far less literature focuses on women veterans' post-military career transitions—particularly related to role exit experiences.

In the veteran literature, the post-military transition characterizes as inherently complex and multidimensional (Elnitsky et al., 2017; MITRE Corporation, 2019; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). While numerous transition frameworks exist in the literature, a limited number focus on transition as the central phenomenon (Musamali, 2018). However, scholars recognize the multidimensional utility of Schlossberg's transition model across various disciplines such as occupational health and well-being (Adler & Castro, 2019); higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015); women's career development (Greer, 2017); adult learning and development (Greer, 2020); sport (Lavalle, 2019); prison to college (Brower, 2015), and post-military career transitions (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Shue et al., 2021).

Adler and Castro (2019), noting limitations, submit that Schlossberg's transition model functions at the individual level of analysis and *starts* at the point of transition

citing transition as, in some cases, an ongoing process. Notably, Adler and Castro's (2019) work primarily orients toward occupational health and the workplace as a complete system. Furthermore, Schlossberg (1981) acknowledges that transition remains continuous and, as such, requires appraisal and reappraisal. Relative to application, Schlossberg et al. (1995) argue that while individuals (e.g., race, age, gender, and value orientation) and transitions (e.g., type, context, and impact) differ, the 4S structure remains stable. Perhaps due to the phenomenological nature of transitions, the dominant research approach often utilized has been qualitative rather than quantitative (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Notwithstanding, Schlossberg's (1981) Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition proves particularly relevant to the constitution of the present study and, thus, functions as the grounding theory.

*Schlossberg's Theory of Transition*

The Schlossberg Theory of Transition (1981) emerges as one of the most comprehensive theoretical approaches to investigating transitions (Adler & Castro, 2019). The theory postulates that transition necessitates changes in assumptions and behaviors and that not all changes entail transitions. Schlossberg (1981) argues that three major factors influence transitions—characteristics of transitions (role change, affect, source, timing, onset, duration, concurrent stress), pre- and post-transition environments (support and physical settings), and individual (e.g., psychosocial competence, gender, health, race and/or ethnicity, and value orientation). Further, the model accounts for the diverse, nonlinear, and idiosyncratic nature of transitions and concomitant stressors by focalizing coping resources (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Research shows that stress remains an inherent characteristic of transitions, whether to a considerable or negligible degree (Ashforth, 2001; Baker, 1985; Heppner, 1998; Latack, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). In his research on occupational stress, Baker (1985) points to the association between stress and imbalances in the person-environment and underscores that stress depends primarily on one's perception. Relative to coping, Schlossberg's (1981) 4S model, a human adaptation model derivative, assesses four interrelated factors influencing individuals' ability and capacity to negotiate transitions. The framework encompasses situation (i.e., event or nonevent), self (i.e., personal demographics and psychological resources), support (e.g., interpersonal, institutional, and community), and strategy (coping mechanisms).

Furthermore, Schlossberg (1981) and Schlossberg et al. (1995) argue that coping presents as either an asset (surplus) or liability (deficit), attenuating or exacerbating the transition process. Heppner (1998) and Fernandez et al. (2008), in the analytical evaluation of psychological resources and deficits in career transition, argues that individuals with higher perceived psychological resources exhibit more apparent vocational identities and higher confidence. As noted previously, the literature consistently shows that the greater the magnitude of differences in a career transition, the greater the potential for increased stress and, in turn, the demand for coping (Ashforth, 2001; Bruce & Scott, 1994; Latack, 1984; Louis, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981). Ascertainment of resources-deficit ratio balance, thus, proves useful in mitigating adverse effects of transitions (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

*Military-to-Civilian Career Transition*

Career transitions remain highly normative in the U.S. Armed Forces. The U.S. Armed Forces, constituting 1.4 million active servicemembers, regularly facilitate personnel distribution and movement, ensuring global mission sustainment (DMDC, 2021). Movements include permanent changes of duty stations (averaging about 400,000 transfers annually), temporary duty assignments, and deployment tours (DMDC, 2021). In compliance with congressionally mandated end-strengths, an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 servicemembers exit the military, per annum, with many entering the civilian labor market (Kamarck, 2018; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018; Vespa, 2020). Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans' Relief (2014) redefines active-duty servicemembers' statuses to veterans upon honorable discharge from the U.S. Armed Forces.

Veterans' successful reintegration into civil society remains a national priority (Ainspan et al., 2018; DAV, 2018; Elnitsky et al., 2017). Principi (2006) stated that the "ultimate measure of successful transition from the military to civilian life is long-term, sustained employment" (p. 6). Notwithstanding, research reveals that the reintegration process consistently proves difficult for many veterans (OTED 2020, 2021a; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). Moreover, veteran employment-related literature suggests that the military-to-civilian career transition is not merely a matter of finding employment but rather a life-changing process (Atuel et al., 2017; Grogan et al., 2020; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Krigbaum et al., 2020; OTED, 2020).

Elnitsky et al. (2017), operationalizing the principle-based concept analysis, define servicemember and veteran reintegration as "both a process and outcome of resuming roles in family, community, and workplace which may be influenced at different levels of an ecological system" (p. 10). According to Elnitsky et al.'s (2017) findings, the transition concept typically refers to a period, process, or, to a greater extent, movement within or across institutional settings. The Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation (2017) defines the military-to-civilian transition as "the process through which military veterans and their immediate family members achieve and maintain a stable level of psychological, physical and economic well-being" (p. 8). Congruent with Elnitsky et al.'s (2017) reintegration concept, this explication considers the totality of a veteran's life—individual, physical, psychological, social, and economic (Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

Expanding research emphasis on transitions, Castro and Kintzle (2017) advance the Military Transition Theory by adapting Schlossberg's transition model. The military transition theory postulates that a growth-susceptibility dichotomy exists with military transitions (entry, internal, and exit), depending on the individuals' experiences (Castro & Kintzle, 2017). The model depicts three interdependent and overlapping variables governing post-military transitions segmented into three phases: *approaching transition* (i.e., nature of transition, cultural factors, individual characteristics), *managing transition* (i.e., individual adjustment factors and support systems), and *assessing transition outcomes* (i.e., employment, health, housing, social systems, finance and legal, and well-being).

The military-to-civilian transition characterizes as an inherently stressful life event involving multiple life domains often simultaneously—i.e., employment, education, financial, health, relationships, and well-being (Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; OTED, 2020, 2021a; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). Prior research on the military-to-civilian career transitions primarily focuses on the objective perspective—such as transition assistance program outcomes (Grogan et al., 2021; Hire Heroes USA, 2019; OTED, 2020, 2021a); civilian-military employment dyad (Atuel et al., 2016; Carter, Schafer, et al., 2017); and veterans' economic value (Haynie, 2016; McDonald, 2020). However, limited scholarly literature exists on the subjective (psychological) perspective of the military-to-civilian career transition.

Emerging veteran-related research suggests that cumulative transition stress may overtax psychological resources (Bahtic et al., 2020; Burgess, 2018; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Further, data reveal that veterans underestimate the mental and emotional strains of military-to-civilian transitions (OTED, 2020, 2021). For example, in one recent study, over 50% of 2,735 transition assistance program-eligible veterans viewed the transition as more difficult than anticipated (OTED, 2020). The mainstream transition and career transition literature shows that one's psychological resources (asset or liability) and adaptive capacities influence transition outcomes (Hall, 2004; Schlossberg, 1981; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Recent research suggests studying interventions designed to strengthen personal-dispositional factors salient to the military-to-civilian career transition process (Krigbaum et al., 2020). Given the established context, the following

two sections introduce two protective resources (e.g., psychological capital and perceived employability) novel to extant literature.

## Psychological Capital

Psychological capital originates from the field of positive psychology (Luthans et al., 2007). From the Greek word psyche, meaning *psykhē* or soul, *psychology* refers to the science of the mind (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Psychology concerns the connection between the physical (conscious) and psychical (unconscious) of a given phenomenon (Lewin, 1939). The psychology field cemented its history as a discipline in the U.S. military as early as World War I (1917-1918) for psychological (mental functioning) and neuropsychological (cognitive and behavioral functioning) assessments (Hughes et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2011).

### *Positive Psychology*

While expansive in scope, historical applications of psychology appear primarily associated with the injurious nature of one's mental life (Maslow, 1954; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Shifting focus, James (1874-1910), an American psychologist, argued the importance of objective and subjective experiences (Froh, 2004). According to the theorist, objective experiences depend on cognitive construction—an epistemic view that considers subjectivity irreducible (Froh, 2004).

In the modern era, Seligman and Maier (1967) and Overmier and Seligman (1967) further advance the field of *positive psychology* with pioneering research culminating in the theory of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness stems from non-contingency and reflects passive responsiveness to negative stimuli, which likely potentiates emotional disturbance—e.g., fear, anxiety, and depression (Maier &

Seligman, 2016; Seligman, 1974). Maier and Seligman (2016) theorize that controllability tempers the effect of subsequent or cumulative stressors. Furthermore, Maier and Seligman (2016) point to the stress-buffering effects of hope—a future-oriented resource—relative to perceived uncontrollability over particular outcomes. Pivoting from the conventional problem-focused approach, scholars began examining indices of psychological strengths (e.g., hope and optimism) to optimize functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argue that psychology restricts itself to curing human weaknesses more than building human strengths. These scholars submit that positive psychology catalyzes a "change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Positive psychology focuses on positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions, promoting mental well-being through the lens of psychological strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The U.S. Army, for example, extrapolates the positive psychology concept into its comprehensive soldier fitness program measuring soldiers' subjective well-being (Peterson et al., 2011). The assessment instrument indices include emotional (e.g., life satisfaction, character strength, optimism, and resilience), social (trust and friendship), family (personal and familial relationship), and spiritual fitness characterized as a sense of purpose (Peterson et al., 2011). Peterson et al. (2011), in their study of 8,000 soldiers (80% men and 20% women), conclude that women scored lower on social trust than men, meaning women, while just as psychosocially fit, felt more unease in the institution.

The initiative situates positive psychology into the U.S. Army's culture to blunt the adverse effects of contextual threats and resource-depleting stressors, bolstering individuals' health, well-being, and performance (Peterson et al., 2011). Moreover, Peterson et al. (2011) suggest that positive psychology interventions may prove helpful in destigmatizing mental health and, in turn, recalcitrant stereotypes. However, shifting psychological orientation from negative to positive relies on personal resources to optimize human functioning and potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

*Psychological Capital Construct*

Commensurate with Seligman's approach, Luthans (2002) situates psychological capital in positive psychology and positive organizational behavior—the study and application of positive human strength and psychological capacity. The psychological capital, as outlined by Luthans and Youseff-Morgan (2017), constitutes the theoretical integration of four measurable constructs: self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), resilience (Luthans, 2002a, 2002b), hope (Snyder et al., 1991), and optimism (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Luthans et al. (2007) define psychological capital:

> an individual's positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success. (p. 3)

Luthans et al. (2007) further contend that collective psychological capital functions as a differentiated source of sustainable competitive advantage. In contrasting theoretical constructs, Luthans et al. (2004) illustrate that psychological capital extends beyond economic capital, human capital, and social capital.

As distinguished in the literature, economic capital refers to non-human assets (financial and physical) leveraged to hedge against future risks in business (Luthans et al., 2004; Pinxten & Lievens, 2014). Human capital, characterized as the economic approach to human behavior, refers to the economization of knowledge, skills, and abilities representing individuals' work value in the labor market (Becker, 1993). According to Luthans et al. (2004) and Pinxten and Lievens (2014), social capital, a network-based resource, constitutes two elements: cognitive (i.e., trust) and structural (formal and informal). Furthermore, the construct situates social relationships across different levels of the ecological system (Luthans et al., 2004; Pinxten & Lievens, 2014).

Luthans et al. (2004) colloquialize economic capital as "what you have," human capital as "what you know," and social capital as "who you know" (p. 46). Contrastingly, psychological capital sustains psychological strength by developing and replenishing psychological resources (Luthans et al., 2014; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). With its emphasis on the subjective experience, psychological capital concerns "who you are" and "who are you becoming" (Luthans, 2012; Luthans et al., 2006; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Newman et al., 2014).

*Psychological Capital: Theoretical Applications*

In their research on the veteran identity, Atuel and Castro (2018) assert that the military-to-civilian transition compels veterans to ask the existential question, "Who am I

in this civilian world?" (p. 485). The transition marks a period of liminality, uncertainty, disruption, and distress (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Bridges, 2003; Schlossberg, 1981; Willson, 2019). In the employment context, meta-analytic evidence reveals that unemployment and underemployment tax psychological resources and, in turn, adversely affect reemployment and well-being (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009).

A longitudinal survey of 1,876 veteran respondents (79% men and 21% women) reveals that psychological and emotional well-being emerges as the most salient factor influencing veterans' life satisfaction outcomes (OTED, 2021). In context, literature shows that individuals' effective acquisition and management of psychological resources remain integral to successful career transitions (Baluku et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2008; Heppner, 1998). While studies exist on the application of psychological capital in the confines of the military (Peterson et al., 2011; Schaubroeck et al., 2011, Seligman & Matthews, 2011), less remains known about military-to-civilian career transitions.

Meta-analytic evidence shows that psychological capital influences positive adaptation relative to stress, well-being, and coping strategies (Newman et al., 2014). Illustratively, one empirical study on employment uncertainty in adverse labor markets reveals higher degrees of uncertainty resulted in lower levels of psychological capital (Epitropak, 2013, as cited in Newman et al., 2014). Additionally, findings show that lower levels of psychological capital predicted higher degrees of psychological stress (Epitropak, 2013, as cited in Newman et al., 2014). In the military-to-civilian career transition context, studies persistently indicate veterans fear not finding and maintaining sustainable employment in the civilian labor market (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Castro et

al., 2014, 2015; Kintzle et al., 2016; Zoli et al., 2015). According to research, those with higher psychological capital possess more psychological resources to draw from in demanding situations (Luthans et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2014; Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

Research demonstrates that military-to-civilian transition reflects replete losses (e.g., employment, identity, a sense of purpose, social network, and environmental mastery) threatening individual well-being (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Atuel et al., 2016; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017; Whitworth et al., 2020). Meta-analytic findings show that psychological capital increases well-being through stress reduction (Newman et al., 2014). In their study, Schaubroeck et al. (2011) examine the psychological impact of traumatic events among 648 (99% men) U.S. Army soldiers across nine combat units in Iraq. Although based on work-related stressors, findings reveal strong positive covariance between psychological capital and cognitive appraisal, whereby cognitive appraisal mediated the effects of psychological capital and health symptoms (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). The data further shows that higher levels of psychological capital prove essential to coping—particularly in situations exerting overwhelming demands on one's reservoir of psychological resources (Schaubroek et al., 2011). Schlossberg (1981) reminds us that the salience of appraisal and reappraisal as reactions to stressful situations depends on one's perception to strengthen resolve.

In another study, Gupta and Shukla (2018) examine the effects of psychological capital on subjective well-being (work and life) among a random sample of working women, revealing significant positive relationships. Gupta and Shukla's (2018) study shows that psychological capital blunts the effects of stress associated with work-life

imbalances influencing the participants' affective reactions. According to Gupta and Shukla (2018), psychological capital predicts subjective well-being, the importance, thus, lies in its development.

Research confirms the fundamental assumption about psychological capital's developability as illustrated with operationalized interventions (Luthans et al., 2006; Luthans et al., 2008; Salanova & Ortega-Maldonado, 2019; Sharp, 2019). Salanova and Ortega-Maldonado's (2019) literature review on evidence-based psychological capital interventions reveals positive application in diverse samples—e.g., students and employees, expatriate workers, and individuals at-risk for social exclusion. Similarly, Sharp (2019) validates the efficaciousness of a psychological capital intervention among 49 employees using the two-group pretest/post-test design. The statistically significant interaction effect in the gain scores of the treatment group over the comparison group, substantiating psychological capital's development capacity (Sharp, 2019).

These scholars' examination of the constructs' developability, durability, transferability, and applicability provide insight into sustainable pathways to enhanced performance and well-being. In the military-civilian context, the Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation (2017) argues in favor of interventions focused on veterans' psychological needs (e.g., self-actualization). Moreover, emerging research calls greater attention to interventions focused on transition stress—a psychological experience independent of mental illness (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

Although limited in numbers, other studies show the positive direct effects of psychological capital on career transition adaptation (e.g., Baluku et al., 2021). In one instance, Baluku et al. (2021), in their study of 516 undergraduate students, show strong

direct effects of psychological capital on adjustment in university-to-work transitions. Research illustrates that the military-to-civilian career transition starkly differs from employment-to-employment and university-to-employment transitions, owing to the magnitude of difference between the military and civilian environments (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Atuel et al., 2016; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). However, this study illuminates the instrumental role of psychological capital in career transitions and the construct's applicability.

Research effectively illustrates the applicability of psychological capital construct crosses disciplines, organizations, and cultures and extends from the work to life domains (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). In systematic reviews of the psychological capital literature, scholars such as Burhanuddin et al. (2019) argue its utility beyond the business industry into academia to explore, for example, multi-perspective phenomenological experiences. Similarly, Luthans (2012), Luthans & Youssef-Morgan (2017), and Salanova and Ortega-Maldonado (2019) advocate extending the psychological capital construct to diverse contexts using mixed and qualitative methods, given empirical data remains devoid of experiences. To this end, Baluku et al.'s (2021) research provide empirical evidence demonstrating that psychological capital positively influences subjective employability.

## Perceived Employability

In the context of this study, research consistently shows finding and maintaining sustainable employment ranks as a salient concern for veterans (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Zoli et al., 2015). In its simplest form, perceived employability refers to the sense and appraisal of one's ability to secure employment (Berntson et al., 2006; Forrier et al.,

2015; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). The employability concept appears ubiquitously defined across various disciplines (Berntson et al., 2006; Forrier et al., 2015; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Rothwell et al., 2007). The origin of the concept traces back to preparing the unemployed, students, and disabled individuals for labor market entrance (Berntson et al., 2006; De Vos et al., 2021; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Over the last decade, employability conceptions remain dynamic and mutable due to the evolving economic, social, and political landscapes (De Vos et al., 2021; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Resultantly, extensive scholarship exists on the subject, which appears disjointed (Berntson et al., 2006; Forrier et al., 2015; Forrier et al., 2018). Establishing conceptual continuity, Forrier et al. (2018) categorize employability into two groups: strength-based (input) and assessment-based (outcome). De Vos et al. (2021) contend that both research approaches remain vital in the contemporary career environment. Moreover, Forrier et al. (2018) suggest practical implications for interventions recognizing the salience of relationality. Dominant themes from the selective review of employability literature include conceptualizations and contemporary careers.

*Employability Conceptualizations*

Employment and employability perceptions emerge as major determinants of individuals' well-being and life satisfaction (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; De Battisti et al., 2016; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). While structural factors (e.g., labor market conditions) prove integral in appraising one's chances of employment, career transitions rely on agency and capacity (Berntson et al., 2006; De

Battisti et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2008; Heppner, 1998). Employability and career transition remain inherently connected (De Vos et al., 2021; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Thus, understanding the employability concept provides crucial context for transitioning servicemembers and veterans' labor market (re)entrance.

Hillage and Pollard (1998) operationalize the employability concept based on four self-awareness factors: assets (human capital), deployment (capability), presentation (value proposition), and context (individual situation and external influences). These scholars, in turn, defined employability as:

> the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitude they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to the employers and the context (eg [*sic*] personal circumstances and labor market environment) within which they seek work." (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 12)

Hillage and Pollard's (1998) definition situates the individual as the primary arbiter of employment securement, which leans towards the meso-level (i.e., work experience, education, and career development learning) approach.

Fugate et al. (2004) recast employability through the psychosocial lens focusing on adaptability in a volatile, uncertain, and complex labor market. The person-centered construct comprises three dimensions: career identity, personal adaptability, and human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2004). Career identity refers to one's self-definition in the career context and dispositional attributes—e.g., beliefs, values, and experiences (Fugate et al., 2004). Furthermore, personal adaptability concerns one's willingness and

ability to cope with the changing work context (Fugate et al., 2004). Human (skills, experience, and education) and social (relationships) capitals function synergistically for career advancement (Fugate et al., 2004). Human capital, however, remains the primary determinant of employability (Becker, 1993; Berntson et al., 2006; Fugate et al., 2004). Fugate et al.'s (2004) definition of employability underscores labor market dynamics and shifts in the psychological contract (employer-employee relational obligation).

Offering another viewpoint, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argue that exclusively person-centric constructs prove narrowly responsive to labor market needs. These scholars' employability framework integrates individual, personal, and external factors (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). First, individual factors include personal attributes, competencies, transferable skills, and qualifications (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Next, personal factors pertain to an individual's life circumstances (e.g., domestic responsibilities, family, and work culture (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Lastly, the external component accounts for labor market conditions, policies, vacancies, recruitment, and other such factors (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) framework considers both the labor market's supply and demand sides, which implicates individual-, meso-, and macro-level factors.

Differently, Berntson et al. (2006) submit that subjective rather than objective employability matters most as perception drives one's appraisal of their chances at (re)employment. Consistently, Vanhercke et al. (2014) define perceived employability as "the individual's perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment" (p. 594). These scholars recognize that the level of employability perceptions, whether high or low, influences employment outcomes.

In their study, Berntson et al. (2006) examine predictors of employability using two samples—4,952 participants (economic recession group) and 6,696 (economic prosperity group). The scholars conclude that human capital variables strongly predict perceived employability (Berntson et al., 2006). The study demonstrates that economic conditions influence perceived employability (Berntson et al., 2006). Findings further reveal that individuals' level of employability perception varied based on labor market conditions, implicating the probability of employment (Berntson et al., 2006).

Through the psychological lens, Vanhercke et al. (2014) conceptualize perceived employability using the strength-based approach, which appears congruent with Forrier et al.'s (2018) views. Positioning the individual as the foci recognizes the criticality of the subjective experience (Forrier et al., 2018; Vanhercke et al., 2014). As seen in the career literature, subjective perspectives influence adaptation to transition (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Bruce & Scott, 1994; Mulhall, 2014). Furthermore, the strength-based approach focuses on psychological resources, which facilitates or impedes the transition process (Heppner, 1998; Schlossberg, 1981). Moreover, the contemporary careers literature underscores two crucial and interactive employability factors—identity (self-awareness) and adaptability (Hall, 2004).

*Contemporary Careers: Protean and Boundaryless*

With globalization, technological advancement, and societal changes, redefinition of the career construct emerges as reflective of an unstructured, unpredictable, nonlinear, and dynamic work world (De Vos et al., 2021; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). In the literature, dominant theoretical influences mainly focus on *attitudes* instead of *behaviors*—such as Hall's (1976, 2004) *protean* and DeFillippi and Arthur's

(1994) *boundaryless* career orientations. In contrast to traditional career constructs, the protean career model situates career development and management responsibilities with the *individual* rather than the *organization* (Hall, 1976, 2004; Volmer & Spurk, 2011). Furthermore, Hall (2004) posits that individual career success, defined as a desirable work-related outcome, hinges on subjective success.

Whereas self-directed career management remains central to the protean orientation, the main tenet of the boundaryless orientation is *mobility*—physical and psychological (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Hall, 2004; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Generally, boundaryless career orientation entails pursuing employment opportunities across decentralized settings—e.g., occupation, organization, or industry (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) hypothesize that boundaryless careers lead to an accrual of pertinent competencies described as *know-why* (identity, values, and interests), *know-how* (knowledge, skills, and abilities), and *know-whom* (relationships). In their study, the scholars argue that these career competencies either facilitate or constrain career success (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Others contend that an individual's ability and capacity to cope with the transition, in general, and concomitant uncertainties and stress proves equally, if not more, essential (Adler & Castro, 2019; Bridges, 2003; Schlossberg, 1981; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Few scholars extend the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon to the broader context of contemporary careers (e.g., Baruch & Quick, 2007; Krigbaum et al., 2020; Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2010). In one such example, Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2010) examine the career transition process of 202 retiring Israeli military officers and civilian equivalents (89% men and 10.3% women). In their study, these authors characterize the

defense, or military, sector as traditional, structured, and stable and the civilian sector as contemporary, unstructured, and volatile. Results from the multiple hierarchical regression analysis revealed that the preparedness (know-how) and social capital (know-whom) variables positively correlate to career satisfaction (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2020).

In another example, Krigbaum et al. (2020) examine predictive factors relative to military-to-civilian career transitions in the contemporary labor market. Examining the transition experience of 146 participants (77.4% men and 22.6% women), the scholars conclude that demographic (age, race, ethnicity, and years of service) and dispositional factors (life satisfaction, workability, and social capital) strongly influence transition success (Krigbaum et al., 2020). Krigbaum et al. (2020) further stress that interventions designed to strengthen personal-dispositional factors prove salient to the military-to-civilian career transition (Krigbaum et al., 2020).

Career scholars De Vos et al. (2021) view career transition as an antecedent of employability. One's perception of employability remains a subjective, or interpretative, experience influencing adjustment and adaptation processes (Schlossberg, 1981). Based on the various literature, psychological capital and perceived employability function as protective resources when facing adverse situations (e.g., job loss) and uncertainties (Luthans et al., 2007; Vanhercke et al., 2014). On the one hand, psychological capital confronts the questions *who am I* and *who am I becoming* (Luthan et al., 2004). On the other hand, perceived employability anchors in *what I have* and *who I know* (Vanhercke et al. 2014).

## Chapter Summary

Chapter II presents the literature review on women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences. The literature well-documents the challenges veterans experience with the civilian reintegration process (OTED 2020, 2020a). However, data also reveal that the Post-9/11 era women veterans experience unique transition challenges (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Boyle et al., 2020; BPW Foundation, 2007; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; DAV, 2018; Grogan et al., 2021). Although qualitative and sustainable employment remains an elemental physiological need, adverse career transition affects psychological and economic well-being (Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). The current study expands military-to-civilian career transition discourse by integrating two facilitative resources largely absent in the veteran employment-related scholarship—psychological capital and perceived employability. The following chapter presents the methodology chosen to execute the study to include criteria for achieving credible findings.

# CHAPTER III – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter III frames the overall construction of the study as informed by the purpose, problem statement, and characterization of the required data to achieve methodical congruence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The chapter incorporates multiple sections beginning with a restatement of the purpose statement, research questions, and research objectives. The next two sections cover the research design (e.g., type, method, rationale, and positionality), ethical considerations, and human subject protections. Subsequent sections include the population and sample and instrumentation, followed by data collection and data analysis. Furthermore, the chapter includes sections on trustworthiness as the standard for appraising qualitative research rigor. In conclusion, the last section summarizes the study's research methodology.

## Purpose of the Study

The study explores the essence of the women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition lived experience. The study further seeks to understand the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on career transition. Post-service employment represents the most salient need for many veterans—one that strongly influences transition outcomes (Barrera & Carter, 2017; BPW Foundation, 2007; Zoli et al., 2015). Transitions, in general, may manifest as either psychological strengths or psychological deficits, or aspects of both (Schlossberg, 1981).

Consistent with the notion of the military-to-civilian transition as a multifactorial *process,* internal resources can either facilitate or impede veterans' ability to cope with the confluence of individual-level stressors—economic, psychological, psychosocial, and

cultural (Atuel et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2015; Kamarck, 2018). As such, this study may fill knowledge gaps in scholarship about the psychological dimensions of the military-to-civilian career transition and inform stakeholders' policies, programs, and practices (Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017).

## Research Questions

While many women veterans (re)integrate into civilian employment successfully, a meaningful number struggle with the military-to-civilian career transition process. This bifurcated outcome sets the tone for a more in-depth qualitative inquisition into women veterans' lived experiences. In alignment with the study's purpose, the overarching research question is: How do women veterans experience the military-to-civilian career transition? A subsequent research question related to protective personal resources and adaptive capacities emerges: What influence do psychological capital and perceived employability have on women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition?

## Research Objectives

The investigator, guided by relevant literature, frames five research objectives to address the aforestated research questions.

*RO1* – Describe study participants' characteristics to include race and/or ethnicity, age, marital status, employment status, education level, military branch, rank, years of military service, and disability status.

*RO2* – Explore the influence of psychological capital on women veterans' career transition.

*RO3* – Explore the influence of perceived employability on women veterans' career transition.

*RO4* – Explore women veterans' perceptions of career transition.

*RO5* – Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.

Given its qualitative constitution, the present study does not attempt to advance hypotheses or generalize but rather understand the essence of the research object—each woman veteran participant. The main rationale for using the qualitative method, thus, lies in understanding women veterans' self-interpretation of the lived phenomenon. As evident, the women veteran cohort represents an understudied sub-population whose employment experiences and outcomes remain relatively marginalized in the literature (Bush & Craven, 2017; Dempsey & Schafer, 2020; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Another reason to undergo qualitative exploration is the cohort's statistical under-representation in empirical studies (Dempsey & Schafer, 2020). A further rationale lies in the characterization of women veterans as an invisible population (Holder, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c, 2017d; Thomas & Hunter, 2019; VETS, 2015). As in this case, Creswell and Poth (2018) deem the use of qualitative design appropriate to *give voice* to underrepresented or marginalized groups or populations and when "the quantitative measures and statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem" (p. 46).

## Research Design

Research methodology functions as the strategy and protocol for conducting a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). Given this study's nature, purpose, and objectives, the qualitative research method proves most suitable for grasping the essence of women veterans' subjective transition experience. Creswell and Poth (2018)

contend that to gain "a complex, detailed understanding of the issue," importance lies in "talking directly with people…allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (p. 45). In other words, the approach hinges on understanding and learning from others' accounts of the lived phenomenon through social construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Philosophically, two dominant ontological beliefs exist about the social world—post-positivism and interpretivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Philosophical Assumptions*

The post-positivistic approach depends on scientific evidence (e.g., experiments, statistics, and agent disengagement) to generate objective data (Shadish et al., 2002). Contrarily, interpretivism grounds in the human experience (e.g., dialogue, contextual depth, and agent engagement) to construct subjective data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, scholars encourage researchers to articulate underlying assumptions within the interpretative framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011). Consequently, the study integrates the role of the researcher within the interpretative framework strengthening methodological integrity.

*Researcher Positionality Statement*

Creswell and Poth (2018) identify four philosophical assumptions associated with qualitative studies: ontology (reality), epistemology (knowledge), axiology (value), and methodology (process). First, ontological assumptions enable qualitative studies to *uncover* or *discover* intrinsic truths through perspectives and interpretations of social realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) and Crotty (1998) argue that, based on philosophical beliefs, individuals' realities

remain independent and negotiable, standing in contrast to the positivistic stance on objective truth. Further, Miles et al. (2020) submit that individuals' documented *words* remain absent of true objectivity. The researcher accepts that interconnectedness occurs through multiple and heterogeneous realities dictating what becomes known from an ontological perspective.

Second, epistemological assumptions situate in both *subjectivism* or imposed meaning and *constructivism* or constructed meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Frost, 2011). The researcher, thus, accepts the epistemological position that researchers and their presuppositions remain inseparable. To further expand, epistemology refers to the importation and engagement of knowledge—that is, how researchers come to know subjective truths about phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011). In other words, the interconnectedness and interdependency between the researcher and participants become necessary to understand subjective worldviews. Subsequently, the researcher leverages the knowledge gained to construct meaning about the life-world phenomenon. The constructivist-interpretivism framework, thus, hinges explicitly on research participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, axiological assumptions center on matters deemed important, valuable, and ethical illustrating transparency in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The originating inspiration for this research lies in personal and constituent experiences with the understudied phenomenon. Furthermore, relevant scholarship characterizes women veterans as an understudied and invisible population—an emerging group of research interest (Bush & Craven, 2017; Dempsey & Schafer, 2020; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Meade, 2020; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). The constructivist-

interpretivism paradigm foregrounds participants' views allowing the investigative space to explore phenomena at the conscious level (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Relative to the research context, Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate researchers "positioning themselves" in the study, enabling readers' understanding of their worldviews (p. 44). Acknowledging and conveying one's positionality, thus, demonstrates transparency about its potential influence on the research process and subsequent findings and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Otherwise stated, positionality demands *professional objectivity* while remaining mindful of *personal subjectivity*. In this study, the researcher presents as a retired chief master sergeant from the active U.S. Air Force with 22 years of global military experience (including combat). Moreover, the researcher classifies as a Post-9/11 era veteran—a period distinguished by two decades of war. In addition, the researcher inhabits multiple social positionalities (e.g., woman, minority, veteran, and service-connected disabled) salient to the interpretative process. Taken together, ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions influence the next one—the methodological assumption.

Fourth, methodological assumptions frame the research strategies used in the data collection and analysis processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). Qualitative research involves structuring unstructured, or raw, data to derive new meaning—giving voice to the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). In the scientific literature, deductive (general to specific) and inductive (specific to general) reasoning emerges as the two predominant research approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Trochim, 2020). Usually, deductive logic, which associates with quantitative research, characterizes as a priori and depends on confirmation (Miles et al., 2020; Trochim, 2020).

Contrarily, inductive logic, which associates with qualitative research, classifies as a posteriori and relies on observation (Miles et al., 2020; Trochim, 2020). Based on the experiential nature of the current study, the researcher employs an inductive logic to identify themes, interpret meaning, and report findings. With an understanding of the philosophical assumptions and interpretative framework, the following section introduces the selected genre of inquiry—phenomenology.

*Phenomenological Approach*

In the scientific domain, the qualitative research method and strategies possess the capacity to investigate existential issues associated with lived phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The phenomenological methodology most suitably addresses the study's central research focus—understanding women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experience. Generally, phenomenology descriptively captures the essence of lived phenomena through human experience (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodological approach enables the distillation of *common meaning*, relying on the researcher and participants' perspectives to derive the *what-and-how* of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, two influential philosophical beliefs exist in phenomenology—transcendental and hermeneutics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transcendental phenomenology focuses objectively on the epistemological meaning of *knowing* (Zahavi, 2003). Husserl (1959-1938), modern founder, relates this type of phenomenology to consciousness (state of being) and intentionality (directed awareness) in explaining others' worldviews (Frost, 2011; Smith, 2018; Zahavi, 2003). The Husserlian philosophy explicitly commits to epoché or bracketing to authenticate

others' phenomenological experiences (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2018; Zahavi, 2003). In brief, epoché constitutes a conscious process requiring researchers to hold personal experiences and judgments in abeyance during data collection and analysis processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011). Epoché disallows researchers' interpretation or constructive sensemaking—the root of hermeneutics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frost, 2011; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutical phenomenology constitutes the nature of lived experience through the researcher's interpretation, suggesting that *knowing* and *being* are intertwined (Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Expanding on Husserl's phenomenological methodology, Heidegger (1889-1976) leverages hermeneutics to explore the conscious experience: the meaning of *being there* (Frost, 2011; Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, van Manen (2014, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018) views hermeneutics as an interpretation of the phenomena occurring through the negotiated meaning of others' lifeworld. Contributing another theoretical viewpoint, Smith et al. (2009) propose interpretative phenomenology as a framework for understanding subjective truths.

*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

This study operationalizes the qualitative research method with the interpretative phenomenology analysis framework as the praxis of interpretation. Interpretative phenomenology embodies the philosophical tenets of phenomenology and hermeneutics with an idiographic approach to investigate within-individual dynamics (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Larkin

and Thompson (2012) state that "while phenomenology might be descriptive in its inclination, it can only ever be *interpretative* in its implementation" (p. 102).

Interpretative phenomenology incorporates double hermeneutics binding the researcher's sensemaking and participants' meaning-making processes to (re)construct meaning (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). The Husserlian notion of epoché presents as essential in this interpretative framework, albeit engaged differently. To explain, Smith et al. (2009) argue that bracketing in the data collection process becomes necessary to elicit thick descriptive information unencumbered by researchers' preconceptions. Conversely, data analysis relies on the researcher's epistemological predilections to facilitate understanding, construction, and synthesis of intersubjective meaning (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Thus, in this study, iterative bracketing and reflexivity remain consequential in *sensemaking* interactions to preserve phenomenological integrity and research rigor. Smith et al. (2009) describe reflexivity as an ethical instrument used to manage preconceptions, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and values attenuating researcher bias effects. In addition to bias reduction, the protection of human subjects remains the most salient ethical goal in research (APA, 2020).

## Research Ethics and Human Subjects Protections

The University of Southern Mississippi's Institution Review Board (IRB) represents an independent oversight committee established statutorily to protect human research subjects' rights, privacy, and welfare (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The onus rests with the researcher to adequately demonstrate measures to protect human subjects (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The IRB approval in

Appendix A signifies that the proposed study adheres to ethical requirements and standards codified in U.S. federal regulations. Evidence of ethical considerations lies in the fundamental principles of beneficence, justice, and respect for persons (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Ethical Principles*

Adopting the dictum *first, do no harm*, the researcher prioritizes protecting participants' rights before and throughout the study, as suggested in the literature on qualitative research (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009). The *beneficence principle* refers to the obligation to protect participants from the potential risk of harm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study has no known or foreseeable risks beyond routine life discomforts and inconveniences. In addition, the *justice principle* demands fair and equal treatment of participants, as illustrated, for example, in research benefits, sample-size justification, and the member-checking process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the *respect for persons* principle requires researchers' commitment to respect participants' rights and protect all disclosed information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This commitment manifests in incorporating ethical measures (e.g., pseudonyms, data security, and access restrictions) to prevent breaches of privacy and confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Relative to masking data, pseudonyms replace real names on all textual and digital records generated (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, the *respect for persons* principle requires researchers to provide participants with sufficient information in pursuit of consent (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Informed Consent*

At the outset, the researcher ensures each participant understands the rudimentary details of the study to obtain voluntary consent, as advised by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Roberts and Hyatt (2019). Importantly, participation remains entirely voluntary with no penalty for any research subject who declines to participate or, at any point, withdraws from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fink, 2003; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Furthermore, the literature stresses the use of plain language when developing the content of the consent form (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The oral presentation consent form (Appendix B) embedded in this study reflects terms participants reasonably understand to authorize or decline consent autonomously. The details comprise the study's purpose, description, voluntariness, benefits, risks, confidentiality, investigator's contact information, and IRB approval assurance (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fink, 2003; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Further, informed consent characterizes an iterative process (Fink, 2003; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019); therefore, the researcher seeks periodic confirmation and reaffirmation.

Moreover, Smith et al. (2009) stress the paramount importance of researchers remaining cognizant of participant sensitivity during the data collection process. The consent form, thus, includes language extending the offer for confidential Department of Veterans Affairs resources (Appendix C), potentially mitigating unforeseen risks. As implied previously, ethical behavior applies to sampling as the intent should be to yield the appropriate type and number of participants to address the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Population and Sample

Population refers to an entire group of subjects, whereas sample characterizes a relatively representative subset drawn from that population (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020a) and National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2019) datasets indicate that the 18.4-million veteran population comprises about 1.9 million women. A veteran characterizes an individual who served in the U.S. Armed Forces (Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force) with an honorable discharge (Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans' Relief, 2014). In this study, the target sample includes women veterans who served on active duty in any branch of the military across the contiguous United States. Purposefully, the study's sample reflects women veterans with first-hand knowledge and experience of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon.

### *Sampling Strategies*

In phenomenology, the recruitment of information-rich participants remains critical to addressing the study's research questions, as *lived experiences* represent the most prominent criteria (Alase, 2017; Eatough & Smith; 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith et al. (2009) propose that sampling strategies remain theoretically aligned with the research design and the researcher's underlying philosophy (i.e., interpretivism). Further, other qualitative research scholars support using a combination of nonprobability sampling strategies to flexibly facilitate participant recruitment (Creswell and Poth (2018; Smith et al., 2009). In phenomenological studies, more specifically, Smith et al. (2009) advocate selecting sampling techniques that yield representativeness in *perspective* instead of *population*.

Thus, this study incorporates three widely-used qualitative sampling techniques—purposive, criterion, and snowball—with an emphasis on increasing similarities and narrowing variations.

Purposive, criterion, and snowball strategies serve a two-fold purpose: (1) recruit eligible, information-rich participants and (2) meet sample requirements—size and composition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) advise that purposive sampling "will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the research about the research problem under examination" (p. 148). Furthermore, criterion sampling involves selecting participants representative of pre-established criteria most germane to the study to achieve homogeneity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

Moreover, snowball sampling enables the solicitation of additional eligible participants necessary to reach an appropriate sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling explicitly relies on the referrals of others (e.g., experts, participants, and gatekeepers) to gain access to eligible prospects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, scholars advocate using the referral technique to access hard-to-reach populations—e.g., women veterans (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, the sample size logic depends on the research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989).

*Sample Size*

Qualitative research focuses on subjective experiences and transferability rather than objective truths and generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Supporting that assertion, sample sizes for qualitative research designs tend to run acceptably small (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In phenomenology studies,

specifically, sample sizes vary from 1 to as many as 325, according to Creswell and Poth (2018). From an ethical perspective, sample sizes exceeding the research requirement may prove unjustifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Congruently, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend up to 10 participants as in-depth analysis remains the qualitative goal in phenomenological inquiries.

The literature underscores the criticality of selecting information-rich cases to ascertain the phenomenon's essence to generate thick descriptions (Smith et al., 2009). Some scholars argue against formulaic sample sizes when using the interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Paramount importance lies in *quality* rather than *quantity,* emphasizing analyzing patterns of divergence and convergence (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). For this reason, Alase (2017) and Smith and Osborn (2008) submit that sample size ranges of two to 25 and five to six participants, respectively, commit to idiographic principles.

Moreover, Creswell and Poth (2018) consider data saturation an acceptable strategy to justify sample size. Data saturation refers to the point of redundancy during the data collection and data analysis processes necessary to validate findings (Cypress, 2017; Guest et al., 2006). Essentially, data saturation occurs when no new information and thematic expressions emerge in the data (Guest et al., 2006). To achieve data adequacy, the researcher operationalizes the principles of data saturation, with consideration to the employment of standard interview questions as suggested by Guest et al. (2006) and Fusch and Ness (2015). Guest et al. (2006), studying the methodological

principles of data saturation, propose that 12 interviews may prove adequate for seeking shared perception and understanding of a phenomenon among homogeneous samples but caution against blanket assumptions.

Furthermore, Fusch and Ness (2015) argue that sample sizes, whether large or small, neither determine nor guarantee data saturation but rather data exhaustion with the intent to achieve thick, rich data. Consistent with the research questions and objectives, the study's sample size ranges from 10 to 15 participants accounting for data saturation and data thickness to achieve dimensional context. Notwithstanding, Smith et al. (2009) submit that the representativeness of *perspective* rather than *population* remains central to the participant selection process to elicit thick descriptions.

*Participant Selection*

Participant selection remains one of the most consequential aspects of qualitative research—namely, phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith et al., 2009). Creswell and Poth (2018) assert, "the more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and overall essence of the experience for all participants" (p. 153). Polkinghorne (1989) identifies two essential requirements participants should possess: (1) lived experience of the understudied phenomenon and (2) capacity to describe and articulate the experience. Put differently, the solicitation of information-rich participants *willing* and *capable* of sharing their subjective experiences remains key in phenomenological studies.

Moreover, Smith et al. (2009) argue that the prospective participants should be characteristically and reasonably homogenous (e.g., gender, military component, and

military era). Smith et al. (2009) and Alase (2017) further describe homogeneity as an essential factor in understanding the shared perceptions of the lived phenomenon. This study's selection criteria include only women veterans (18 years or older) who served, minimally 12 months, in the active U.S. Armed Forces after September 11, 2001—an era uniquely distinguished by the protracted war on terrorism. van Manen (2014, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018) states, "In a phenomenological study, the participants may be located in a single site, but although they need not be" (p. 153). A veteran-serving nonprofit collaborative with national reach located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. East Coast serves as the primary research site for participant access and recruitment. Appendix D contains confirmation of research site approval granting permission for data collection purposes. In detail, the site coordinator agrees to post the recruitment flyer (Appendix E) on the organization's website and LinkedIn page, extending the invitation to collaborative establishments.

*Participant Recruitment*

The researcher integrates a multi-pronged approach to recruit and retain participants for the study—snowball referrals, communication mediums, and participant incentives. As discussed previously, leveraging the snowball sampling strategy to recruit criteria-eligible participants remains a crucial aspect of phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2019; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers, thus, rely on participant-interviewees' social networks for recruitment support (Smith et al., 2009). Consistently, in addition to professional and personal networks, the current study embeds snowball recruitment in the interview process to reach prospective participants.

Secondly, close collaboration with gatekeepers—those with authority to broker participant access—influences the easability of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Importance, therefore, lies in early and consistent communication, including attainment of requisite authorizations (i.e., IRB and sponsoring organization) and any distribution of recruitment material (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Communication mediums leveraged to generate interest include webpages, listservs, and social networks. Specifically, the researcher-participant interaction framework incorporates four contacts: introductory recruitment email (Appendix F), interview confirmation and reminder notification (Appendix G), member-checking request email (Appendix H), and thank-you email (Appendix I).

The member-checking process enables the validation of verbatim transcripts to determine data clarity, accuracy, and completeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). The researcher engages participants in the data collection process via the member-checking request email strengthening the study's validity. Furthermore, the email effectuates an assumption of agreement to use data as-is for non-replies—respecting participants' rights to discontinue engagement. Moreover, researchers maintain the responsibility for a clear and accurate representation of studies undertaken to elicit participants' interest and, subsequently, voluntary participation (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fink, 2003; Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). As such, the researcher ensures that all written communications contain the requisite details of the study consistent with ethical requirements.

Thirdly, as another strategy, ethicists contend that tangible offers (e.g., incentives, compensation, reimbursement, or tokenistic rewards) increase participant recruitment and

retention (Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Largent & Lynch, 2017; Resnik, 2019). Consensus in relevant scholarship illustrates that payment structured in the research design incites prospective subjects' *interest* and *willingness* to participate (Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Largent & Lynch, 2017; Resnik, 2019; Russell et al., 2000).

Although offering payment remains widely practiced, no standard agreement exists about its appropriateness owing to disparate ethical views (Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Largent & Lynch, 2017; McNeill, 1997; Resnik, 2019; Zutlevics, 2016). McNeill (1997), for instance, views remuneration as ethically unacceptable in research with inherent risks (e.g., clinical trials), theorizing that it obscures risks and alters participants' decision-making and judgment. Conversely, McNeill (1997) reasons that structuring payment in research with no known or negligible risks may be defensible.

Other scholars consider offering payment for participants' contributions (e.g., time and effort) as a means of overcoming potential recruitment barriers as ethically acceptable (Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Largent & Lynch, 2017; Resnik, 2019; Russell et al., 2000). Moreover, Bentley and Thacker (2004) and Resnik (2019) advance empirical evidence repudiating claims of inducement or coercion as the threat remains unsubstantiated. However, Resnik's (2019) findings raise concerns about payment adequacy.

According to Resnik (2019), financial payment varies from $25 or less to thousands depending on the type of study (e.g., clinical, biomedical, epidemiological, or social and behavioral) undertaken. Some ethicists agree that reasonably conservative payments remain preferable as higher offers might unduly influence participants (Largent & Lynch, 2017). Thus, the study's protocols incorporate a cash-equivalent payment of

$20 (Visa or Amazon gift card) as an incentive to bolster recruitment and retention and honor participants' time and effort. However, the incentive does not extend to participants exercising the right to withdraw from the study.

Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest researchers exercise the principles of reciprocity in the researcher-participant and researcher-gatekeeper relationships. The researcher distributes thank-you emails accompanied by payments to participants following the member-checking process. Once approved, the report of findings remains available to interested participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subsequent section discusses the key instruments used to acquisition data from recruited participants.

## Instrumentation

Data validity and reliability remain controversial in scientific research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The instrumentation protocols, thus, adhere to the qualitative standards of trustworthiness (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Instrumentation refers to the resources used in the data acquisition process and the measures undertaken to evaluate the instrument's rigor (Miles et al., 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study's instrumentation framework comprises the researcher, in-depth semi-structured interviewing, an interview guide, and pilot-testing, as Roberts and Hyatt (2019) detailed. In qualitative inquiries, humans function as instruments for data collection and analysis as opposed to devices—e.g., surveys, questionnaires, scales, or interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Human Instrument*

Inherently, the human instrument threatens research credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse et al., 2002). Meaning-construction through lifeworld perceptions manifests

as the most fundamental trait of human beings (Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2003). The researcher's main responsibility, thus, entails structuring unstructured data to construct meaning from subjective truths about the lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, scholars recommend bracketing during the formulation of interview questions and the data collection process (Bevan, 2014; Chan et al., 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1989). Moreover, Tufford and Newman (2010) offer a bracketing framework highlighting opportunities to bracket throughout the qualitative research process (See Appendix J, Bracketing Framework and Copyright Permission).

*Semi-Structured Interviews*

In interpretative phenomenology, semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions typically serve as the conduit for data collection (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). From a phenomenological perspective, semi-structured interviewing entails real-time social interaction whereby researchers immerse themselves into participants' lifeworld to distill the essence of the lived phenomenon (Bevan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Communication flexibility and spontaneity—hallmark features of semi-structured interviews—situate the researcher in the context of the lived phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus, open-ended questioning allows the conversational space necessary to generate thick descriptions (Bevan, 2014; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

Despite its utility, some scholars recognize that the semi-structured technique could constrain the interview process citing, for example, time demands and labor

intensiveness (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Another disadvantage involves researcher bias in constructing interview questions, which must remain unburdened by assumptions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Roberts, 2020). Biased, unreliable data threatens research findings and conclusions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Phillips et al., 2013). Accordingly, the researcher establishes an interview guide to facilitate the researcher-participant dialogical exchange.

*Interview Guide*

While avoiding mechanization, the instrument provides *structure* and functions as a *guide* (Bevan, 2014; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Guest et al. (2006) assert that standard interview questions lessen variability in the data collected. The interview guide contains pre-determined interview questions to explore the phenomenon, enabling active interviewing (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Roberts, 2020; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Turner, 2010). An active interview reflects a constructivist orientation as a mutualistic relationship exists in re-presenting meaning (Hathaway, 2019).

Moreover, Bevan (2014) and Eatough and Smith (2017) assert interview protocols "are used to guide, rather than dictate, the course of the interview" (p. 30). In line with that assertion, Smith et al. (2009) suggest formulating open-ended questions, prompts (sub-questions), and probes to engender sufficient participant responses. These scholars further claim that applying rhetorical modes of questioning (e.g., descriptive, narrative, comparative, contrast, evaluative, structural, and circular) proves most suitable for generating dense experiential data (Smith et al., 2009).

When designing the interview guide, Creswell (2013) proposes developing approximately five to seven open-ended questions to engage participants in reflection. More detailed, Smith et al. (2009) suggest constructing six to 10 open-ended questions accompanied by prompts (sub-questions) using the funneling technique. The interview questions flow from general (participant-oriented main questions) to specific (researcher-oriented prompts), prioritizing the participants' voices (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Scholars caution that proceeding otherwise might introduce the threat of researcher bias, resulting in data contamination (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Informed by the research objectives, the interview questions originate from the literature, as proposed by Smith et al. (2009), and align with the epistemological nature of the study. In brief, the operationalized interview guide contains an introduction, a series of predetermined questions, and a debriefing statement. Specifically, the guide includes eight open-ended interview questions and prompts based thematically on three primary constructs—career transition, psychological capital, and perceived employability—ordered from general to specific (see Appendix K).

Identifying participants' demographical characteristics presents another essential component of the interview guide, given positionalities frames the researcher-participant exchanges (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Demographics provide data granularity, proving instrumental during data analysis and discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018); Miles et al., 2020). Thus, the guide incorporates nine demographic questions situated at the end of the instrument, as suggested by Fernandez et al. (2016). The select demographic variables draw from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Veterans

Affairs datasets, as well as those in the existing literature—e.g., BPW Foundation, 2007; Castro, 2014, 2015; Kidder et al., 2018; OTED, 2020; and Vogt et al., 2019.

To show alignment, Table 2, *Interview Guide Correlation Matrix*, illustrates the extent to which the interview and demographic questions cover the research objectives, as Castillo-Montoya (2016) advises. In detail, the matrix depicts the research objectives (RO) on the vertical axis and the interview and demographic questions (Q) on the horizontal axis by number (e.g., RO3 or Q3). Foremost, research objective one maps to questions nine through 17, capturing general and unique characteristics (i.e., race and/or ethnicity, age, marital status, employment status, education level, military branch, rank, years of service, and disability status) necessary to understand important characteristics of the study population.

Subsequently, research objective two, which focuses on the psychological capital construct, maps to interview questions one, two, four, five, and eight. Next, research objective three explores the perceived employability construct and links to interview questions one, two, three, five, and six. Covering the career transition construct, research objective four ties to interview questions one, two, four, six, seven, and demographic questions nine through 17. Lastly, research objective five explores the relationship between all three constructs and, thus, maps to interview questions one through eight and demographic questions nine through 17 to explore and understand the experiential lives of women veterans.

Complementarity exists among the understudied constructs. Consequently, the interview questions overlap, contextualizing and clarifying the phenomenon. According to Smith et al. (2009) and Bevan's (2014) methods of phenomenological interviewing,

such a deliberate approach promotes descriptive adequacy—posturing the phenomenon for a complete analysis. The interview guide determines the quality and depth of the data collected and minimizes the imposition of researcher bias (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Roberts, 2020). For this reason, the researcher pilot-tests the instrument before fielding it to strengthen the credibility of the study's findings.

Table 2

*Interview Guide Correlation Matrix*

| Research Objective | Research Questions |
|---|---|
| RO1 | Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17 |
| RO2 | Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5, Q8 |
| RO3 | Q1, Q2, Q3, Q5, Q6 |
| RO4 | Q1, Q2, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17 |
| RO5 | Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17 |

*Pilot Testing*

Pilot-testing entails vetting the measuring instrument (i.e., interview guide) before data collection to judge its practicality and identify deficiencies (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2020; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Most importantly, the process increases the probability that the instrument consistently measures the study-specific concepts as intended (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Based on Roberts and Hyatt's (2019) argument, an instrument must possess the capability and capacity to address the research question—a standard akin to internal validity in quantitative inquiries.

As such, the researcher employs a literature-informed pilot interview protocol (Appendix L) to interrogate the interview guide for its suitability and efficaciousness. The reviewer liaises with a criteria-eligible participant representing an essential constituent in the military-to-civilian career transition process to conduct the pilot test. Experts assess the adequacy of coverage, readability, understandability, reflectivity, answerability, and clarity of the instrument (Bevan, 2014; Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

A well-vetted interview guide can contribute to methodological integrity and consistency (Bevan, 2014; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Roberts, 2020). According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), the more consistent the interview process, the more credible the findings—potentiating transferability beyond the study's scope. The pilot test results, thus, situate as part of the chain of evidence demonstrating research transparency and coherency (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, pilot-testing allows familiarization of the guide's content and estimation of the time needed to collect data (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2020; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

## Data Collection

Under 45 Code of Federal Regulations 46, human subjects research projects undergo an IRB review and approval in advance of data collection (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Upon approval, the researcher initiates data collection activities, including pilot-testing the instrument, obtaining consent, executing recruitment strategies, and preparing for interviews. Congruent with the research's purpose, questions, objectives, and design, the data collection frame comprises semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio recordings, and verbatim transcripts, as noted by

Creswell and Poth (2018). As a precursor, the researcher brackets preconceptions in capturing participants' self-interpretations of the phenomenon.

First-person phenomenological accounts derive from in-depth semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, including probes and prompts (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). From a relational view, the method consists of one-on-one researcher-participant exchanges conducted via synchronous means—namely, the Zoom video communication platform. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe digital data collection mediums as economical, convenient, efficient, and flexible—especially for hard-to-reach populations. Moreover, single-session, semi-structured interviews permit the flexibility to establish rapport and trust with participants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Interviews rely on participants' *willingness* to collaborate with the researcher in the knowledge-production process (Smith et al., 2009). Alase (2017), thus, emphasizes the importance of rapport-building *before* the start of the interview session. Rapport engenders the trust necessary to enter participants' lifeworld to co-construct meaning (Roberts, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Polkinghorne (1989) warns that interviews can "pre-structure the phenomenon," suggesting audio-recording as a corrective measure (p. 47).

Recorded (i.e., audio or video) accounts of participants' lived experiences remain normative in phenomenological studies, as permitted (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The data collection plan, thus, incorporates Zoom, an Internet-based medium with audio-recording and audio-transcription capability, to

capture participants' responses verbatim. The researcher requests each participant's permission to audio-record the interview session during the consent process. If approved, the researcher enables the audio-recording option before the interview and the auto-transcript option after the interview. Some phenomenologists argue that the absence of audio-recording disadvantages the data collection process (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Examples of potential challenges include the omission of valuable details, insufficient rapport-building, and poor interviewing logistics (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

However, Smith and Osborn (2008) caution against reifying recording as audio-captured data does not constitute a true objective record. (Creswell, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this study, the data collection protocols include detail scripting, a paper-and-pencil method, as a contingency measure. Notwithstanding, Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008) emphasize the criticality of obtaining verbatim transcripts of the interviews to distill both the content and semantic-level details. Contextualization of participants' interview experience emerges as pivotal to achieving qualitative rigor (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As such, written observations remain central to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). The protocols, thus, incorporate field notes (descriptive and reflective), ensuring qualitative clarity and data richness as recommended in the qualitative literature.

Relative to duration, the time commitment for semi-structured interviews depends mainly on the context of the research and the phenomenon's complexity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview spanning 60 to 90 minutes proves sufficient to generate rich,

detailed information (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). All in all, this study's interviewing approach requires 45-60 minutes allowing sufficient space, time, and flexibility to attend to participants and, concurrently, facilitate data generation. Table 3, *Data Collection Plan*, details the timeline for collecting experiential data.

Table 3

*Data Collection Plan*

| Timeline | Activity |
|---|---|
| Week 0 | • Initiate reflexive journaling<br>• Secure sponsoring organization's written approval<br>• Obtain IRB approval<br>• Pilot-test instrument |
| Week 1 | • Distribute recruitment material<br>• Schedule interviews, provide consent form in advance, and inform of audio-recording and member checking<br>• Continue reflexive journaling |
| Weeks 2-8 | • Obtain informed consent and permission to audio-record<br>• Conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews<br>• Remind participants about member-checking process<br>• Initiate snowball sampling to reach saturation, as needed<br>• Download transcripts and verify against audio-recording<br>• Sanitize data sources by applying pseudonyms and removing personally identifiable information<br>• Read and validate transcripts for accuracy<br>• Organize data and begin preliminary data analysis<br>• Continue reflexive journaling<br>• Complete member-checking process<br>• Send thank-you emails and a $20 gift card<br>• Notify sponsoring organization of interview completion |
| Weeks 9-12 | • Continue reflexive journaling<br>• Conduct data analysis and write up findings<br>• Email participants' final report of findings post-approval |

Pre-data collection activities, illustrated in week zero, include initiating reflexive journaling and securing written confirmation of the research site and IRB's approval. Thereafter, the researcher pilot-tests the instrument using the protocols outlined in

Appendix K. Once approved, the researcher activates the data collection plan. In week one, the researcher initiates the recruitment strategy by sending the invitational recruitment email via the gatekeeping organization to access prospective participants.

After verifying eligibility, the researcher schedules and subsequently confirms interview sessions, based on participants' preference, via email correspondence. The researcher sends participants the informed consent in advance and informs about audio-recording and the member-checking protocols. The process of reflexive journaling continues throughout the study. The literature suggests that such action reduces researcher bias and increases data validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Weeks two through eight primarily represent the timeline for conducting interviews. At the start of each interview session, the researcher executes the informed consent process utilizing protocols outlined in the oral presentation consent form (see Appendix B). This approach requires: (a) reading and explaining each element of the consent form; (b) providing the opportunity to ask questions about the study's purpose, research activities, benefits, risks, conveniences, or discomforts; (c) addressing all questions; and (d) asking and obtaining verbal consent. Furthermore, the researcher verifies each participant's age (18 years or older). Before proceeding, the researcher requests permission to audio-record the interview session. According to 45 Code of Federal Regulation 46, research involving minimal risks to human subjects (i.e., interviews) does not require written consent—except if the potential for identification and disclosure of responses outside the research exposes subjects to the risk of harm (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Therefore, upon agreement, the

researcher annotates the words “verbal consent,” writes the pseudonym to the participant’s block, and signs and dates in the researcher’s block of the oral presentation consent form.

Thereafter, the researcher enables both the audio-recording and auto-transcript options and, subsequently, conducts one-on-one, synchronous, semi-structured interviews using the vetted-interview guide. Smith et al. (2009) and Larkin and Thompson (2012) assert that interpretative phenomenology studies usually focus on issues of existential significance. In the interest of research participants’ well-being, Smith et al. (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) emphasize the importance of access to support. Therefore, the protocols include contact information for confidential support should any participants experience sensitivities resulting from the interview. The researcher informally confirms and reaffirms participants’ consent throughout the interview.

During the interview debrief, the researcher reminds participants about the member-checking requirement. Member checking remains fundamental to preserving the integrity of participants’ perspectives of the lived phenomenon and, thus, strengthening research credibility (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Soliciting participants’ support, the researcher resumes recruitment efforts using snowball sampling with the intent of reaching data saturation. For textural and digital files, the researcher uses pseudonyms instead of real names and removes personally identifiable information as an ethical measure.

The researcher downloads the transcripts verifying them against respective audio recordings post-interview. Smith et al. (2009) describe the transcription process as time-consuming, averaging one to several weeks per transcript for novice researchers. Thus,

the researcher initiates the transcription process immediately upon completion, averting recall bias. Further, Smith et al. (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) emphasize interpretative phenomenological analysis's repetitive and iterative nature, which proves essential to data familiarization and recognition of emerging patterns. As such, the researcher repeatedly reads and validates each transcript, organizes the data generated, and, preliminarily, begins data analysis. During this process, unawareness of the influence of one's natural attitude, or preconceptions, could potentially undermine the research (Bevan, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the study's protocols also require the researcher to *attend to self* by foregrounding continuous reflexivity.

Furthermore, the researcher engages participants in the transcription validation process via the member-checking request email using the data as-is for non-replies. Thereafter, the researcher notifies the sponsoring organization of the completion of the interviews. Moreover, the researcher emails thank-you emails and the $20 gift card compensating participants for their time and effort. The study's data management protocols cover the storage and disposition of textural and digital files (e.g., transcriptions and audio recordings). As a cautionary note, Smith et al. (2009) urge the retention of such files until the completion of the final data analysis.

During weeks nine through 12, the researcher continues journaling reflexively, analyzes the data using established protocols, and produces a narrative account of the analysis. After obtaining the IRB's approval, the researcher provides interested participants with the final report of findings. The following section outlines the study's data analysis process and rationale for the chosen analytical framework.

## Data Analysis

The interpretative phenomenological analysis framework serves as the praxis for data explication. A phenomenological study *explores* rather than *explains* as expressed words matter most in the qualitative research logic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The rationale underpinning the selection of the framework rests with its capacity to generate detailed, or thick, descriptions giving voice to the research participant cohort (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Ponterotto, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Furthermore, the approach permits in-depth exploration and analysis at the idiographic levels to distill the essence of the lived phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Creswell and Poth (2018) submit that qualitative inquiries represent perspectives and in-depth meaning. In phenomenological studies, the participant and researcher co-construct meaning as interpretative agents (Smith, 2019; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The framework enables researchers to situate themselves in studies as *outsiders (etic)* and *insiders (emic)*—an essential aspect of the sensemaking process (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) offer practical guidance to facilitate data explication, as no prescriptive rules exist in the relevant literature.

Specifically, Smith et al.'s (2009) heuristic approach, as outlined in Table 4, *Data Analysis Strategy*, provides an orderly data analysis strategy—especially for novice researchers. Some scholars recommend the manual rather than a computer-mediated method for data organization, as the latter may prove problematic during final analysis

and reporting (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the researcher adopts Smith et al.'s (2009) manual approach to data analysis and, supplementally, uses Microsoft Excel to systemize the analysis flow.

Table 4

*Data Analysis Strategy*

| Stages | Activity |
|---|---|
| Stage 1 | Reading and re-reading |
| Stage 2 | Initial noting |
| Stage 3 | Developing emergent themes |
| Stage 4 | Searching for connections across emergent themes |
| Stage 5 | Moving to the next case |
| Stage 6 | Looking for patterns across cases |

The process requires repetitive data synthesis and re-synthesis, building codes and themes necessary to structure meaning (Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As a preliminary step, continual self-reflexivity serves to mitigate potential bias, further enhancing ethical and qualitative rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, as another data source, reflexive journaling provides evidential support for trustworthiness (Cypress, 2017; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Stage 1, *reading and re-reading*, requires multiple read-throughs of the data and listening to audio recordings performing line-by-line analysis of each transcript (Alase, 2017; Finlay, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). During this process, the researcher codes each transcript and reflects on the interview experience (e.g., preconceptions, introspection, insights, and procedures),

triangulating the data source. Stage 2, *initial noting*, entails free or spontaneous association and exploration of semantic-level details (e.g., extracted words, key phrases, and ideas) captured as field notes to contextualize findings (Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

While Stage 2 remains primarily exploratory, Stage 3, *developing emergent themes*, represents an interpretative activity engaging with field notes more than the transcript (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Finlay, 2011; Miles et al., 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The transcript, however, remains the source for theme validation (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Subsequently, stage four involves *finding connections across emergent themes*—that is, clustering the most prominent aspects of participants' experiences (Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Meaning, that the researcher systematically checks for data representativeness across all transcripts.

In stage five, Finlay (2011) and Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the researcher *moves to the next case*—repeating stages one through four for each subsequent case. Importantly, in this stage, bracketing each case to maintain participants' individuality demonstrates a commitment to idiographic research principles (Chan et al., 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, stage six entails *looking for patterns across cases* (Finlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). This stage involves the construction of superordinate themes supported by substantiating quotes from the transcripts (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Moreover, the cross-case analysis enables the interpretation of the individual

accounts as a whole to synthesize the *essence* of the lived phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008) describe the six-stage approach as more iterative and interactive than strictly linear. Stage six, thus, does not represent the final stage, as the researcher must traverse the data to clearly articulate and present the participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Illustrative of double hermeneutics, stages one and two represent the first-order analysis (participants' sense-making), while stages three through six represent the second-order analysis (interpreter's sense-making) phases (Finlay, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith et al. (2009) state that, in stage six, a quality analysis includes both idiosyncratic examples and shared higher-order concepts that translate into the narrative account. Post-theme development focuses on synthesizing the data and writing up the findings, ensuring authenticity and transparency (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Most critically, the narrative encompasses textural and structural descriptions of the research participants' perception of the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Otherwise stated, the analytical narrative describes the *how* and *what* of the phenomenological experience. Further, Miles et al. (2020) state, "Writing does not come after analysis; it *is* analysis, happening as the writer thinks through the meaning of data in the display." (p. 117). The composite write-up, thus, comprises relevant transcript extracts and analytical commentary—illustrating the researcher's interpretation of the participants' sense-making process (Smith et al., 2009).

Data analysis in phenomenological research aims to make sense of the data collected during the interview process. The prevailing notion behind data collection and data analysis is that the two processes function iteratively and interactively. Table 5, *Data Analysis Plan*, depicts the research objective (column one), data collected by instrument item (column two), data type (column three), and data analysis strategy (column four).

Table 5

*Data Analysis Plan*

| Research Objective | Data Collected | Data Type | Data Analysis Strategy |
|---|---|---|---|
| RO1 | Q9 = Race/ethnicity | Nominal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q10 = Age | Ordinal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q11 = Marital status | Nominal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q12 = Employment status | Nominal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q13 = Education level | Ordinal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q14 = Military branch | Nominal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q15 = Rank | Ordinal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q16 = Years of service | Ordinal | Descriptive statistics |
| | Q17 = Disability status | Nominal | Descriptive statistics |
| RO2 | Q1, 2, 4, 5, 8 = Psychological capital influence on career transition | Text | Thematic analysis |
| RO3 | Q1, 2, 3, 5, 6 = Perceived employability influence on career transition | Text | Thematic analysis |
| RO4 | Q1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9-17 = Perceptions of career transition | Text | Thematic analysis |
| RO5 | Q1-17 = Relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and career transition | Text | Thematic analysis |

*Note*: Research objective indicated as RO (e.g., RO1). Interview guide questions represented with the letter Q reflecting a single (e.g., Q9) or multiple questions (e.g., Q1-17).

More specifically, research objective one captures the demographic-level details, classified as either nominal or ordinal data. For this data type, the literature suggests

descriptive statistics or, more specifically, frequency distribution to summarize the characteristics of research participants (Trochim, 2020). Further, the data associated with research objectives two through five represent text data derived from themes constructed during the interpretative phenomenological analysis. Moreover, research-related records require proper data management (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Data Management

In the context of this study, data management requires that all data be accessed strictly by the researcher and maintained (e.g., storage, security, and disposition) according to the governing institution's policies (APA, 2020). Data storage and security protocols entail securing textual records in a locked file cabinet when not in use and password-protecting digital files (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The protocols extend to maintaining up-to-date virus software for the duration of the study, ensuring data security.

The data disposition protocols integrate the governing institution's records control schedule as approved by the State (Mississippi Department of Archives & History [MDAH], 2014). Specifically, the researcher adheres to the retention rules disposing of all research-generated files at least three years post-completion and the official close of the study, as dictated by the MDAH (2014). One exception: the researcher destroys audio recordings directly after the study's official completion, as Alase (2017) and Smith et al. (2009) advised on data management. Moreover, after the 3-year period, the state agency's guidelines require proper disposal of files (MDAH, 2014). Accordingly, the researcher strip-cut shreds all textual records and permanently deletes all digital files. Overall, responsible data management safeguards the chain of evidence, which proves critical to

maintaining transparency and, thus, strengthening research credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

## Trustworthiness

The methodological rigor of qualitative research remains contested in scientific discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cypress, 2018; Hammersley, 2007; Miles et al., 2020; Morse, 2015; Morse et al., 2002; Shadish et al., 2002; Shenton, 2004). Creswell and Poth (2018), using synthesized evidence, characterize validation as a process that "attempt[s] to assess the "accuracy" of the findings, as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers (or reviewers)" (p. 259). These scholars view validation as a process that emphasizes *understanding* and deemphasizes *verification* (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, Angen (2000, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 257) argues that validation is "a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research." Importantly, by all accounts, the principal goal remains to produce knowledge—that is, plausible and credible qualitative evidence about lived phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hammersley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015; Morse et al., 2002).

Positioning trustworthiness in the qualitative paradigm, Lincoln and Guba (1985), in their seminal text, introduce evaluative criteria equivalent to those in quantitative research—validity (internal and external or generalizability), reliability, and objectivity. The trustworthiness model comprises the analogous concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to assess research rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hammersley (2007) and Smith et al. (1989) rebuff the notion of finite and universal criteria, preferring divergent guidelines and sound judgment instead. In contemporary discourse, Cypress (2018) and Morse (2015) defend the pertinence of

mainstreaming the *validity* and *reliability* terms, arguing for consistency in the scientific paradigm. Bypassing the debate, Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that building validation techniques into the research process rather than reifying viewpoints and terminology matters most to authenticating rigor. To that point, Morse et al.'s (2002) dictum "without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its use" holds, signifying that strength lies in the research design and appropriate utilization of validation strategies (p. 16).

There exists a myriad of qualitative validation standards in the literature—many with minute differences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 2015; Morse et al., 2002). Therefore, scholars suggest researchers exercise personal judgment in selecting well-established quality measures and terminology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse et al., 2002). Moreover, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend, minimally, two of nine validation techniques: triangulation, negative case analysis, reflexivity, member checking, prolonged engagement, participant collaboration, external audit, thick descriptions, and peer review or debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher adopts Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness model—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the judicious explication of research rigor. More specifically, the study operationalizes triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, and thick, rich description to ensure rigor. Together, the trustworthiness criteria and validation strategies serve to evaluate rigor and, thus, enhance this research study's integrity and quality.

*Credibility*

Credibility, an analog to internal validity, refers to accuracy and adequacy in data interpretations and findings—that is, the *truth value* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). To achieve credibility, the researcher cross-checks evidence using triangulation, self-reflexivity, and member checking. Firstly, triangulation entails leveraging multiple, diverse methods, researchers, theories, data sources, and data types to substantiate research findings and enrich understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). Further, triangulation produces different datasets to elucidate convergent, divergent, and cross-analytical perspectives—a necessity for inherently small samples (Smith et al., 2009). Reference the triangulation section further below for the current study's protocols.

Secondly, to reduce bias, the researcher commits to reflexive journaling, documenting preconceptions, values, beliefs, experiences, reactions, and reflections throughout the research process. More specifically, the researcher exercises bracketing during the interview guide construction, interview sessions, and data collection process, as recommended by Alase (2017), Chan et al. (2013), and Smith et al. (2009), to achieve greater credibility. In addition to triangulation and reflexivity, the researcher engages participants in the member-checking process.

Thirdly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checking as the most crucial yet controversial validation technique owing to the constructionist view that multiple realities exist. Member checking encourages co-collaboration on data construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Morse (2015) argues that "member checking of the analysis, however, is not practical (p. 1216).

Thus, participants maintain the privilege of verifying the verbatim transcripts for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). The member-checking process extends the option to correct the *general* context rather than co-opt data analysis (Morse, 2015; Sandelowski, 1993). As with credibility, the transferability criterion serves to enhance the consistency of the study's results.

*Transferability*

In quantitative research, external validity generalizes the findings across settings, situations, people, and time (Shadish et al., 2002; Trochim, 2020). Contrarily, the transferability criterion assesses thick descriptions enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009; Trochim, 2020). Research context derives from studies' demographic profiles, methodologies, strategies, findings (e.g., verbatim quotes and analytical themes), and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Ponterotto, 2006).

Inherently, interpretative phenomenology can capably generate thick descriptions (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the study incorporates purposive, criterion, snowball sampling, and saturation to solicit information-rich cases. Additionally, the researcher employs an interview guide containing open-ended questions designed to generate detailed descriptions. Morse (2015) asserts that thick descriptions influence the transferability and dependability of research findings.

*Dependability*

Dependability refers to consistency—similar to reliability in quantitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020; Trochim, 2020). Reliability estimates the consistency or repeatability of measures and results (Shadish et al., 2002; Trochim, 2020). Sandelowski (1993) argues that "repeatability is not an essential (or necessary or sufficient) property of things themselves whether the thing is qualitative research or qualitative review" but instead representative of sameness (p. 3). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) submit that consistency or repeatability remains essential in judging the quality of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve dependability, Smith et al. (2009) suggest maintaining an audit trail or chain of evidence manifested through documentation. The researcher, thus, builds transparency in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes enabling the readers to retrace the research logic. The chain of evidence includes, for example, consent forms, interview guides, reflexive notes, audio recordings, transcripts, analytical memos, emails, and reports—all authenticating the decision pathway. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) extend the audit trail validation strategy to the confirmability criterion.

*Confirmability*

Research confirmability proffers a degree of neutrality to illustrate data-supported findings and interpretations—similar to objectivity in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020; Morse, 2015). Morse (2015) and Morse et al. (2002) criticize the notion of confirmability in phenomenology, arguing that the researcher's experiences manifest as part of the dataset. Lincoln and Guba (1985) long-recognized confirmability as challenging in qualitative approaches. Notwithstanding, the core

assertion about the role of confirmability remains pertinent and relevant in the context of bias reduction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, Smith et al. (2009) and Alase (2017) suggest practicing continuous reflexivity combined with bracketing during data collection. All in all, the researcher uses triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, and audit trail as validation strategies in assessing qualitative rigor and ensuring academic soundness.

*Triangulation*

Triangulation enables a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, increasing confidence in the findings and, thus, contributing to research trustworthiness and rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, the researcher triangulates three data sources using content analysis to strengthen the credibility of the study's findings. Stemler (2000) describes content analysis as a systematic procedure involving evaluating, interpreting, and condensing large volumes of textual data into meaningful themes.

The study's data source framework includes transcribed interview transcripts, the Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment Cross-Sectional Survey Report, and the U.S. Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program curriculum. The survey analyzes veterans' long-term outcomes over broad life domains: employment, education, health and relationships, financial, social connectivity, satisfaction, and well-being (OTED, 2020, 2021a). The transition assistance program curriculum reflects an outcome-based design using standard learning objectives focused mainly on career transitions (e.g., employment fundamentals, occupational crosswalks, and resume-writing), financial planning, military-to-civilian transition preparedness, and Veterans

Affairs benefits and services (TAP for Military Personnel, 2016). Qualitative content analysis is useful in identifying patterns (commonality, convergence, and divergence) across data sources and correlating frequencies of a priori themes in search of shared meaning (Stemler, 2000).

## Chapter Summary

Chapter III outlines the methodology used to address the research purpose, questions, and objectives. The methodological frame includes the research design, which details the philosophical assumptions and researcher's positionality statement, followed by the research method and approach. The researcher leverages the phenomenology method using the interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore women veterans' lived experience of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon. The chapter illustrates the research ethics employed in protecting human subjects highlighting core ethical principles and the informed consent process. Further, the chapter details the population and sample, including sampling strategies (purposive, criterion, and snowball), sample size, selection criteria, and eligibility requirements. Next, the instrumentation section addresses the human instrument, interviewing technique, interview guide, and pilot-testing protocols. The remaining sections cover data collection, analysis, and management (e.g., storage and disposition). Finally, the last part of the chapter discusses how the canons of the trustworthiness model undergird the methodological framework. The following two chapters cover the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

# CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

Chapter IV presents and describes the data analysis methodology leveraged to derive the research results clearly and objectively (APA, 2020). The study endeavors to understand women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences and the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition. Consistent with the study's nature, the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology served as the praxis for data explication. The analytical framework enabled the researcher to distill the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The researcher operationalized Smith et al.'s (2009) heuristic data analysis technique outlined in Chapter III to structure the phenomenological analysis. Inherent in this analytical approach is the participant-researcher interpretative role in the meaning-making and sensemaking processes commonly referred to as double hermeneutics (Finlay, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The qualitative data analysis process relied on data condensation—a technique used to shorten and transform data contained in interview transcripts, analytical notes, and reflexive journal entries while preserving core meanings (Miles et al., 2020). The results section includes data visualizations (i.e., tables and figures) to exemplify textual information. Miles et al. (2020) state that data condensation and displays strengthen data and enhance trustworthiness.

Structurally, the first section of this chapter overviews the derived themes and subthemes. The following section presents the demographic statistical data of the sampled population. The subsequent section details the analytical process used to distill

the most salient results organized by themes. Finally, the last two sections present the results of data triangulation, followed by the chapter summary.

## Themes and Subthemes

Four superordinate themes and six corresponding subthemes emerged from the narrative accounts of 14 women veterans' lived experiences. Table 6, titled *Research Objectives and Theme Correlation Matrix*, aligns the research objectives with themes and correspondent subthemes. Respectively, columns one through three reflect the study's research objectives, superordinate themes, and concomitant subthemes. The dashed line indicates the absence of a subtheme.

Table 6

*Research Objectives and Themes Correlation Matrix*

| Research Objectives | Superordinate Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| RO1 | Demographic Characteristics | |
| RO2 | Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting | Spiritual Resilience |
| RO3, RO4, RO5 | Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency | Self-sponsorship<br>Employability Support |
| RO3, RO4, RO5 | Employability Confidence: Leaning In | Human Capital Acquisition<br>Situational Context |
| RO5 | Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes | Personal Values |

*Note*: Research objective indicated as RO. A blank cell under the subtheme heading indicates not applicable.

Accordingly, the research participants' *Demographic Characteristics* satisfy research objective one. *Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting* integrates

spiritual resilience, fulfilling research objective two. *Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency* embeds Self-sponsorship and Employability Support, satisfying research objectives three, four, and five. Further, *Employability Confidence: Leaning In* incorporates Human Capital Acquisition and Situational Context, achieving research objectives three, four, and five. Lastly, *Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes* embeds Personal Values, satisfying research objective five.

## Demographic Characteristics

*RO1. Describe participants' characteristics, including race and/or ethnicity, age, marital status, employment status, education level, military branch, pay grade, years of military service, and disability.*

Fourteen women veterans across the Continental United States participated in this study employing non-probabilistic sampling—purposive, criterion, and snowballing techniques. As described in Chapter III, the researcher operationalized an interview guide containing eight open-ended interview questions and nine demographic questions aligned with the research objectives. The researcher pilot-tested the interview guide using one criteria-eligible participant resulting in minor edits simplifying several questions.

Data collection included one-on-one, semi-structured interviews held via Zoom Video Communications in May and June 2022. Pseudonymization and anonymization protected and maintained participants' privacy and confidentiality during the data collection and analysis processes. Descriptive statistics allowed rich contextualization of the women veterans' demographic information, as presented in Table 7, *General Demographic Characteristics of Participants*, and Table 8, *Military-specific Demographic Characteristics of Participants*.

Table 7

*General Demographic Characteristics of Participant*

| Pseudonym | Race/ Ethnicity | Age | Marital Status | Employment Situation | Education Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Myla | Black | 32 | Divorced | F/T Private Sector | Some College |
| Brei | Multi-Racial | 37 | Divorced | F/T Public Sector | Masters |
| Victoria | Hispanic | 29 | Married | F/T Private Sector | Masters |
| Gabriella | Black | 31 | Single | F/T Private Sector Student | Associates |
| Athena | Black | 55 | Married | Self-Employed | Bachelors |
| Dana | Black | 40 | Married | F/T Public Sector | Professional |
| Andra | Black | 53 | Divorced | F/T Public Sector | Bachelors |
| Dina | White | 46 | Married | F/T Public Sector | Masters |
| Brenda | White | 45 | Married | F/T Public Sector Student | Associates |
| Morgan | Black | 54 | Single | F/T Public Sector | Associates |
| Camilla | Black | 51 | Married | F/T Public Sector Student | Masters |
| Kennedy | Black | 37 | Married | F/T Public Sector | Masters |
| Nicole | Black | 61 | Single | Self-Employed | Bachelors |
| Meredith | Black | 49 | Married | Self-Employed | Bachelors |

Note. N = 14. F/T indicates full-time employment in the private or public sector. Employment situation also captures student status.

In Table 7, column one reflects pseudonyms assigned to the participants, as suggested in the literature (APA, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ponterotto, 2006). The most common race or ethnicity of the sampled population comprised 71.4% ($n$ = 10) Black or African Americans, followed by 14.3% ($n$ = 2) White or European Americans, 7.1% ($n$ = 1) Hispanic American, and 7.1% ($n$ = 1) multiracial American, as shown in column two. Column three indicates the participants' ages which range from 29 to 61,

with the total age averaging 44 years. The marital status, as reflected in column four, describes 57% (*n* = 8) of the participants as married, 21% (*n* = 3) as single, and 21% (*n* = 3) as divorced.

Further, columns five and six convey labor force characteristics—employment situation and education, respectively. Seventy-eight percent (*n* = 11) of the participants indicated full-time employment (public and private sector) and 21% (*n* = 3) specified self-employment, as shown in column five. Eight of the 11 participants worked in the public sector. Further, 21% (*n* = 3) of the participants reported enrollment in degree-granting post-secondary institutions. Column six highlights that nearly all of the participants, 93% (*n* = 13), hold academic degrees—21% (*n* = 3) associates, 29% (*n* = 4) bachelor's, 36% (*n* = 5) master's, and 7% (*n* = 1) doctorate.

In Table 8, column one reflects the pseudonym, whereas columns two through five describe military-specific characteristics. Eleven (78%) participants served in the U.S. Air Force, while the remaining three served in the U.S. Army (7%), U.S. Navy (7%), and U.S. Marine Corps (7%), as illustrated in column two. Further, column three indicates the participants' military pay grades at the time of retirement or separation, which reflects most as enlisted (E) personnel ranging from E-5 to E-9. The total years of service, shown in column four, averages 18.6 years with 71% (*n* = 10) of participants reporting 15 years or greater time-in-service. Lastly, column five illustrates that nearly all the participants, 93% (*n* = 13), reported service-connected disability statuses.

Table 8

*Military-Specific Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

| Pseudonym | Military Branch | Pay Grade | Total Years of Service | Service-Connected Disability |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Myla | USAF | E-5 | 6 | No |
| Brei | USAF | E-6 | 17 | Yes |
| Victoria | USMC | E-4 | 6 | Yes |
| Gabriella | USAF | E-5 | 6 | Yes |
| Athena | USAF | E-9 | 30 | Yes |
| Dana | USA | O-3 | 15 | Yes |
| Andra | USAF | E-7 | 26 | Yes |
| Dina | USAF | E-9 | 24 | Yes |
| Brenda | USAF | E-7 | 19 | Yes |
| Morgan | USN | E-6 | 18 | Yes |
| Camilla | USAF | E-9 | 26 | Yes |
| Kennedy | USAF | E-5 | 7 | Yes |
| Nicole | USAF | E-9 | 30 | Yes |
| Meredith | USAF | E-9 | 30 | Yes |

*Note*. F/T indicates full-time employment in the private or public sector. Military branches are acronymized as USA (U.S. Army), USAF (U.S. Air Force), USMC (U.S. Marine Corps), and USN (U.S. Navy). Enlisted and officer pay grades are represented by an E (e.g., E-4) or O (e.g., O-3), respectively. Service-connected disability refers to compensable injuries and illnesses incurred and/or aggravated by military service.

The demographic data proved essential to the data synthesis process, satisfying research objective one. Ponterotto (2006) suggests that acquiring thick descriptions of the sampled population without compromising participants' confidentiality enhances trustworthiness and engenders a sense of verisimilitude for the readers. The next section

describes the analytical heuristic used to explore the participants' lived military-to-civilian career transition experiences.

## Data Analysis

Smith et al.'s (2009) six-stage heuristic interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed systematic interpretation of interview transcripts. Research objectives two through five, as outlined in Chapter III, Table 2, addressed the study's research questions producing a qualitative richness of the understudied phenomenon. Research objectives two and three covered the psychological capital and perceived employability concepts, respectively. Further, research objective four focused on perceptions of career transition. Research objective five concentrated on the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and career transition.

At the outset of the data collection process, the researcher systematically bracketed presuppositions and assumptions, capturing participants' lived experiences as told, attenuating biases. Bracketing skills advancement occurred with the pilot and each successive interview. Furthermore, the researcher bracketed during the data analysis process preserving participants' individuality consistent with the idiographic principles of the interpretative phenomenological analysis. Bracketing between transcripts allowed themes to emerge organically.

Accepting responsibility for personal situatedness, the researcher systematically practiced self-reflection and reflexivity, codifying thoughts, feelings, and observations accordingly. Reflexive journal and memo entries descriptively captured personal introspections, analytical musings and details, observations, reflection-on-action, and

evolving perceptions. The reflexive journaling and note-taking thickened the data, which proved instrumental in the researcher's sensemaking process.

The data collection and analysis processes progressed iteratively and reflectively. The interviews averaged 30 to 60 minutes with contemporaneous notetaking initiating preliminary data analysis. The decision to discontinue data collection remained dependent on data saturation which occurred with the twelfth interview. Two subsequent interviews generated five new codes that merely reflected variations for extant codes, culminating in 14 total participants.

Miles et al. (2020) argue the importance of proper data management and its implications on data analysis. The data preparation protocols included reviewing, sanitizing, pseudonymizing, and anonymizing Zoom-generated files (e.g., transcripts and recordings). Sanitizing (or cleaning) the transcripts amounted to light editing to increase readability and clarity, removing identifying information and timestamps, correcting any misspellings, and restructuring the data format for better comprehension. Importantly, the participants' lived experiences remained intact in the strictest sense.

Table 9, *Number of Codes Per Interview Transcripts*, shows, by participants' pseudonyms (column one), the number of codes (column two) generated per interview transcript, in the order of occurrence, and the cumulative count (column three). Transcripts underwent manual validation in juxtaposition with the recordings. Thereafter, the researcher initiated the member-checking process, concluding with submitting incentive payments and thank-you emails, as outlined in Chapter III.

Table 9

*Number of Codes Per Interview Transcript*

| Pseudonym | Number of New Codes | Cumulative Count |
|---|---|---|
| Myla | 45 | 45 |
| Brei | 19 | 64 |
| Victoria | 19 | 83 |
| Gabriella | 8 | 91 |
| Athena | 7 | 98 |
| Dana | 17 | 115 |
| Andra | 5 | 120 |
| Dina | 2 | 122 |
| Brenda | 6 | 128 |
| Morgan | 7 | 135 |
| Camilla | 9 | 144 |
| Kennedy | 2 | 146 |
| Nicole | 3 | 149 |
| Meredith | 2 | 151 |

Printing transcripts using legal-sized (8.5 x 14) paper allowed workable space to perform multiple analytical activities, including coding, note-taking, and thematizing. Moreover, a kinesthetic-tactile approach to coding enabled active data engagement and in-depth phenomenological exploration, widening the aperture to participants' lifeworld. Table 10, *Examples of Coding Methods Used for Theme Development*, displays each coding method (first column) using select interview transcript extracts (second column) and researcher-generated classifications (third column).

Table 10

*Examples of Coding Methods Used for Theme Development*

| Method Type | Interview Transcript Extracts | Classifications |
|---|---|---|
| Descriptive | "So, I didn't actually have a lot of support during the time from the people I thought that I could trust. Obviously, I had family support. But it was a bit different because I thought that the people around me would be able to help me better in that journey." | Support Network |
| In Vivo | "When I first got out, I wasn't confident at all. I wasn't confident at all, and some of the jobs I applied for were below my skill level." | "Wasn't confident"<br>"Below my skill level" |
| Concept | "I mean, it took me a while to be able to be comfortable within the civilian world, you know, getting a job, starting school, learning more about myself. Because that's something that you don't know. When you're in the military, you're a soldier, right? You're an airman. You're all these things, but you don't really think of yourself as a person, especially when you're a woman." | Identity Negotiation |
| Emotion | "Like, once I got out of the military, I started to become depressed. It was a hard transition." | "Depressed"<br>"Hard" |
| Values | "I wish, in transitioning, they can tell us how to, kind of/ sort of, not minimize who we are, but adjust to knowing that the standard in which we held in the military is not the same standard in the civilian sector…People seem so intimidated when they find out that you served in the military." | (V) Professional Standard (B) Intimidated |

*Note:* Descriptive coding represents a summarization of the data. In Vivo coding uses reflect verbatim words or phrases in quotation marks. In a broader context, concept coding illustrates abstract words or phrases. Values coding reflects the participant's values (V), beliefs (B), and attitudes (Miles et al., 2020).

Beginning formal analysis, the researcher manually coded each transcript using Smith et al.'s (2009) suggested interpretative phenomenological analysis guidelines. In brief, the term *code* describes a researcher-generated construct or label (i.e., word or short

phrase) assigned to capture the essence of a unit of data (Miles et al., 2020, p. 63). *Coding* refers to an interpretative discovery process involving identifying themes across the data corpus (Miles et al., 2020). The analytical coding scheme incorporates elemental (descriptive and concept) and affective (emotion and values) coding methods. Miles et al. (2020) suggest leveraging various coding techniques to ensure exploratory comments remain closely reflective of the participants' voices. *Sensing* proved essential to organizing and labeling the data into meaningful units of analysis—a process phenomenologists refer to as data immersion (Smith et al., 2009).

Moreover, Figure 2 recasts Smith et al.'s (2009) data analysis heuristic as operationalized in this study. The data immersion phase, comprised of stages one and two, occurred at the individual level of analysis. Stage 1 entailed multiple readings of each transcript while engaging with the recording to the point of familiarization. The researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript, capturing exploratory notations in the left margins of the documents. Stage 2, conducted iteratively and reflectively with Stage 1, required exploring the data and identifying key information (e.g., words, abstract concepts, and patterns) in an active search for meaning.

Intersubjectively, the researcher embodied empathy, as suggested by Finlay (2005), during data collection and analysis processes—an emotionally responsive stance. Subjectively, using a distanced perspective, the researcher utilized critical *questioning* to facilitate higher-level interpretations of participants' lived experiences. Empathy and questioning signified the double hermeneutics methodology employed to deepen the interpretative engagement, as advised by Smith (2019) and Smith et al. (2009). In effect,

phase one represents the participants' meaning-making process, whereas phase two reflects the researcher's sensemaking process.

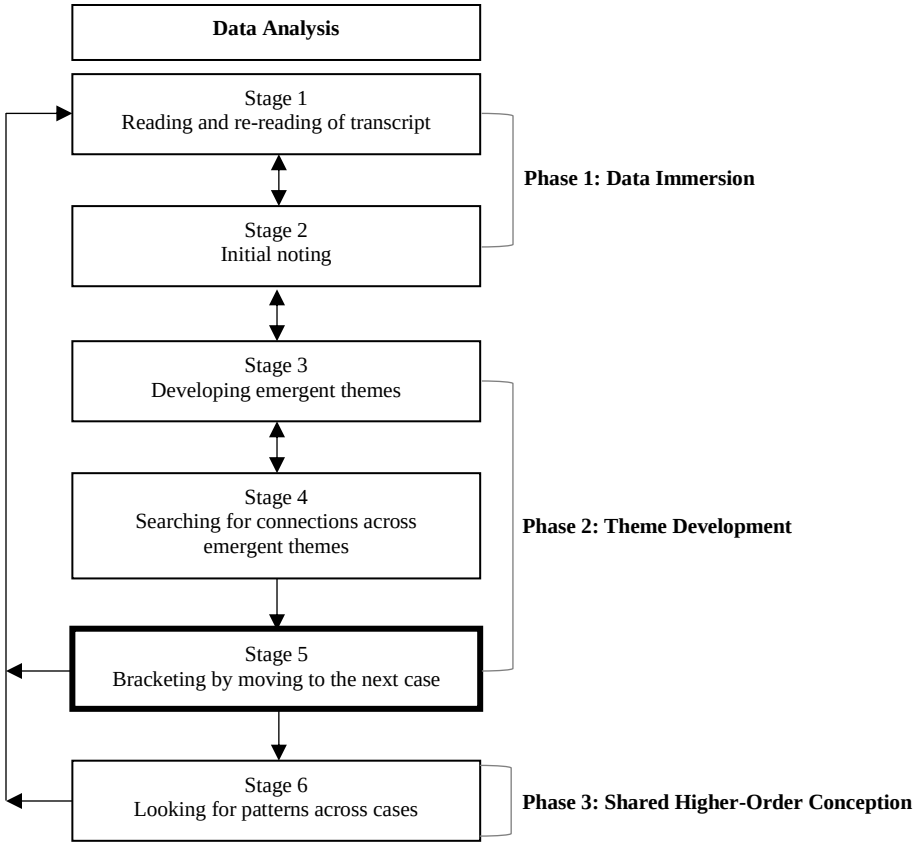


*Figure 2. Recast Data Analysis Strategy*

More specifically, phase two, encompassing stages three, four, and five, focuses on the thematic development process, which occurred inductively at an aggregate level. In *developing emergent themes*, sensemaking, or interpretation, entailed searching through the corpus of the coded textual data generating non-hierarchical codes and, successively, provisional themes. At the next juncture, the researcher began *searching for connections across emergent themes*, clustering and noting those most salient to the research questions. The right margin of the transcripts allowed the space necessary to

capture emergent themes and analytical notes, which were subsequently color-coded and loaded in Microsoft Excel.

Stage five constitutes the idiographic level of the interpretative phenomenological analysis and the researcher's commitment to understanding each participant's account of the lived experience. Preservation of individuality occurred by bracketing previous thematic details and, thereafter, *moving to the next case* repeating stages one through four until completion. The third phase, comprised of stage six, focused on the construction of shared higher-order conceptions, illustrated by *looking for patterns across cases* with consideration to convergences and divergences. Comparative analysis within and across cases deepened understanding of the lived phenomenon, accounting for both individual (part) and shared (whole) meanings.

As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), theme construction strategies included abstraction, polarization, numeration, and subsumption. Abstraction highlights similarities, while polarization emphasizes dissimilarities between emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). Key to abstraction, numeration refers to the frequency with which themes appear supported, legitimating qualitative keyness (Smith et al., 2009). The notion of *keyness* refers to the most prominent features of the qualitative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsumption facilitates the construction of sub-themes representative of the series of themes supporting a superordinate theme (Smith et al., 2009). All in all, the research purpose, questions, and objectives served as the filters for code generation and thematic development. The following section presents the results of the thematic data analysis supported by verbatim extracts from the participants' interview transcripts.

The transition from military service to civilian life remains an inevitable experience for individuals serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, requiring sufficient personal resources and the capacity to adjust and adapt. As ascertained from the participants' accounts, the transition affected multiple life domains, including employment, financial, education, relational, health, and well-being. For most, the military-to-civilian career transition influenced economic stability, human capital, social support networks, and environmental mastery. Whether a participant transitioned *well* or *less well* depended on their reservoir of psychological resources and capacity, or strength, to manage the situational demands.

## Theme 1 – Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting

*RO2. Explore the influence of psychological capital on women veterans' career transition.*

The superordinate theme Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting incorporates the subtheme Spiritual Resilience, as shown in Figure 3. Analyzing the lived experiences of the military-to-civilian career transition through the psychological capital lens elucidated *how* the women veterans negotiated the transition, satisfying research objective two. Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting embeds elements of hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism evident in the participants' coping styles (e.g., problem-focused and emotion-focused) and strategies during their military-to-civilian career transitions. Further, Spiritual Resilience reflects strength gained from spiritual resources drawn upon in the face of challenges and adversity, as evidenced in the cross-case analysis. Moreover, spirituality, which remains different from religiosity, is reflected as a protective coping resource that positively influences participants' well-being.

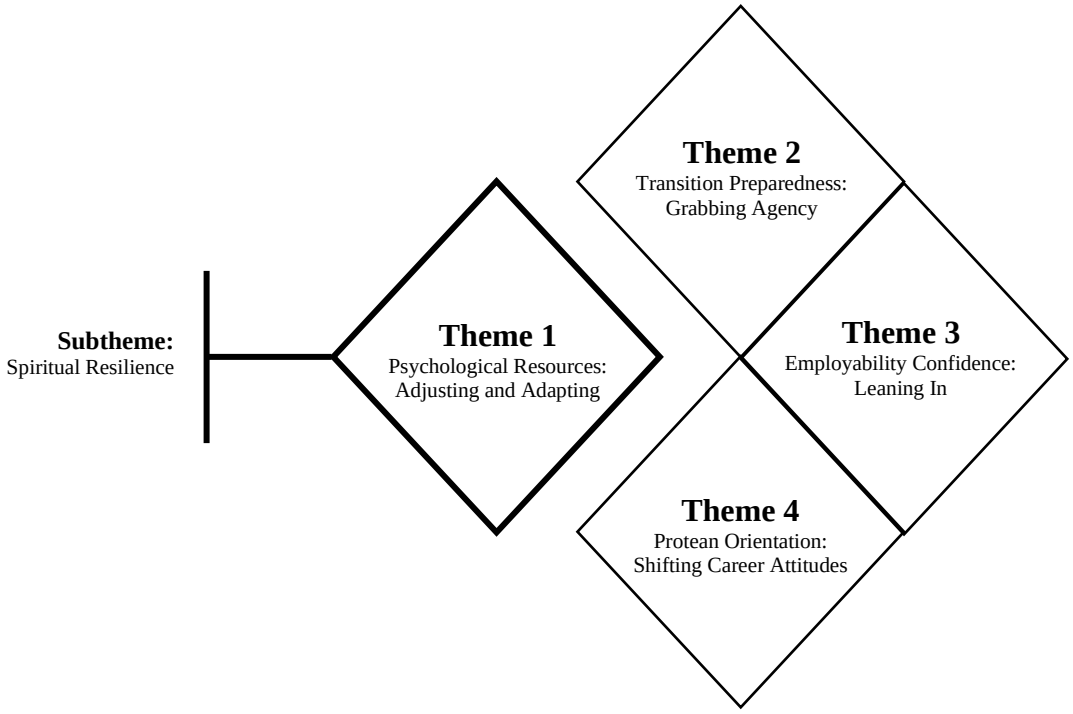


*Figure 3. Theme 1, Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting*

In most participants' cases, the data clustered cohesively around hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism—the constituent parts of the psychological capital construct. However, several cases exemplified the whole of the construct. What follows are two exemplars drawn from divergent evidence of psychological capital, as illustrated in the cases of Gabriella and Victoria.

> Detailing her military-to-civilian career transition experience, Gabriella stated:
>
> I actually got medically discharged. My last year, like I said, due to the isolation and the disconnection that I felt really started to have an effect on me mentally in a negative way—a very negative way—that caused me to have a lot of mental health struggles.

She continued, "I was really, really depressed. I just cried all the time. I wasn't doing anything. I had no social life. I didn't have any friends, really." Recounting the

experience, Gabriella added, “But once I knew that I was getting out [of the military], I just started taking control of my own life.”

When asked: What were your career plans prior to leaving the military? Gabriella replied, “I decided I wanted to be a stenographer and that I wanted to go into court reporting.” The participant worked in information management while in the military—a completely different career field. She further commented, “With this career field, my confidence in attaining and maintaining employment is almost through the roof because there’s such an intense shortage.” The participant experienced financial strain commonly associated with income loss. In response to a question about financial well-being, Gabriella stated, “Well, financially, it definitely took a hit. Because, you know, once I got, like, the last bit of money. I didn’t have any money for like two months.” The participant solved the immediate financial need through Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers, loans from family and friends, and the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance tuition and stipend. To this end, Gabriella aspired to become a stenographer—actively researching the career field while in the military. She sought and capitalized on non-paid internships, positioning herself for long-term career success as a courtroom stenographer.

Gabriella illustrated characteristics of the psychological capital construct: (a) established a new career pathway and career goals (hope); (b) exhibited confidence in knowledge, skills, abilities, and capability (efficacy); (c) held realistic reemployment expectations (optimism); and (d) withstood and bounced-back from setbacks from adverse military experiences and effectively navigated unemployment. The participant

employed both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping styles, illustrating positive adaptation in facing adversity.

In one divergent case, Victoria voluntarily separated from the U.S. Marine Corps after six years of service. Victoria recounted, “I remember on my last deployment, I was having a very bad time, and I essentially had a target on my back the whole time.” Detailing the particulars, she described an incident that derogatorily reflected her character as a woman and Marine. Victoria recalled being viewed as a “slutty ditz that never did any work because that's what everyone—the corporals and the sergeants—were kind of implying and perpetuating.” She remembered “breaking down” and decided to separate from the military after that. Initially, she had planned to serve 20 years “up until that deployment” and further remarked, “after that moment, I was like done.” When asked: How did you handle the stress? Victoria responded, “I didn't handle it very well. I got very, very quiet during that time. I didn't talk to anyone.”

The participant described “avoiding” others for the remainder of the deployment. Victoria added, “When I got home, I was still very withdrawn, and I didn't really have anywhere to turn because I was home. And that's great, but I didn't have anyone.” In response to a question about her social support system, the participant stated, “I don't really have a support system, and I’m not close with my own family.” She subsequently recognized her spouse as an integral source of support. When inquired about post-military career plans, she recalled that “when I got out, I really had no clue what I wanted to do,” and, after five years, she added, “And I still don’t.” Victoria’s initial attempts at securing employment were unsuccessful, and she described feeling diffident. Victoria conveyed, “I wasn't actually going out and trying to do anything, like, having a goal and

going out to achieve it. I was just kind of letting life happen." The participant eventually sought professional psychological support and secured, as described, a low-demand job. When asked about the most difficult aspect of the transition, Victoria reflected:

> Just fighting with your own self—like your mental health. Because you don't feel like you deserve better or like you can do better. Yet, you logically know I have all these skills, and I can do all these things, but it doesn't actually, emotionally, feel like you can do it, and you don't want to put yourself out there.

This exemplar is indicative of low psychological capital evident in insufficient capacity to manage situational demands, which rendered the participant vulnerable to cumulative stressors and stress. The participant demonstrated emotion-focused coping as seen with avoidance, withdrawal, and languishing, reflective of limited bounce-back (resilience). The lack of goal-setting efforts (hope), confidence (efficacy), and future-oriented expectations (optimism) are indicative of lower psychological capital. The following section highlights a positive social strength common among many participants—spiritual resilience.

Spiritual resilience, a prominent social strength featured strongly across the data, actuated as a pathway to hope, optimism, and resilience. Of the 14 accounts, 57% ($n$ = 8) of the participants modeled evidence of spiritual resilience as a coping mechanism to overcome challenges and adversities. For example, reflecting on her involuntary separation, stage-four cancer diagnosis, and divorce, Brei said, "That was only the grace of God." She further reiterated, "My son, my relationship with God, and my faith honestly was what carried me through this whole process." What follows are other extracts of participants describing the role of spirituality.

- I am a firm believer. My faith is very grounded in God, and I center my priorities. Health, family, and my faith—all other things work around these things…. My outlook is much more different than a lot of people that I know. And I thank God for that. I thank Him for that. I don't know how else to explain it. (Meredith)
- Like, I would never not put in for something. Like, a lot of people look at jobs and say, 'Oh, I'm not qualified for that. I'm not going to put in for that.' For me, I'll put in for it and let them tell me that I'm not qualified. Well, let them tell me no because you never know what God has for you. My faith is the number one thing. God got me to where I am. (Kennedy)
- For my entire adult life, all I knew was the military, and that was the only job—because it is a job—that I had. So, just being ready, trying to be ready for whatever life outside of the military was going to be like. For me, I do, you know, believe in God. So, I just kind of talked to God about my transition. Because it is internal, it's a mindset. (Myla)

Lastly, Nicole's experience reflected dense evidence of spiritual resilience. During her military-to-civilian career transition, Nicole's sister, who remained in remission for about 15 years, died from breast cancer. Determined to be present and available, Nicole decided to "turn down" several job opportunities spending the last three months of her sister's life with her. Nicole reflected, "I count it all joy with God—because I put everything in God's hands—and I realize that He had a lot to do with me not getting the job right away." In most cases, spirituality contributed to the women veterans' resilience in the face of stress and adversity. Many derived what characterizes a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction in life.

The preceding section presented results related to the positive psychological disposition. In this study, the analytical distinction between objective and subjective employability shifted research attention to *personal strengths*. Based on the different accounts, psychological capital influenced the participants' transition preparedness and employability perceptions, as described in the following two sections.

## Theme 2 – Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency

*RO3. Explore the influence of perceived employability on women veterans' career transition.*

*RO4. Explore women veterans' perceptions of career transition.*

*RO5. Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.*

The superordinate theme Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency incorporates two subthemes: Self-sponsorship and Employability Support, as illustrated in Figure 4, satisfying research objectives three, four, and five. Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency refers to the participant's readiness to enter and thrive in the civilian workforce. From an intrapersonal viewpoint, Self-sponsorship refers to *self-understanding*, *self-care, and self-support* relative to the participants' well-being. From an interpersonal perspective, Employability Support describes *help-seeking* behaviors enabling employability (i.e., access to informational, educational, and financial resources). All the women veterans remained vulnerable to stressors and transition-related stress, owing to the seismic shift in career cultures—e.g., stability, financial security, structure, and meritocracy. A cross-case analysis revealed that most participants *struggled*, to varying degrees, with the military-to-civilian career transition.

In direct response to an inquiry about the journey from military service to civilian life, 64% ($n = 9$) of the participants offered a relatively unified string of descriptors: “not very easy,” “traumatic,” “nerve-wracking,” “hectic,” “culture shock,” “big change,” “tumultuous,” “hard,” “very fast,” “scary,” “stressful,” “lost myself,” “felt lost,” and “struggle.” In contrast, few others reported somewhat different impressions of their experiences. In one example, Camilla described the military-to-civilian career transition as “pretty easy,” further commenting, “I didn't encounter any huge issues.” Gabriella stated, “I don’t think it was that rocky…for me, per se.”

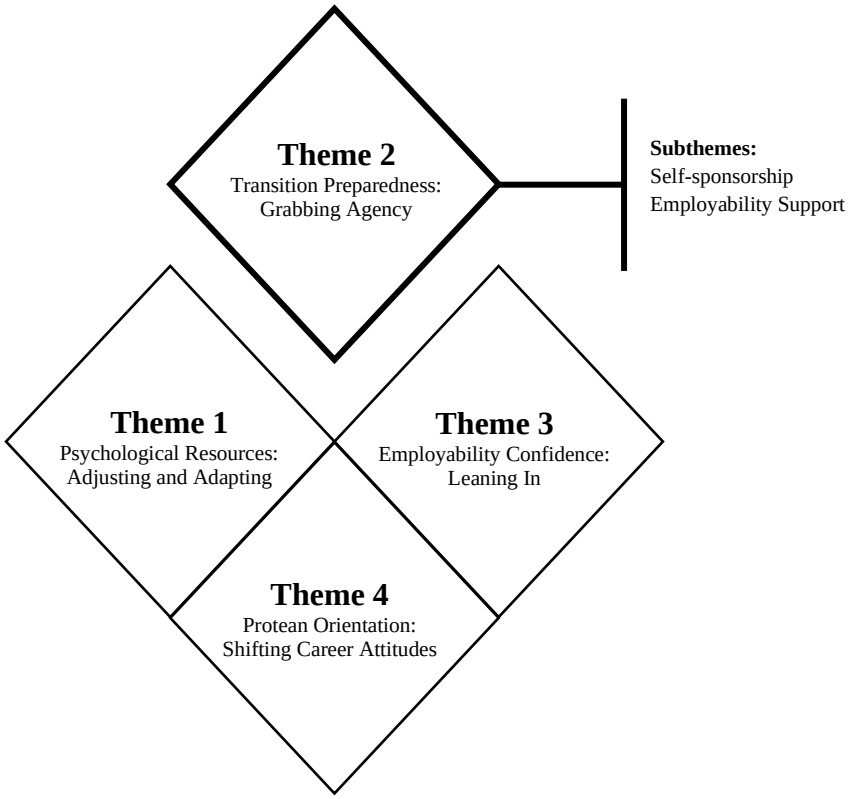


*Figure 4. Theme 2, Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency*

In synthesizing the data, the participants’ transition preparedness manifested into three categories: prepared, underprepared, and unprepared. One (7%) participant felt prepared, eight (57%) felt underprepared, and five (36%) felt unprepared. Table 11,

*Transition Preparedness Responses by Participants*, depicts the category (column one), participants' pseudonyms (column two), and corroborating extracts (column three).

Table 11

*Transition Preparedness Responses by Participants*

| Category | Pseudonym | Participants Responses | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Prepared | | | 1 |
| | Gabriella | "I started looking at career fields months before I knew I was getting out." | |
| Underprepared | | | 8 |
| | Athena | "I think the fact is that I wasn't prepared as well as I thought." | |
| | Andra | "Being more prepared would have calmed some of the anxieties." | |
| | Camilla | "At my age, if I wasn't prepared, I wasn't going to be prepared by a 5-day class." | |
| | Dina | "I wasn't very prepared." | |
| | Kennedy | "I don't think that they prepared us enough." | |
| | Morgan | "Because I got out abruptly, I wasn't as prepared as I thought." | |
| | Myla | "Maybe I'm not as prepared as I thought." | |
| | Nicole | "I don't know if I really prepared myself enough." | |
| Unprepared | | | 5 |
| | Brei | "I honestly did not know where to start." | |
| | Brenda | "I didn't prepare at all." | |
| | Dana | "I don't think there's any way to prepare." | |
| | Meredith | "Which led to me, at the end, thinking, Really? You really aren't prepared." | |
| | Victoria | "When I got out, I really had no clue what I wanted to do." | |

*Note*: N = 14

Reportedly, most participants felt constrained primarily by unmet informational needs, time, adverse military-related career events, poor organizational support, mission requirements, and self-imposition. However, multiple cases illustrated the participants'

openness to undergo career change events. *Space* and *time* influenced the participants' level of preparedness, as evidenced in the continual appraisal of life and economic situations. In effect, data remained constant around the notion of self-directedness, which manifested as an integral aspect of transition preparedness and, subsequently, employability and employment. Analogously, the participants' help-seeking orientation, thematized as self-sponsorship, proved essential to their employability and personal well-being. When asked about maintaining well-being, Morgan uttered, "Self-care."

*Self-sponsorship*

The subtheme Self-sponsorship describes data clustered around self-care attitudes and behaviors. Meredith described how she struggled with the transition, capturing a collective sentiment about the psychological transition, when she articulated:

> They [transition assistance program representatives] did not speak about the emotional and mental aspects of the transition. None of that I learned in there about how you're going to feel, you know, within the first month or so, two months, three months out. You know, what kind of things might you be looking at if you think you need help? You know, maybe you need some mental health therapies. Or, you know, maybe you need a support system that we already know is in your local area and that we're going to give to you, you know, to call some people and let them know that you just retired and you're looking for assistance. You know, none of that!

Relative to transition adjustment and adaptation, participants were asked: How long did it take you to adjust and adapt to civilian life? In response, eight (57%) participants recalled feeling *well-adjusted* and *well-adapted* following the military-to-civilian career

transition. In contrast, six (43%) reported feeling *less well-adjusted* and *less well-adapted*. Participants' accounts included comments such as "depression," "anxiety," "lost myself," "feel like an outsider," "you don't feel you belong," "lost my sense of identity," and "lost my worth." Data revealed that 79% ($n$ = 11) of participants sought professional psychological support or ministerial counseling in attending to their well-being.

Cumulatively, income loss proved stressful, mainly for those with less than 10 years of service. Several participants leveraged the Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers and/or the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance tuition and stipend to bridge financial gaps. Victoria described the financial strain as "stress-inducing." Gabriella explained:

> The financial hit started to affect me psychologically because it wasn't me doing badly psychologically. I was very happy to be out. But the finances had an effect on me, psychologically, if that makes sense. So, that was what started to make me depressed because I didn't have any money. I just leaned on friends or family, you know, asked them to borrow money if they could do it. I just asked them to help me out, and, um, just, you know, knew that it was going to change once I started school.

Kennedy stated:

> Oh, I was stressed, constantly asking myself if I did the right thing. I didn't get a job right away. And unemployment was only for 26 weeks. Even though I was in school, when I got a little bit of money from my GI Bill, it was enough to cover my rent. But it wasn't enough to cover everything. So, I was stressed that first year that I got out.

Seeking financial support not only assisted with stabilizing the participants' economic position but also enabled the preservation of psychological resources by decreasing their financial stress. The remaining 79% (*n* = 11) of the participants perceived themselves as financially prepared for the military-to-civilian career transition tempered by the prevalence of military retirement incomes.

Not lost in the data was the range of social roles, including employee (*n* = 11), entrepreneur (*n* = 3), student (*n* = 3), spouse (*n* = 8), parent (*n* = 9), and caregiver (*n* = 3). Table 12, *Influencing Social Roles by Type*, indicates the influencing social roles noted in the data (column one) and numeration (column two). The data pointed to the interplay between participants' work-life and family-life domains and time-to-employment.

Table 12

*Influencing Social Roles by Type*

| Role Type | *n* |
|---|---|
| Employee | 11 |
| Entrepreneur | 3 |
| Student | 3 |
| Spouse | 8 |
| Parent | 9 |
| Caregiver | 3 |

*Note*: N = 14

The following extracts conveyed expressions related to domestic responsibilities. Camilla, a spouse caregiver, remarked, "And just because I was retired didn't mean that was going to change, right? I still needed family members to help and assist me." Dana commented:

> My family life was kind of hard because you come back from Afghanistan. I came back to my apartment, and it was just my husband, and it was a mess. It was just a mess. I kind of broke down. It was just kind of hard adjusting to, you know, real life—having to pay rent, buy gas, cook for yourself, clean for yourself, and just be a wife—when you come back.

Almost none of the participants secured employment in advance of their military separation date—except the few who pursued entrepreneurship. Some participants prioritized domestic responsibilities, which influenced the length of time-to-employment. Notwithstanding, from a professional standpoint, the women veterans spoke less about gendered roles and more about positioning themselves for meaningful employment. Many eventually entered the labor market but not without challenges.

*Employability Support*

Employability support encompassed the various sources of support (formal or informal) leveraged to strengthen the participants' employability. More specifically, institutional support consisted of the military transition assistance program and exited organizations, whereas financial support included unemployment, tuition, and personal loans. Close textual analysis revealed that, in most cases, there existed not a lack of *agency* to traverse the military-to-civilian divide but instead access to more objective and relevant interventional support. A critical component of employability, social support networks included informational support and emotional support—i.e., peers, friends, family, and, for some, religious institutions.

In general, institutional support plays an essential role in veterans' economic integration by way of the military's transition assistance program. Participants described

their experiences with the military-instituted transition assistance program in direct response to the question: How did the military's transition assistance program facilitate or hinder your career development? As a result, participants' responses clustered around valences of helpfulness codified as *helpful, less helpful*, or *ambivalent* with implications for the program's quality, variability, and relevance. Accordingly, Table 13, *Helpfulness of Transition Assistance Program by Participants Responses,* reflects the participants' responses (column one) and the number of participants (column two). Of the 14 participants, four (29%) viewed the program as helpful (to some extent), eight (57%) described the program as less helpful, and two (14%) expressed ambivalence.

Table 13

*Helpfulness of Transition Assistance Program by Responses*

| Participants Responses | *n* |
|---|---|
| Helpful | 4 |
| Less Helpful | 8 |
| Ambivalent | 2 |

The succeeding list of verbatim extracts are examples of participants' descriptions of their experience relative to the program. For clarity, the participants often referred to the transition assistance program by the acronym TAPS.

- There was a portion of TAPS where you have to figure out which avenue you're taking. So, are you taking the avenue of being a full-time student? Are you taking the avenue of being employed? Are you taking the avenue of being employed in your career field that held while you were in the military? Are you taking the avenue of being employed in a completely different career field, which makes you

a career switcher? So, it helped identify which path you're taking and to figure out the steps that you need to take to get into that path. That was very, very beneficial, very helpful. (Gabriella)

- So, actually, they gave me a lot of information because they actually sent me to, what was it called, Boots to Business by the SBA [Small Business Administration]. So, that really helped. (Morgan)
- I would say it helped some more so than hindered. It kind of tried to give us some ideas on how to wear civilian clothes and help us adjust to civilian life. They did touch on every little thing about how to word your resume and how to translate from the military to the civilian sector. I think we set up mock interviews. It gave us resources and gave us some websites to go through. (Andra)

The balance of the participants viewed the program as less helpful and, in many ways, deficient. What follows are select examples of participants describing their experience with the transition assistance program:

- It was a lot of paperwork. It was a lot of research this, research that. It was a lot of information thrown at me versus like a guiding type of thing, which makes you more nervous. I will say, my school offered a lot of opportunities. They had groups and communities for veterans. (Myla)
- I don't feel like they helped at all. You went through that one class. They taught you how to write a resume. Well, I wouldn't say they taught you how to write a resume. They told you things that will be included in a resume. We're not necessarily taught how to write a resume. It wasn't like they had, like, job fairs where they had people to come out to you talk about. It was nothing like that. It

was just like one week of sitting in a classroom. But it didn't prepare you for real life. (Kennedy)

- Oh, yeah. TAPS was a joke. TAPS did not help me, not one bit. It was a waste of time for me. It was a waste of my time, effort, and energy. I actually did it online because it was during the pandemic, and, you know, no one can really go in person. So, they had us online. And I had my personal phone. I had the work phone. So, people were still reaching out to me for help, you know. How can I do anything, right? 'You're gone out of the office, we need your help,' kind of thing. I lived on base, so, there was easy access to me. But the information that they were sharing wasn't applicable to what I wanted to do. (Meredith)

A few participants cited poor organizational or chain-of-command support as a barrier. Absent, more so, was career development support. Issues with skills transferability and translation emerged as common across many of the participants' accounts, pointing to the need for career development support. For example, two participants offered their thoughts:

- I think the number one most important thing that they don't teach you or give you a lot of background on is resume writing. How to transition your military skills over to the civilian world? Because nobody cared that I was a staff sergeant in the Air Force. That didn't mean anything to anybody, or nobody cared that I cooked for 400 airmen every day. That didn't mean anything. So, how do I transition those skills into the civilian world? (Kennedy)
- I was more than just a med tech, you know. You put a med tech on the outside, it means one thing—you're going to just be in a hospital in this area. But unless I

have my certifications, I can't put down a nurse or nurse assistant, although we've done that work. We have that training. We have those skill sets. So, that's the part I struggled with. (Andra)

One common refrain captured in the data is the variously phrased "nobody cares what you did in the military." What follows is a list of extracts representative of the sense of realistic optimism, as evidenced in the data.

- Nobody cares who you were. Nobody cares what you did. (Andra)
- So, one of the first things that they told me is nobody cares if you're a Chief or not. They don't even know what a Chief is, alright? So, don't go around telling people, 'Hey, I'm Chief, whatever whatnot.' They don't care, okay? (Meredith)
- And then you get out of the military, and nobody really cares. Nobody really cares that you're in the military or how long you're in the military, or what you did in the military. So, that was kind of like a culture shock. I wasn't really expecting that when I got out, so it's been a struggle and a lifestyle change, for me, going from military to civilian work. Well, lifestyle change, mainly, due to the amount that I'm able to get paid. I think they value you more in the military. So, I was making a lot more in the military compared to what I'm making now. And nobody really cares about the skills from my military aspect or my education skills. So, I'm often offered jobs that aren't really paying that well, and I've been through quite a few jobs. (Dana)

In addition to institutional and financial support, social support networks emerged as a key source of employability support. The women veterans' strong reliance on social support networks satisfied informational, career development, and emotional needs. What

follows are extracts describing how the women veterans generated pathways to strengthen their employability.

- I made some connections networking with people that I knew before, some people who had already been out of the military, some people who had just recently done their transition. So, I piggybacked on a lot of them, as well, to try to help me gain a little bit more insight on the way in the door. (Brei)
- Lots of research, right, just researching all those areas, and then, you know, going back and speaking with those who've done it before me. (Camilla)
- I don't really have a support system, and I'm not close with my own family. So, all I had was just my husband, and that is a lot of pressure to put on someone. He had his own personal and mental health issues. So, I was just, kind of like, doing my best to just keep it together by myself. (Victoria)

Uncertainty prevailed as an affliction manifesting as transition-related stress for most participants. However, obstacles evolved into opportunities as most participants generated alternative pathways to negotiate the military-to-civilian career transition.

### Theme 3 – Employability Confidence: Leaning In

*RO3. Explore the influence of perceived employability on women veterans' career transition.*

*RO4. Explore women veterans' perceptions of career transition.*

*RO5. Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.*

The superordinate theme Employability Confidence: Leaning In considers participants' understanding of their employability and confidence in their employability

skills. The theme captures codes associated with the participants' career-related attitudes and behaviors—e.g., goal-setting, career planning, self-directedness, and proactiveness. As shown in Figure 5, the superordinate theme embeds two subthemes: Human Capital Acquisition and Situational Context. The Human Capital Acquisition subtheme captured the participants' work-related experiences, including volunteerism, education, and industry-acquired training. Differently, the Situational Context subtheme codified salient aspects of the participants' career transition experience—a storytelling approach. Overlappingly, theme three satisfies research objectives three, four, and five.

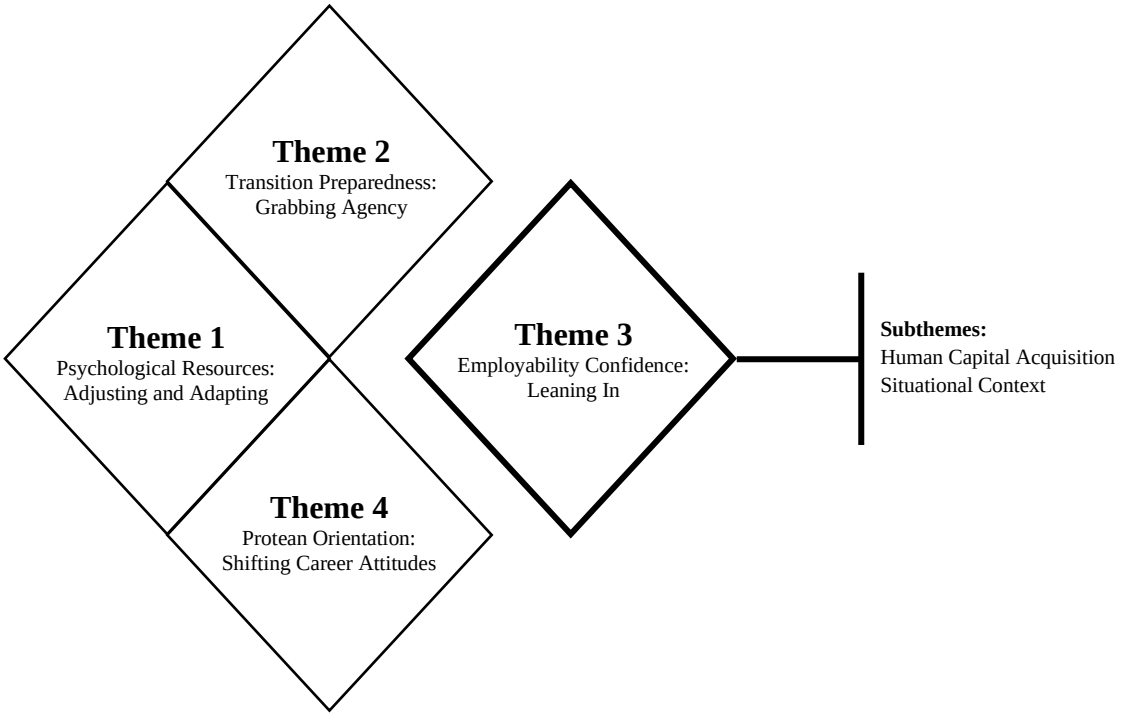


*Figure 5. Theme 3, Employability Confidence: Leaning In*

Most participants valued their military experience and held positive perceptions of employability, which proved advantageous to their employment outcomes. Of the total, 71% (n = 10) of the participants described *feeling confident* in their abilities to acquire

and maintain employment commensurate with their experience, skills, training, and education. What follows are representative examples of the participants' responses.

- With this career field, my confidence in attaining and maintaining employment is almost through the roof because there's such an intense shortage. And the society, the world, not even just the U.S., you know, the entire globe needs stenographers. So, I'm entering a career field that needs us. (Gabriella)
- I don't know if I was very lucky, or maybe it was my skills or my ability to actually conduct interviews. But I had several offers and opportunities. And, so, I didn't have an issue finding employment. I'll be honest, there's so much out there. (Camilla)
- Oh, I was confident. I knew I could do it. It just was going to take me some time to do it. But I knew I could do it. I wouldn't have gotten out if I didn't know I could do it. (Kennedy)
- You know, you're an entrepreneur. You have to put the work in. You're by yourself here, so, you got to do the work. And so that's when I realized this was doable. This is something that I can do and still be able to maintain my lifestyle. (Nicole)

In contrast, few others described feeling less confident in finding and maintaining commensurate employment, as noted in the examples below.

- What I did in the military isn't like an exact line-up, but it's very close to being like an information security analyst. (Myla)

- A lot of IT [information technology] depends on being able to prove that you actually have certification and, like, the knowledge to do things. I didn't have any of that. (Victoria)
- I wasn’t. Not comparable to what I was used to. I was just anxious to find something because the income would change, and I knew that. So, I wanted to find something. But to find that niche, to find what I was used to, it was just kind of, for me, pulling at straws, just trying to grab onto something to hold on to—something for the consistency for the time being—until I can get to where I'm supposed to be. But sometimes I feel like I've never really got back there. (Andra)
- When I first got out, I was not confident at all. I wasn't confident at all, and so some of the jobs that I applied for were below my skill level. (Brenda)

*Human Capital Acquisition*

While most participants retired from the military, none were at the Social Security full retirement age, which remains common among veterans. As such, most women veterans anticipated reemployment for financial reasons or personal fulfillment. Of the participants, 100% ($n$ = 14) transitioned directly into unemployment and, upon exiting, 50% ($n$ = 7) of the participants enrolled in higher education. Moreover, 21% ($n$ = 3) of the participants opted for entrepreneurship in pursuit of self-concordant goals. Those classified as entrepreneurs served 30 years of time-in-service. As with military-acquired experience, skills, and training, education was instrumental in the participants’ subjective employability.

Correspondingly, the women veterans perceived education and career-specific training as a career investment. As indicated previously, the cohort of women veterans

was well-educated—93% (*n* = 13) held academic degrees and at least 7% (*n* = 1) with some college credits. The following exemplars illustrate participants' adaptive responses to career development through the lens of self-career management.

- What I did in the military isn't like an exact line-up, but it's very close to being like an information security analyst. And so, I went to school for computer science with a minor in cybersecurity so that I can kind of like make it fit and make my AFSC [Air Force Specialty Code] fit within that. (Myla)
- So, I had gone back to school to use my GI Bill. Instead of going for my master's, I decided to go for a second bachelor's because I love history and I thought about teaching. (Nicole)
- So, I knew when I was retiring that I wanted to do something in project management or something program management—in that aspect…I just wasn't checking all the boxes to secure that path, like PMP [Project Management Professional]. (Brei)

Gabriella, who held an undergraduate degree, enrolled in a stenography licensing program and secured unpaid stenographer internships to gain practical career experience. She explained, "If I don't have a license, it doesn't matter what degree I have, I can't work." She further remarked, "So, I am almost done now." Before separation, Gabriella aspired to become a courtroom reporter. Similarly, Morgan spoke about self-employment in the tax services industry. She said to strengthen skill and education alignment, "I got my accounting degree since I've been out."

*Situational Context*

Situational context appreciates the heterogenous and idiosyncratic nature of the women veterans' lived experiences. The theme presents important context elucidated in the data using a multifocal analysis, highlighting similarities and differences among the participants' accounts. Multifocal variables included the onset of the transition, the source for the transition decision, and the type of employment setting. These variables connect the women veterans' stories meaningfully, distilling the phenomenological essence of their lived experiences.

Table 14, *Situation Report by Transition Onset, Decision Source, and Setting*, organizes by the type of transition onset (column one), participants' pseudonyms (column two), decision source (column three), and employment setting (column four). Furthermore, the transition onset column indicates whether the career transition occurred gradually or suddenly. The transition decision source reflects who—whether personal (voluntary) or institutionally-directed (involuntary)—precipitated the participant's decision to leave the military.

Aggregately, 71% ($n$ = 10) of the participants' military-to-civilian career transition occurred gradually and 29% ($n$ = 4) occurred suddenly. Further, 79% ($n$ = 11) of the participants left the military of their own volition. In contrast, 21% ($n$ = 3) of the participants departed the military due to institution-directed decisions. As for employment setting type, 57% ($n$ = 8) of the participants acquired employment in the public sector, with the majority reporting employment with the U. S. Department of Defense as civil servants or military contractors. Furthermore, 21% of the participants reported employment in the private sector, and 21% reported self-employment. Utmost

importance lies in understanding the women veterans' perception of the lived military-to-civilian transition experiences.

Table 14

*Situation Report by Transition Onset, Decision Source, and Setting*

| Transition Onset | Pseudonym | Decision Source (Separation or Retirement) | Employment Setting | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gradual | | | | 10 |
| | Andra | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Public-Sector | |
| | Athena | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Entrepreneurial | |
| | Dana | Personal Decision Voluntary Separation | Public-Sector | |
| | Dina | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Public-Sector | |
| | Camilla | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Public-Sector | |
| | Kennedy | Personal Decision Voluntary Separation | Public-Sector | |
| | Meredith | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Entrepreneurial | |
| | Myla | Personal Decision Voluntary Separation | Private-Sector | |
| | Nicole | Personal Decision Voluntary Retirement | Entrepreneurial | |
| | Victoria | Personal Decision Voluntary Separation | Private-Sector | |
| Sudden | | | | 4 |
| | Brei | Institutional Decision Involuntary Medical Retirement | Public-Sector | |
| | Brenda | Personal Decision Voluntary Early Retirement | Public-Sector | |
| | Gabriella | Institutional Decision Involuntary Medical Retirement | Private-Sector | |
| | Morgan | Institutional Decision Involuntary Medical Retirement | Public-Sector | |

The type of transition (onset and decision source) influenced the transition, with four of the 14 participants describing the abruptness of the career change event. Two participants offered insight into their experiences as follows:

- It was very fast. I have a little bit of a different experience, I think, than most in my transition process. I wasn't allowed to have any terminal leave, so I separated. I did outprocessing on 30 October, and my last day in the military was 31 October, and I became a civilian on the first of November. So, fast, I guess, is the best way to say it. I feel like I'm at a loss for words. (Brenda)
- I actually got medically retired. I went through a full medical board and a couple of administrative medical boards and was found fit for duty a couple of times. And then, at the end, they said, 'Nope, she's not fit for duty.' So, I still carried on with mission operations. Then, I got that notification in October of 2013 that I was getting medically retired. So, I had less than 90 days, if 90, to get out. (Morgan)

Differently, Gabriella stated:

> What you described as a transition—that mental transition—I was going through that process, which is really challenging. But I was going through that process while I was still in the military—like on my way out. So, by the time I was already out, I was ready to take on civilian life full force per se.

Across the participants' accounts, the employment setting types offered meaningful cross-cultural and career orientation insights. Comparatively, participants who remained in the public sector, especially the military setting, experienced greater environmental continuity, as described:

- In the area that I work in, we're retired senior NCOs [noncommissioned officers]. We know each other. We cover each other. (Andra)
- I didn't really have a difficult time transitioning because I felt like there was nothing different. I work with a lot of retirees, so the culture is the same. (Brei)
- Because I actually was a civilian. I worked in the government before I even went into the military. Okay, so, I kind of had to just kind of revert back to, you know, how things were then prior to the 18 years of military time. (Morgan)

The following section focuses on the relationship between the concepts operationalized in this study, as evidenced by the participants' preferential career orientation.

### Theme 4 – Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes

*RO5. Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.*

The superordinate theme Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes encompasses one subtheme titled Personal Value, depicted in Figure 6, satisfying research objective five. Hall (1976) describes the protean career, which includes work, education, and training, as a self-managed as opposed to an organization-managed process. As employed in this study, protean orientation characterizes the participants' career self-directedness in alignment with personal fulfillment. Data elucidating the protean orientation clustered around codes associated with personal adaptability and self-awareness derived from reflective and introspective responses related to the *self*. Further, the Personal Values subtheme captures commonalities associated with deeply entrenched military values in the context of career decisions which, in some cases, points to altruistic behaviors. Taken together, codes associated with protean-oriented career attitudes

clustered around self-directedness, self-awareness, employment outcomes, and personal values.

Of the 14 participants, 43% (*n* = 6) remained in equivalent career fields, 36% (*n* = 5) entered different career fields, and 21% (*n* = 3) opted for entrepreneurship with most capitalizing on educational opportunities. The employment setting remains important relative to the degree of environmental continuity and mastery.

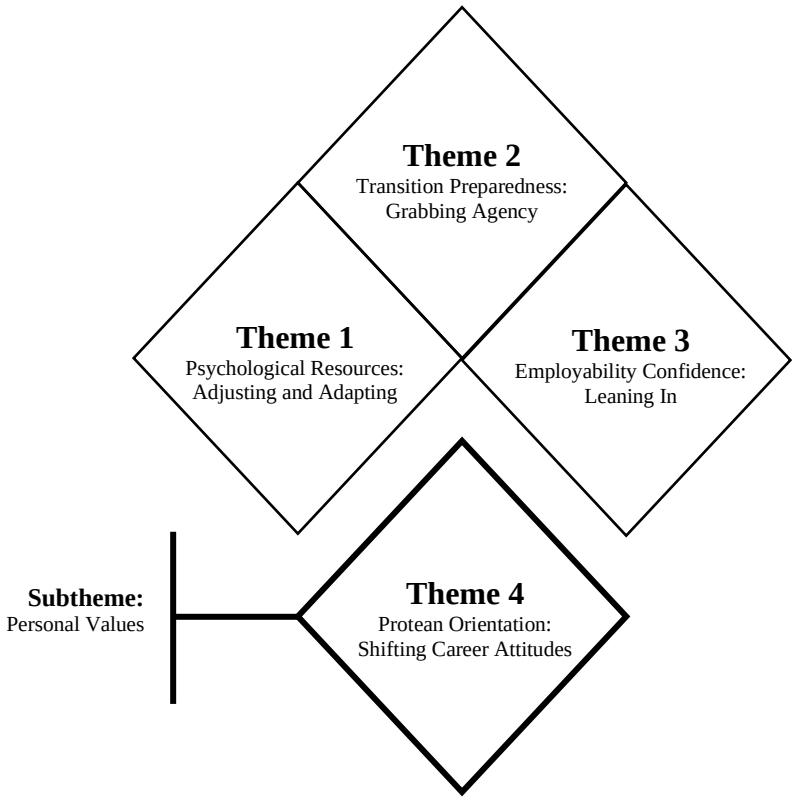


*Figure 6. Theme 4, Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes*

Regarding adaptability, as mentioned previously, eight (57%) of the 14 participants described feeling well-adjusted and well-adapted, whereas six (43%) described feeling less well-adjusted and less well-adapted. No distinctions existed among demographic characteristic categories (e.g., age, pay grade, or marital status) as the sense

of adjustment varied by the participants' situational context. What follows are extracts from the interview question: How long did it take you to adjust and adapt to civilian life?

- Immediately after I, you know, retired, I changed my nails. I cut my hair. I changed my clothes in my closet. I got rid of the stuff that, you know, identified me like directly to the military. And I said, 'It's a new beginning. It's a new start.' (Meredith)
- Not long. It's different. But I know I'm this civilian, and I'm not that rank anymore. So, it's kind of hard to separate it. And I don't think, you know, if we would ever separate who we are—as far as the military and the civilian side. (Camilla)
- I haven't, honestly. I mean, yes, it took quite a while to be able to be comfortable within the civilian world, you know, getting a job, starting school, learning more about myself. Because that's something that you don't know. (Myla)
- Actually, it still seems like I'm always adjusting and always adapting. I did 26 years in the military, so I'm assuming it may take a good 26 years to adapt to the civilian world. But it's a different entity. (Andra)
- I'm not even sure if I've actually done that yet, and I've been retired for 7 years now—because it's, wait, 2022, I got out at the end of 2013—so, actually eight years I've been retired. (Brenda)

In terms of self-awareness, many of the participants' self-reflective views focused on identity awareness, as illustrated in the following extract.

- When you're a person in the military, you are a soldier, right? You're an airman. You're all of these things, but you don't really think of yourself as a person,

especially when you're a woman. Like, it's even harder, I think. And you make that transition, and now you're a whole civilian. Now, you have to find out who you really are. And I found that I am completely different from people who have never served in the military, and it's apparent. That's why I said I don't think I'll ever fully adapt unless I'm around other veterans. (Myla)

- I think that you need to decide what and which direction you want to go, but also why. I think we need to do what makes us happy. But I think, again, we need to find out who we are before we can even pursue those routes. So, again, I think finding out about your identity is most important. (Athena)
- For me, for a while, I lost myself. I lost my sense of identity. I lost my worth. Going through the military, I grew into confidence that I knew was there because I knew my job. I knew what I needed to do, and you got all your resources, you got your network, you got everything, and you got everybody. And once I got out, it's like I lost a purpose. Not a personal purpose because I knew I had to, you know, take care of my family—take care of my mom. But other than that, I didn't know who I was anymore. I wasn't, you know, sergeant anymore. I didn't know me. I didn't really have that worth about me. I mean, some of it that's on my own self. I have to build that. (Andra)
- I would rather be fat and happy, like I am now, than, like, skinny, hungover, and miserable, which is what I distinctly remember as the before times. Because I was always drinking. I was always looking for some sort of connection with anyone around me—whether it was a friendship or, like, romantic or anything…But I still

have a very disordered relationship with food. But now I'm notably a lot happier and a lot more content with everything. (Victoria)

- I feel like it's [military service] an interesting part of my life, but it's not my entire life. I don't feel like that's all I am. (Dina)
- I think we do a lot of masking while serving. And then when you don't have all the walls, it's kind of like those [the masks] are gone. You, kind of, see yourself. (Camilla)
- But you need to start preparing yourself that you are now a civilian and that it is okay for you to have that chapter. But you need to stand on your own and have your own identity and get back to that. (Meredith)

Cognitive and cultural dissonance was common among the participants' accounts, which many described as "different." However, data revealed that adaptability rested less on the participants' willingness or ability to do so and more so on personal values. For some, subordinating personal values in the career development process seemed non-negotiable.

The centrality of personal values emerged prominently across the participants' accounts. More pointedly, data pointed to participants' value systems influencing employment decisions. One participant captured the essence of this sentiment when she emphasized, "So, what I will say is to adapt to the civilian norm would mean for me to compromise who I am." The statement implicates the military's value-shaping environment.

Similarly, Andra described the civilian sector as "different" and explained, "It didn't seem the camaraderie was there." She subsequently stated, "In my first job outside [the military], I lasted a good nine months, and I had to quit. And I never, never thought

I'd quit a job, ever." The work-related challenges involved a perceived lack of integrity, professional standards, and personal accountability. Andra stated, "So, yeah, it was difficult. That's my one outside-of-the-military sector job. In my head, I was like, I need to get back to the military sector. This is not working for me, and I tried."

Many participants opted for employment aligned with personal values and interests. The following extracts illustrate how participants described their career dispositions.

- I wanted to work for myself. I didn't want to work for anyone else. My plans have always been when I retired from the navy that I would have my own business. I had quite a few businesses in mind. (Morgan)
- And I was like well, maybe I'll find something part-time and start real estate slowly. And then I landed here. And now that we're thinking about this one-year plan to move to Florida, it's in my mind again, you know, maybe get a real estate license. (Dina)
- I thought I was going to get into like a federal or GS or, you know, some sort of military-connected community or organization. However, okay, I quickly found, I think within the first couple of weeks after I retired, that that wasn't for me. Like, 30 years of service in the military, I pretty much know how that goes. I pretty much know, and I decided that that's not what I want to do for the rest of my life. Like, I love the military for what it has done for me and our family. But it's all I know, and I wanted to expand my horizons. I want to see if I could be as successful as I was in the military in my civilian-sector life on my own terms, not on anyone else's time. (Meredith)

- Some of the establishments that I worked at were, I can say, very basic wages, and it's because of the work that I did. I just wanted to be of service. (Athena)
- I knew that I had picked up many skills, and I can easily convert them into, you know, what the civilian sector was looking for. Like, I feel very confident if I put in a resume for to some of these, you know, CEO or leadership positions that I would probably be at least looked at. But, again, will I be happy? My happiness is more important to me right now. Money is not a motivator. I've got a retirement. (Meredith)

The preceding sections represent the researcher's interpretation of the participants' sensemaking of their lived military-to-civilian career transition experiences as corroborated by verbatim extracts from interview transcripts. Four superordinate themes and six subthemes emerged from the data analysis, which, in turn, underwent data source triangulation to validate the results, as described in the next section.

*Data Triangulation*

Triangulation enables a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, increasing confidence in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to thick descriptions, member checking, and reflexivity, triangulation, as operationalized in this study, enhanced the trustworthiness of the research results. More specifically, the triangulation frame includes data derived from an in-depth analysis of the study's interview transcripts supplemented with an analysis of two related artifacts. Namely, the Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program (PSTAP) Assessment Cross-Sectional Survey Report and the U.S. Department of Defense Transition Assistance

Program (TAP) Curriculum provided comprehensive and diverse views of the understudied phenomenon.

Based on cross-analysis, triangulation revealed significant convergence between the illustrated themes and data sources, corroborating the research results. Table 15, *Triangulated Data Sources and Level of Coverage*, depicts theme coverage by two data sources—PSTAP Survey and TAP Curriculum. More specifically, column one lists the superordinate themes and associated subtheme(s). Columns two and three reflect the PSTAP Survey and level of coverage, respectively. Similarly, columns four and five reflect the TAP Curriculum followed by the level of coverage. The level of coverage reflects the researcher's judgment based on the relevance and depth of the data associated with each theme.

Table 15

*Triangulated Data Sources and Level of Coverage*

| Superordinate and Subthemes | PSTAP Survey | Level of Coverage | TAP Curriculum | Level of Coverage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Psychological Resources: | | | | |
| Adjusting and Adapting | X | L | X | H |
| Spiritual Resilience | X | | X | M |
| Transition Preparedness: | | | | |
| Grabbing Agency | X | H | X | H |
| Self-Sponsorship | X | H | X | H |
| Employability Support | X | H | X | H |
| Employability Confidence: | | | | |
| Leaning In | X | L | X | H |
| Human Capital Acquisition | X | H | X | H |
| Situational Context | X | L | X | L |
| Protean Orientation: | | | | |
| Shifting Career Attitudes | X | L | X | H |
| Personal Values | X | L | X | M |

Note: The theme coverage is indicated with an X. The level of theme coverage is reflected as either low (L), medium (M), or high (H). A blank cell indicates negligible or no coverage.

Results from the content analysis revealed that the PSTAP Survey focused mainly on “mental health issues,” “mental health screenings,” and “mental health access,” and less on psychological resources, as interpreted in this study’s data. Notwithstanding, statements such as “seeking mental health support” and “seeking treatment for a mental health or emotional condition” related to the theme Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency and subtheme Self-sponsorship. As another example, data cross-analysis showed that the PSTAP Survey included “Spirituality/Religion” as one of nine variables measuring personal life satisfaction and well-being under the life domain. Evidence revealed that across the three cohorts, an average of 55% felt satisfied with the spiritual or religious aspects of their lives. However, that study’s qualitative input section lacked textural data relative to its “spirituality/religion” variable, which reflects a blank cell in Table 15. However, more robust evidence existed on elements of human capital (e.g., “military skills,” “training,” “knowledge,” and “experience”) and employability support (e.g., “information and resources,” “lacked support,” and “sufficient support”).

Content analysis of the TAP Curriculum revealed more optimal theme coverage. In one example, the following string of text supported the Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting theme: “resiliency in transition, “resiliency skills,” “being realistic,” “turning challenges into opportunities,” and “learning from adversity.” In yet another example, text clustered around the *sense of agency*, *self-regulation*, *self-awareness*, *self-reflection*, and *self-purpose* validated the Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency and Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes themes and Spiritual Resilience subtheme. Similarly, text related to transition stress mitigation (e.g., “ask for help/accept help” and “set goals and move toward theme”) substantiated the Self-

sponsorship subtheme. Furthermore, the preponderance of the TAP Curriculum focused on employment support (i.e., employment workshop, vocational exploration, education requirements, and business ownership) and career-readiness standards. Essentially, the curriculum supported the superordinate themes Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency and Employability Confidence: Leaning In and the subtheme Employability Support. All in all, the multi-source data triangulation process strengthened the study's credibility.

## Summary

Chapter IV describes the data analysis processes leveraged to report the study's results. Research objective one describes the demographic characteristics of 14 women veteran participants. Semi-structured interviews yielded thick descriptions to address research objectives two through five, enabling interpretation of the participants' lived military-to-civilian career transition experiences. Subsequently, the results, including verbatim data extract, address research objectives two through five. The chapter reported four superordinate themes and six embedded subthemes distilling the essence of the participants' experiences. The chapter concludes with the research objectives and themes correlation matrix. Next, Chapter V presents the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

# CHAPTER V – CONCLUSIONS

This interpretative phenomenology study explored women veterans' experiences of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon. This research focuses on the subjective transition rather than the objective career change event, emphasizing psychological strengths and resources. Chapters I through IV provide the introduction, including background, context, theoretical framework; literature review; methodology; and data analysis and results. Chapter V contains a synopsis of the study, presents a summary of the results, and, correspondingly, provides a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The balance of the chapter comprises future research recommendations, research limitations, and a chapter summary. This research study concludes with supporting references and appendices.

## Summary of the Study

The study's twofold purpose explores (1) the lived experiences of women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition and (2) the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on the military-to-civilian career transition. The study's theoretical positioning supports the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Innovation's (2017) assertion that the military-to-civilian transition remains a psychological and cultural transition at its core. *How* transitioning servicemembers and veterans negotiate the transition from a *familiar context* (collectivistic military institution) to an *unfamiliar context* (individualistic civilian institution) remains underexplored. Relative to the veteran research subject, the extant literature on women veterans mainly focuses on the adverse effects of military service regarding the physical, psychological,

and psychosocial aspects (Eichler, 2017; Exec. Order No. 13822, 2018; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Reppert et al., 2014).

Thus, the study foregrounds the perspectives of women veterans of the military-to-civilian career transitions to understand their lived experiences and distill the phenomenon's essence. The following research objectives guided the exploration, scoped the focus of the study, and framed the data analysis:

*RO1* – Describe study participants' characteristics to include race and/or ethnicity, age, marital status, employment status, education level, military branch, rank, years of military service, and disability status.

*RO2* – Explore the influence of psychological capital on women veterans' career transition.

*RO3* – Explore the influence of perceived employability on women veterans' career transition.

*RO4* – Explore women veterans' perceptions of career transition.

*RO5* – Explore the relationship between psychological capital, perceived employability, and participants' career transition.

The semi-structured interview functioned as the principal means for data collection, which occurred via the Zoom video communication platform. Fourteen participants voluntarily participated in the study, sharing lived experiences of the understudied phenomenon. Further, the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the women veterans' experiential meaning served as the praxis for interpretation. The subsequent section presents the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

## Summary of the Results

Descriptive analysis of the demographic characteristics collected on the 14 women veteran participants satisfied research objective one. The preponderance of participants was African American, or Black, married, employed full-time, college-educated, and served in the U.S. Air Force with an average of 18.6 years of military service. Grounding theories include career transition theory, positive psychological capital theory, perceived employability construct, and human capital theory. In context, the study particularizes the *subjective* dimension of the military-to-civilian career transition and, thus, focuses on personal resources and psychological strengths relative to adjustment and adaptation.

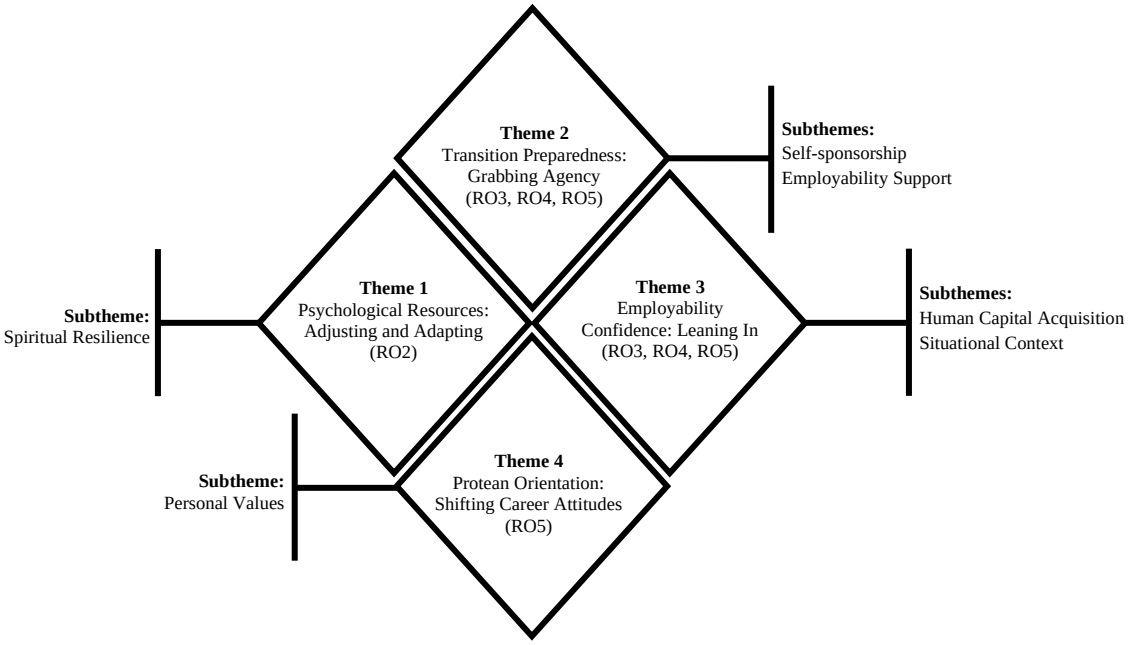


*Figure 7. Composite of Superordinate Themes and Subthemes*

Thematic data analysis yielded four superordinate themes and six associated subthemes related to associated research objectives (RO), as displayed in Figure 7. Relative to triangulation, content analysis of data sources (interview transcripts, an extant

survey report, and a program curriculum) facilitated the validation of the research results. Theme 1, *Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting* and subtheme Spiritual Resilience satisfied research objective one. Theme 2, *Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency* and subthemes Self-sponsorship and Employability Support, fulfilled research objectives three, four, and five. Furthermore, Theme 3, *Employability Confidence: Leaning In* and subthemes Human Capital Acquisition and Situational Context, achieved research objectives three, four, and five. Furthermore, Theme 4, *Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes* and subtheme Personal Values, satisfied research objective five. The results embedded corroborative verbatim extracts into the analytical narrative to strengthen the interpreted narrative, enhancing the study's rigor and trustworthiness. The study advances three salient findings discussed in the next section, which presents the findings with corresponding conclusions and recommendations.

## Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### *Finding 1: Transition struggles are normative in the complex, multidimensional military-to-civilian career transition, pointing to the criticality of transition preparedness and coping competence.*

Reemployment emerged as the most proximal post-military goal for all the research participants, irrespective of their retirement statuses. However, nearly all the women veterans felt either underprepared or unprepared for the military-to-civilian career transition and reportedly *struggled.* As mandatory, all the participants engaged in the federal transition program, which over half described as less than helpful based on informational and career development needs. For some, the involuntariness of their military separations more adversely impacted transition preparedness, owing to low

perceived controllability. Furthermore, most of the women veteran cohort's employment history exclusively reflected the male-dense, totalistic military institution.

Not to be missed, the participants' shift from military service to civilian life influenced multiple life domains—employment, financial, education, relational, health, and well-being. The confluence of challenges experienced exposes the prevalence of transition stress. In terms of self-management, most participants sought professional psychological support and utilized various self-care strategies (i.e., exercising, traveling, and hobbies) to facilitate adjustment and adaptation to civilian life. Several eligible participants—specifically those with less military time-in-service—secured unemployment compensation mitigating financial strains. Notwithstanding, the data elucidated the women veterans' positive adaptational processes catalyzed by their *effort*, *agency*, and *psychological strength*.

*Conclusion:* The study supports Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory which postulates that the transition characteristics (i.e., role change, affect, onset, source, and cumulative stress), pre-transition and post-transition contexts (e.g., support systems and work settings), and individual characteristics (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, psychosocial competence, and value orientation) inform adjustment and adaptation. This study further reaffirms Schlossberg's (1981) view that *uncertainty* remains an intrinsic feature of transitions with the greatest potential to induce stress. Thus, the importance lies in the capacity to cope with complex challenges related to life-altering transitions—one replete with losses (i.e., income, structure, social network, camaraderie, a sense of purpose, and a sense of self). Relatedly, the liminal existence between the familiar and unfamiliar intensifies psychological demands (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Bridges, 2001; Haynie &

Sheppard, 2011; Rattray, 2016; Turner, 1987; Schlossberg, 1981; Willson, 2019). In line with this notion, Luthan et al. (2007) and Luthan and Broad (2022) highlight the beneficial effects of individuals building psychological capital efficacy and adaptive strategies necessary to cope with stress effectively.

In the current study, Finding 1 supports seminal works suggesting that high-magnitude environment differentials likely result in transition adjustment difficulties but remains dependent on one's perception of the transition (Ashforth, 2001; Bruce & Scott, 1994; Latack, 1984; Louis, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981). The study further corroborates that the career transition type (voluntary and involuntary) affects one's sense of controllability which, subsequently, informs the stress process (Ashforth, 2001; Bruce & Scott, 1994; Schlossberg, 1981). Relative to unemployment, empirical evidence shows that personal resources protect against its adverse effects, safeguarding well-being (Blake et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2009; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Career transitions, thus, require sufficient personal resources and the psychological capacity to cope with challenging situational demands (Baluku et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2008; Heppner, 1998). Moreover, this study aligns with Chen and Lim's (2012) research revealing that adaptive coping relates to individuals' perceived employability. All in all, Finding 1 highlights the criticality of transition preparedness and adaptive coping resources.

*Recommendation:* The literature shows that veterans' successful employment (re)integration depends on an effective transition from the military (Ainspan et al., 2018; DAV, 2018; Elnitsky et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, the struggle associated with the complex, multidimensional military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon remains a normative experience—unique only to transitioning servicemembers and veterans

(MITRE Corporation, 2019; Schafer et al., 2016). Consistently, research demonstrates that veterans often struggle with the varying aspects of the transition (Boyle et al., 2020; BPW Foundation, 2007; Castro et al., 2014, 2015; Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019; Kintzle et al., 2016; MITRE Corporation, 2019; OTED, 2020; Parker et al., 2019). Therefore, veterans should realize that the phenomenon's idiosyncratic nature and concomitant stressors can overtax their psychological capacities, affecting their ability to adjust and adapt to new contexts. As shown in the present study, *how* the women veteran participants entered the military-to-civilian career transition process affected their employability perceptions. For most, however, the transference of coping competencies, namely resilience, inculcated and enacted in the military buttressed against some adverse consequences of transition stress.

Relative to institutional support, the federal transition assistance program focuses predominantly on practical aspects of the military-to-civilian career transition (e.g., career readiness standards, military occupation crosswalk gap analysis, resume-writing, and interviewing preparations). Notwithstanding, several programmatic blind spots exist, pointing to the need to attend to both the objective and subjective dimensions of the military-to-civilian career transition. Congruently, recent lines of research underscore the strong prevalence of psychological stressors and transition stress among veterans (Burgess, 2018; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018; Veteran Affairs Center for Innovations, 2017). As elucidated in the present study, most participants describe the military transition assistance program as deficient and irrelevant, implicating unmet informational, social, psychological, and emotional needs. Uncertainty and losses (i.e., income, environmental mastery, social network, camaraderie, a sense of purpose, and a sense of self) were salient

features adversely affecting many participants' career transition experiences. In effect, Finding 1 coincides with recent empirical studies pointing to the psychological and emotional dimensions of the military-to-civilian transition (OTED, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Relative to participants in this study, the concern was not about the volume of resources available, given most were aware, but rather the availability of the *right* types of resources.

The military represents the quintessential volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, or commonly *VUCA*, environment and, consequently, requires and builds competent and resilient forces to effectively execute its missions and cope with constant change. Transference of coping competence inculcated in the military has substantial value and utility relative to transition assistance interventions, as illustrated across the participants' cases in this study. The design and integration of positive psychological interventions, including self-help models, focused on strengthening psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) may have great utility. In context, salience lies in the conservation of resources and mitigation of transition stress.

Feasibly, stakeholders could integrate coping-centric, non-stigma-oriented intervention into existing transition assistance programs, minimizing cost and time constraints. Multiple lines of research revealed that positive psychological resources influence performance and well-being (Berntson et al., 2006; Cole et al., 2009; Luthans et al., 2007; Peterson et al., 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In recent works, Luthans and Broad (2022) submit that psychological capital interventions are non-stigmatizing approaches to psychological well-being. Moreover, accessibility before,

during, and following the military-to-civilian career transition event remains integral as a transition is a process over space and time rather than a time-bounded event.

As noted in the present study, all participants transitioned from military service into unemployment. Most illustrated realistic optimism evidenced in cognitive flexibility about the role change (e.g., from military service to civilian employment) and self-awareness about identity renegotiation—the evolving sense of self. In addition to strengthening psychological well-being, most participants generated multiple pathways actively and proactively enhancing employability. As a recommendation, transitioning servicemembers and veterans should strive to fortify their psychological strengths—an underestimated dimension of the military-to-civilian career transition—and proactively seek support as necessary.

*Finding 2: Human capital acquisition and employability support bolster perceived employability and employability confidence.*

The study's participants assessed and understood the value of their human capital in the civilian labor market. Most participants viewed the military-to-civilian career transition as an opportunity to utilize military-acquired skills, training, education, and years of experience in civilian employment. Congruently, nearly three-fourths of the participants felt confident in their abilities to find and maintain commensurate employment. Over half were employed in the public sector—many in military settings. By contrast, about one-fourth of the participants felt less confident, some of whom were involuntarily separated. Skills translation and transferability challenges (including licensing and credentialing) rosed to the forefront of (re)employment experiences. Few participants struggled with presenting their human capital value in the labor market—a

crucial associatory employability factor. Half of the participants matriculated into higher education upon exiting the military, while others secured career field-specific training (i.e., internships, licenses, and certifications) to increase their employability.

Most participants, however, were active self-agents, as evident in information-seeking behaviors relative to job-searching, career planning, networking, and career development, as driven by volitional persistence. In contrast, a small number not only felt underprepared for the transition and viewed the transition assistance program as deficient but also exhibited lower psychological capacity and reemployment efficacy. To varying extents, employability support strengthened the women veterans' perceived employability. The employability support frame included institutional support, financial support (Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers and/or the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance), and social support networks (e.g., peers, friends, and family).

*Conclusion:* Human capital accumulation remains the foremost determinant of employability, as widely accepted (Becker, 1964, 1993; Berntson et al., 2006; Fugate et al., 2004). Finding 2 lends credence to the Human Capital Theory which posits that individuals can increase work capacity through education and training manifesting as human capital—the economization of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Becker, 1964, 1993). Correspondingly, the women veterans who acquired education and career field-specific training in high-demand careers to complement military-acquired skills and experiences viewed their possibilities of finding and retaining employment positively. Differently, data shows that skills transferability and translation challenges remain barriers to civilian employment for some veterans.

Finding 2 remains highly consistent with the psychological literature on employability in several ways. Firstly, the study reaffirms Vanhercke et al.'s (2014) research suggesting that employability-enhancement activities increased perceived employability. Congruent with this postulation, employability strategies included, for example, network building, resume-writing, mock interviewing, skills training, interning, and volunteering. Secondly, the study aligns with the standard view that social capital and personal resources relate to employability perceptions (Fugate et al., 2004; Peeters et al., 2017; Vanhercke et al., 2014). In this line, the data points to a more nuanced, multidimensional, and situated view of the social component of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon. Social support networks functioned as a critical conduit influencing the women veterans' career transition. Thirdly, the current study substantiates Vanhercke et al.'s (2014) definitional explanation positing that perceived employability inextricably links to competence (e.g., human capital, social capital, and expertise) and dispositions (e.g., proactive attitude). In the present study, job-skills mismatch and poor adjustment, rather than competence and disposition, act as primary barriers to economic integration—a well-researched challenge (Bahtic et al., 2020; Barrera & Carter, 2017; Boatwright & Roberts, 2019; BPW Foundation, 2007; Hardison et al., 2017; OTED, 2020; Parker et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Krigbaum et al.'s (2020) study on factors influencing military-to-civilian career transitions in the contemporary work environment reveals that military service length was a strong predictor of employability. In the current study, the time-in-service averaged 18.6 years. Most women veterans viewed time-in-service and expertise as an additive increasing human capital value and, thus, perceived their employability

positively. Conflictingly, Berntson et al. (2006), in their study on the predictors of perceived employability, posit that tenure did not significantly affect employability and, subsequently, offer that tenure does not necessarily equate to higher human capital. In line with this interpretation, as it relates to the present study, a small number of participants exhibited low human capital and, in turn, low perceived employability, owing, in part, to military occupation and career interest mismatches.

*Recommendations:* Generally, the U.S. Department of Defense invests substantially in developing and sustaining its human capital. Most military servicemembers turned veteran-civilians enter the national labor market with vast amounts of leadership, management, technical skills, and experience in executing the military's strategic, operational, and tactical missions. Skills transferability and translation problems persist as barriers to veterans' successful economic integration. Consequently, veterans should capitalize on available military skills-translation resources to effectively align skills, education, and training with job requirements to improve workforce readiness. In addition, many federal resources exist to improve job-skill alignment, including online credentialing programs designed to facilitate credential attainment, formal apprenticeship programs, and professional development programs such as SkillBridge. While certainly not an inclusive list, eligible servicemembers, especially those with hard-to-transfer skills, should advocate participation in these types of programs to solve transferability issues and bridge training gaps. Moreover, transition interventions focused on non-trade occupations require more programmatic attention.

From an economic integration perspective, strategic job-matching, competency-based interventions could enable effective and efficient human capital reallocation in

collaboration with workforce stakeholders. Exploiting the business value of the veteran human capital facilitates value realization in the civilian labor market. From a practical standpoint, human capital practitioners should acquire education and advisory support on veteran talent acquisition, development, and management to optimize organizational performance and human potential. Moreover, practitioners should exploit both skills- and competency-based approaches to recruitment. Notably, skills underutilization emerges as an essential factor associated with veteran-employee retention and often manifests as underemployment complicating successful economic reintegration and well-being (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Lampka & Kowaleski, 2017; Mahnken, 2020; Schafer et al., 2016). From an individual perspective, veterans should capitalize on the resource-rich support ecosystem to effectively articulate their value propositions to sufficiently navigate the VUCA-oriented civilian labor market. Importantly, the military-to-civilian career transition process remains highly self-regulatory—one requiring self-ownership.

*Finding 3*: *Adopting the protean career attitude is critical in effectively managing military-to-civilian career transitions and establishing value-based career pathways.*

The study's participants confronted a litany of challenges with the shift between the collectivistic (military) and individualistic (civilian) work environments—two highly dissonant systems. Many participants conveyed that the emotional tax inherent in the transition process affected their well-being, manifesting as transition stress, anxiety, and, to a lesser extent, depression. Reportedly, of the 14 participants, over half of the women veterans felt *well-adjusted* and *well-adapted,* whereas the balance felt *less well-adjusted* and *less well-adapted*. However, overall, the participants illustrated strong information-seeking proclivities spurred by their (re)appraisal of situational contexts and demands.

The plurality of the study's participants actively networked and acquired the resources necessary to advance career development. Notably, most leveraged their social support networks for informational and emotional support from veterans who experienced the military-to-civilian career transition and positioned themselves in the civilian labor market.

The more protean-oriented women veterans engaged in sense-making of their military experience and, decidedly, charted career pathways more aligned with personal values. Evidenced protean-related processes included self-directedness, awareness, and adaptability, as illustrated across all the findings. Regarding adaptability, the study's participants who felt *less well-adjust* and *less well-adapted* exhibited intercultural sensitivities. Nearly all the participants viewed the military culture as penetrative—one intricately tied to their self-identity. Some even voiced that full assimilation into the civilian culture would be at the expense of compromising themselves.

One pattern in the data points to the intertwinement of career decisions and social roles and how most women veterans achieved complementarity between work and life demands. Over half of the participants were married and mothers of preschool and school-age children, while fewer were caregivers. This data implicates the salience of social roles relative to work-life constraints. The three most common examples include (1) flexible employment (e.g., contract, part-time, or seasonal) to accommodate educational goals and other career pursuits; (2) self-employment in the achievement of work-life balance and self-fulfillment; and (3) life impact—remunerative (e.g., increased wages) and non-remunerative (e.g., well-being and others' welfare).

Those who underwent involuntary separation experienced salutary effects of the military-to-civilian career transition, such as improved psychological well-being, work-life balance, increased earnings, and greater job satisfaction. To varying degrees, all the participants fortified their social support networks by seeking critical emotional support from family, friends, and faith-based connections. Moreover, spiritual resilience, a positive social strength, played an integral role in over half of the participants' transition experience. Self-awareness and sensemaking appeared central to spiritual resilience.

*Conclusion*: The protean orientation emerged as another salient factor from the military-to-civilian career transition narratives influencing the women veterans' perceived employability. Stark differences exist between the *collectivistic* military and *individualistic* civilian cultures; thus, shifting career attitudes played a pivotal role in research participants' economic reintegration processes. The protean orientation reflected in the women veterans' value-based career decisions, implicating work-life balance, culture, and pursuit of professional development. Consistently, Finding 3 relates to the career literature, which underscores the advantages of the protean career attitude in the contemporary work environment (Hall, 2004; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Volmer & Spurk, 2011). The finding also supports Greer's (2020) research pointing to inhabited social roles in relation to transition stress.

Moreover, many participants illustrated spiritual resilience in facing challenges, enabling adjustment and adaptation. Based on their assessment of the U.S. Army Comprehensive Soldiers Fitness Program, Peterson et al. (2011) characterize spiritual fitness, or strength, as connectedness to sources of hope, meaning, and purpose—

religious or non-religious. In this view, Finding 3 illuminates spirituality as an effective coping mechanism and, thus, a pathway to hope, optimism, and resilience.

Linking constructs, Luthans et al. (2007) posit that building and capitalizing on embodied capitals—namely, human, social, and psychological—postures individuals to actualize their full potential. Consistent with Luthans et al.'s (2007) assertions, psychological strengths, positive employability perceptions, and social support proved beneficial in the veterans' management of their employability. In this context, the study aligns with extensive research underscoring the centrality of personal resources and social networks to employability (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2008; Heppner, 1998; Peeters et al., 2017).

*Recommendation*: The social aspect of the military-to-civilian career transition remains primarily unaccounted for in extant federal transition assistance interventions. Carter, Schafer, et al. (2017) argue that building social capital proves essential to post-service transition adjustment and adaptation in the civilian labor market. As such, thoughtful consideration should be given to a year-long one-on-one peer support intervention via government-corporate sponsorships as an initiative of the national veteran reintegration strategy. Particularly well-suited, the evidential peer support approach could effectively ease women veterans' social and economic into the civilian labor market—particularly those with executive-and professional-level experience. Sustained support could potentially stabilize the person-environment imbalances and facilitate meaningful first-employment opportunities. In the present study, about three-fourths of the participants possessed over 15 years of leadership and management skills, competencies, and capabilities cultivated in the military's VUCA environment.

Moreover, the participants relied on other veterans as credible messengers regarding the military-to-civilian career transition and civilian employment landscape. Therein lies significant opportunities to influence women veterans' long-term economic success further. The proposed peer support intervention should incorporate provisions of professionalized social support drawn from both homophilous and heterophilous resource groups. Using matching criteria, veterans would self-select into peer relationships with high-potential candidates in their career field of interest.

Moreover, data in the present study points to the women veterans' sense of identity and altruism. As such, the peer support approach would enable veterans to build resource-rich social networks building social capital and, in turn, becoming force multipliers. For accountability, stakeholders could monitor transition and employment outcomes over time to determine the peer support intervention's efficaciousness and refinement requirements. As with employment and education, the proposed peer support intervention could constructively bridge the military-civilian divide—generally the most significant reintegration barrier for veterans.

Findings 1 through 3 contribute to understanding how women veterans experience the military-to-civilian career transition and the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability. Correspondingly, a conclusion and recommendation accompany each finding, underscoring the study's significance and bridging essential knowledge gaps. Despite the importance of the findings, this study is not without limitations warranting consideration.

## Limitations

Limitations refer to circumstances outside the investigator's control that could influence research findings and conclusions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Four limitations in the current study include generalizability, researcher bias, sampling logic, and the global coronavirus disease pandemic. Foremost, this study's primary limitation centered on non-generalizability—an inherent feature of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the investigator's lived experience of the understudied phenomenon presented another limitation that could have had unintended consequences. Namely, researcher bias could manifest in the data collection and analysis processes as well as in the formulation of the findings and conclusion (Creswell, 2013, 2014). Preventively, the study embeds triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, thick descriptions, and an audit trail mitigating bias (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2009).

Further, another limitation entailed the study's non-probabilistic sampling methods—purposive (pre-defined group) and snowball (recruitment technique) sampling. The qualitative study explored the lived experiences of women veterans; therefore, nonprobability sampling functions as the most suitable sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Trochim, 2020). Women veterans characterize as an invisible and, thus, hard-to-reach social group (Holder, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017c, 2017d; VETS, 2015). Purposive and snowball sampling allowed deliberate identification and selection of individuals with information-rich experiences and recruitment to achieve data saturation and adequacy, as necessary (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Notably, the snowball sampling technique may have

influenced the diversity of the sample relative to racial, pay grade, and military branch characteristics. However, Smith et al. (2009) stated that "by making the groups as uniform as possible according to obvious social factors or other theoretical factors relevant to the study, one can then examine in detail psychological variability within the group" (p. 80). In the study, diverse data points enabled the identification and analysis of patterns of convergence and divergence—capturing qualitative richness. Finally, the global pandemic influenced the data collection process, limiting in-person contact. Leveraging digital technology (e.g., Internet, mobile phones, and social media) remains a widely acceptable alternative in qualitative research (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013, 2014). The study's results yield several recommendations for future research, as articulated in the next section.

## Future Research Recommendations

Future research may benefit from a mixed-methods investigation on women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences and the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability. This study qualitatively investigated women veterans' perspectives of the military-to-civilian career transitions phenomenon and the influence of psychological capital and employability perceptions. Future empirical research could examine the buffering effects of psychological capital and perceived employability as related to subjective well-being

Future research could also examine the objective and subjective dimensions of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon related to psychological capital, social capital, and cultural capital. The research becomes vital given the cognitive and cultural dissonance inherent in the transition from the totalistic military institution to civil society.

Examining the objective and subjective dimensions may help understand how *dissonance* affects veterans' adjustment and adaptation to civilian employment and how the embodied capitals shape economic integration experiences.

Subsequent research could consider an empirical examination of situational antecedents associated with veterans' post-military transition, employability perceptions, and employment outcomes. The present study's findings, reinforced by literature, highlighted the challenges associated with skills transferability and translation. In this line, future research may more effectively inform job-matching interventions, which, in turn, may positively influence person-job fit and job retention.

The steady growth in the women veteran population demands sustained research attention on post-military career development and employment outcomes. Another suggestion for future research recommendation pertains to underemployment challenges derived from the current study's research participants' interview data. A study of the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon examining the relationship between women veterans' career development and job satisfaction within both public- and private-sector employment could provide human resources practitioners and career counselors with various talent utilization and human capital management perspectives.

## Discussion

This study represents a paradigmatic shift from investigating the side effects of women veterans' military service to identifying women veterans' strengths. Giving voice to women veterans remained central in this interpretative phenomenological inquiry, from which both theoretical and practical implications emerged. The study shifts the focus to the individual level of analysis, emphasizing the salience of coping through the

lens of psychological capital and perceived employability. Theoretically, the study situates the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon in the mainstream career transition discourse. In addition, the findings may have practical implications for policies, programs, interventional practices, and, from an agentic perspective, servicewomen and women veterans themselves.

The military-to-civilian career change event *alone* is significant, particularly concerning perennial issues associated with skills transferability and translations, career development disruptions, unemployment, underemployment, and loss of social support structure. While an unprecedented veteran support ecosystem exists to mitigate economic strains, the obfuscated *psychological transition* remains underestimated as manifested in transition stress—a non-psychopathological response. In this study, exploring the women veterans' subjective transition conveyed the impact of transition stress, compounding their experiences. Participants who *transitioned well* or *transitioned less well* appeared contingent on the sufficiency of personal resources and psychological capacity.

In context, strong interdependencies exist between the military-to-civilian career transition's objective and subjective dimensions, requiring deliberate and sufficient interventional support. Leveraging an adjunctive, non-stigmatized psychological intervention applying the psychological capital construct could complement extant transition assistance programs more deliberately influencing the coping process. Positive psychological interventions could potentially be a key differentiator in veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences. Adopting more holistic approaches to veterans' reintegration processes based on data derived from the individual unit of analysis—women veterans—accords paramount importance.

Generally, as a collective, women veterans posture well as a premium human capital capability contributing to the nation's overall economic growth. Effective economic and social integration remains vital to facilitate aggregate value realization in the civilian labor market. Contrarily, unrealized veteran human capital limits return on investment—an avoidable economic waste in workforce systems starved for high-skilled, high-quality talent.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter V summarized the study's main points and presented the findings, conclusions, and recommendations, followed by an acknowledgment of limitations and suggestions for future research recommendations. The interpretative phenomenological study investigated the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon with a purposive homogenous sample of 14 women veterans. The inquiry further explored the influence of psychological capital and perceived employability on the women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition. One-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews generated data resulting in four superordinate themes and six subthemes.

The results distilled the essence of the women veterans' lived experiences organized into superordinate themes and subthemes: (a) *Psychological Resources: Adjusting and Adapting* and one subtheme Spiritual Resilience; (b) *Transition Preparedness: Grabbing Agency* and two subthemes Self-sponsorship and Employability Support; (c) *Employability Confidence: Leaning In* and two subthemes Human Capital Acquisition and Situational Context; and (d) *Protean Orientation: Shifting Career Attitudes* and one subtheme Personal Values. Subsequently, the chapter presented three of the most salient research findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

The first finding established that transition struggles are normative in the complex, multidimensional military-to-civilian career transition, pointing to the criticality of transition preparedness and coping competence. The second finding reaffirmed that human capital acquisition and employability support bolster perceived employability and employability confidence. Furthermore, the third finding concluded that adopting the protean career attitude is critical in effectively managing military-to-civilian career transitions, establishing value-based career pathways, and traversing the military-civilian divide. The military-to-civilian career transition points to a complex nexus of economic, psychological, psychosocial, and cultural challenges. Criticality, thus, lies in the veterans' successful reintegration into civilian life.

How effectively individuals traversing the military-civilian divide cope with transition-related challenges and adversities remain particularly important. As noted in this study, *transition* characterizes as an adaptive response to the military-to-civilian career change event, which transpires over space and time. The women veteran participants' post-military career transition experiences may inform reintegration- and gender-related policies, programs, practices, and service delivery. Given the complex nature of the military and the high prevalence of transition stress, the subjective dimension of the military-to-civilian career transition warrants increased attention. As such, the researcher desires the study's results, findings, and implications attract the interest of the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Veterans Affairs, and other stakeholders at the federal, regional, state, local, grassroots, and individual levels.

# APPENDIX A – Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Office *of*
Research Integrity

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

118 COLLEGE DRIVE #5116 • HATTIESBURG, MS | 601.266.6756 | WWW.USM.EDU/ORI

**NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION**

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

| | |
|---|---|
| PROTOCOL NUMBER: | 22-483 |
| PROJECT TITLE: | Psychological Capital and Perceived Employability: Exploring Women Veterans' Military-to-Civilian Career Transition and Employment Outcomes |
| SCHOOL/PROGRAM | School of Leadership |
| RESEARCHERS: | PI: Tundra Gatewood<br>Investigators: Gatewood, Tundra T.~Annulis, Heather~ |
| IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: | Approved |
| CATEGORY: | Exempt Category |
| APPROVAL STARTING: | 11-May-2022 |

Donald Sacco Jr.

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX B – Oral Presentation Consent Form

ORI | Office of Research Integrity

Institution Review Board

**Oral Presentation of Research Procedures**

**ORAL PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

**Today's Date**:

**PROJECT INFORMATION**

**Project Title**: Psychological Capital and Perceived Employability: Exploring Women Veterans' Military-to-Civilian Career Transition and Employment Outcomes

**Principal Investigator**: Tundra T. Gatewood **Phone**: (501) 952-9984 **Email**: tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

**College/School**: College of Business and Economic Development, School of Leadership

**Program**: Human Capital Development Program

**ORAL PRESENTATION PROCEDURES**

**1. Purpose**: The research explores women veterans' perceptions of their military-to-civilian career transition and employment to inform veteran-related policies, programming, and support, potentially bridging service-delivery gaps for this unique cohort.

**2. Description of Study**: Your decision to participate in this research study is entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Participation entails a synchronous, semi-structured interview using Zoom—this Internet medium. The interview requires 45-60 minutes. I will provide you with any new information emerging during the research process that may be relevant to your willingness to continue participating. To be eligible, you must be (1) age 18 years or older; (2) a Post-9/11 service-era woman veteran; and (3) served minimally 12 months in the active U.S. military. Once you complete the interview and verify the transcript, you will receive a $20 Visa or Amazon electronic gift card, based on your preference, as an incentive for participation. Be advised that this incentive will not be extended should you withdraw from the study. If interested, you will receive a report of the approved study results, which may be published in academic journals and books and presented in live or written forms.

**3. Benefits**: Although there may be no direct benefit for you, the participant, the research results may potentially impact future women veterans' career transition success. Veteran-facing employment service providers may potentially benefit from gaining deeper insight into women veterans' differentiated transition needs to inform organizational policies, programs, practices, and service delivery.

**4. Risks**: There are no known or foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study beyond routine life discomforts and inconveniences. Should you experience any sensitivities resulting from the interview, you will be granted time to attend to yourself and provided the contact information for confidential veteran support.

**- CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE –**

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**5. Confidentiality**: Information provided during this interview will be kept confidential and secure. Any information that could potentially identify you as a participant will not be divulged, published, or otherwise made known to the public. The research incorporates pseudonyms in lieu of real names in all textual and digital files, reports, articles, and presentations.

**6. Alternative Procedures**: There are no alternative procedures that may be advantageous to you as the participant. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

**7. Participant's Assurance**: This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997.

Direct any questions about the research to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided in the project information section above.

**ORAL PRESENTATION**
**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Consent is hereby given to participate in this research project. All research procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose were explained. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. Participation in the project is entirely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect my willingness to continue participation in the project.

Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above. This project and consent procedures have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5116, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997, irb@usm.edu.

Do you agree to participate in this research study? Yes ____ No ____

Are you 18 years or older? Yes ____ No ____

Audio-recording captures what you say as accurately as possible while allowing me to engage with you during the interview actively. Do you agree to audio-recording? Yes ____ No ____

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| **Printed Name (Pseudonym) of Person Granting Consent & Authorization** | **Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization** | **Date** |

## APPENDIX C – Department of Veterans Affairs Resources

Vet Center Call Center (Readjustment Counseling): (877) 927-8387 [24/7 Availability]

Veteran Affairs Benefits Administration: (888) 442-4551

Veterans Affairs Homeless Programs: (877) 424-3838

Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services: (877) 222-8387

Veterans Crisis Line: (800) 273-8255, Press 1 or Text 838255 [24/7 Availability]

Women Veterans Call Center: (855) 829-6636

APPENDIX D – Research Site Approval Confirmation

---------- Forwarded message ---------
**From: T G <ttgatewood@gmail.com>**
**Date: Fri, Oct 15, 2021, 7:04 PM**
**Subject: Re: [Request] Research Study Sponsor**
**To: Kate Watson <kate@yournexstage.org>**

Kate, thank you so much. I look forward to the opportunity. Be well!

On Fri, Oct 15, 2021, 1:00 PM Kate Watson <kate@yournexstage.org> wrote:

Tundra,

YourNexStage would be happy to support your research. We will be officially launching our national "sandbox" model in January on Meritorious.us. We will be including a "pocket" that is specifically dedicated to doctoral candidates' research into women veterans. In addition to hosting a link to support your research, we invite you to join us in the development of this national platform supporting women veterans and women veteran serving organizations. Please let me know what we can do to be further supportive!

Best wishes,
Kate Watson

Sent from my iPhone

**On Oct 13, 2021, at 5:26 PM, T G <ttgatewood@gmail.com> wrote:**

Hello Kate,

Thanks again for agreeing to support my research project. For my proposal defense, the university accepts an informal agreement from research sites. If you would, please respond to this email as it will suffice.

Respectfully,

Tundra Gatewood

**--------- Forwarded message ---------**
**From: T G <ttgatewood@gmail.com>**
**Date: Thu, Oct 7, 2021, 11:06 PM**
**Subject: [Personal Request] Research Study Sponsor**
**To: Kate Watson <kate@yournexstage.org>**

Hello Kate,

I hope you're doing well. I am solidifying the way forward on my dissertation research project, and want to know if you are still willing to lend support. The purpose of the study is to explore women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experience and employment outcomes qualitatively. As an ask, I need your assistance with soliciting approximately 8 women veterans to participate in a study. Much like the University of Alabama project managers, I will provide the research recruitment correspondence for advertisement (e.g., distribution lists, social media, professional networks). Basically, I need an agreement from you to use your site to access my target population. Informally, please let me know if you can support this request through YNS or otherwise by responding to this email. I will submit a formal request later.

Respectfully,

Tundra Gatewood

APPENDIX E – Recruitment Flyer



# AMERICAN WOMEN VETERANS

*We are not invisible*

## ARE YOU A WOMAN WHO SERVED? IF SO, WE WANT YOU!

We are seeking volunteers to participate in a research study exploring women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition experiences.

**To be eligible to participate, you must:**

- Be a Post-9/11 service-era woman veteran;
- Have served in any branch of the active U.S. Armed Services for a minimum of 12 months; and
- Be 18 years old or older.

**Participation in the study involves:**

- A virtual interview using the Zoom video communication platform.
- A time commitment of approximately 45-60 minutes.
- A $20 Visa or Amazon e-Gift Card, based on preference, as an incentive for completing the study.

**If you are interested in participating or want more information, please contact Tundra Gatewood by phone or text at (501) 952-9984 or email at tundra.gatewood@usm.edu. Thank you for your consideration!**

The Institutional Review Board of The University of Southern Mississippi reviewed and approved (IRB-22-483) this project, ensuring research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Direct any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant to the Chair of the IRB at (601) 266-5997 or irb@usm.edu. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

# APPENDIX F – Introductory Recruitment Email

Dear Participant,

First, thank you for your military service. I am Tundra Gatewood, a U.S. Air Force veteran and doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am conducting a study to explore women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition. I am seeking Post-9/11 service-era women veterans with over 12 months of active military service as participants for the research project. Prospective participants must be over 18 years old to engage in this research.

You are being asked to participate in this study because *your voice* is important to gain in-depth insight into women veterans' transition from the military to the civilian labor force. Participation in the study involves a synchronous, semi-structured interview conducted virtually using the Zoom video communication platform. The interview session averages approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded, as permitted, with the opportunity to verify its content for accuracy and submit changes as necessary.

Your decision to participate in this project is entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw from the research project at any time. The information collected will be held in the strictest confidence. There are no known or foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study beyond routine life discomforts and inconveniences.

Your participation may prove beneficial to stakeholders providing military transition assistance and career counseling programs and services at the federal, state, and local levels. Once you complete the interview and verify the transcript, you will be given an electronic $20 Visa or Amazon gift card (as preferred). Additionally, if interested, you will receive a report of the approved study results, which may be published in academic journals and books and presented in live or written forms.

If you are interested in participating in this research project or have any questions, please contact the undersigned. Thank you for your consideration.

Kindest Regards,

Tundra Gatewood, Doctoral Candidate
The University of Southern Mississippi
Phone: (501) 952-9984, Email: tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

*The Institutional Review Board of The University of Southern Mississippi reviewed and approved (IRB-22-483) this project, ensuring research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Direct any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant to the Chair of the IRB at (601) 266-5997 or irb@usm.edu. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.*

APPENDIX G – Interview Confirmation and Reminder Notification

Hello _____

I appreciate your willingness to share your military-to-civilian career transition experience. As a reminder, your participation remains entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. As mutually agreed, the interview will be held via [medium] on [date] at [time and zone]. You can reasonably expect the session to last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The interview will be audio-recorded, as permitted, with the opportunity for you to verify the verbatim transcript for accuracy and submit any revisions as necessary.

- Verification of your interview transcript will be due no later than [date].

- You will receive an electronic $20 Visa or Amazon gift card (as preferred) via email within five business days after completing the transcript verification process.

Please confirm the interview appointment by either replying to this email or contacting me by phone, call, or text at (501) 952-9984 by [date]. Again, thank you for your willingness to participate and for your time. I look forward to the interview!

Kindest Regards,

Tundra Gatewood
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Southern Mississippi
Phone: (501) 952-9984
Email: tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

*The Institutional Review Board of The University of Southern Mississippi reviewed and approved (IRB-22-483) this project, ensuring research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Direct any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant to the Chair of the IRB at (601) 266-5997 or irb@usm.edu. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.*

APPENDIX H – Member-Checking Request Email

Dear _____

Thank you again for providing an interview for the research study—exploring women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition. Per our previous conversation, I have attached the verbatim transcript generated after our interview session.

I ask you to carefully review the transcript to ensure an accurate portrayal of *your* voice and a description of *your* experience. If the information presented seems unclear, lacking, or inaccurate, you are welcome to clarify your thoughts and provide *general* feedback deemed relevant to the research topic. Please forward your response and your gift card preference via email no later than [date] 2022.

I will forward you an electronic $20 Visa or Amazon gift card via email within five business days after completing the transcript verification process. If I do not receive a response, I will assume your agreement with the information as-is. Again, thank you for supporting this research project and future women veterans.

Kindest Regards,

Tundra Gatewood
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Southern Mississippi
Phone: (501) 952-9984
Email: tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

*The Institutional Review Board of The University of Southern Mississippi reviewed and approved (IRB-22-483) this project, ensuring research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Direct any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant to the Chair of the IRB at (601) 266-5997 or irb@usm.edu. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.*

APPENDIX I – Thank-You Email

Dear _____

Thank you for your participation in the research study—exploring women veterans' military-to-civilian career transition. As an incentive for your time and effort, I offer you a $20 gift card accessible online through the link provided in this correspondence.

Your participation helps to amplify women veterans' voices in the national conversation on the military-to-civilian career transition phenomenon. Hopefully, the study results will benefit stakeholders providing military transition assistance and career counseling programs and services to women veterans at the federal, state, and local levels.

The below-listed resources are available to you as a veteran should you require assistance. I wish you well in your career and life endeavors. Thank you for the privilege of your time and service to our country!

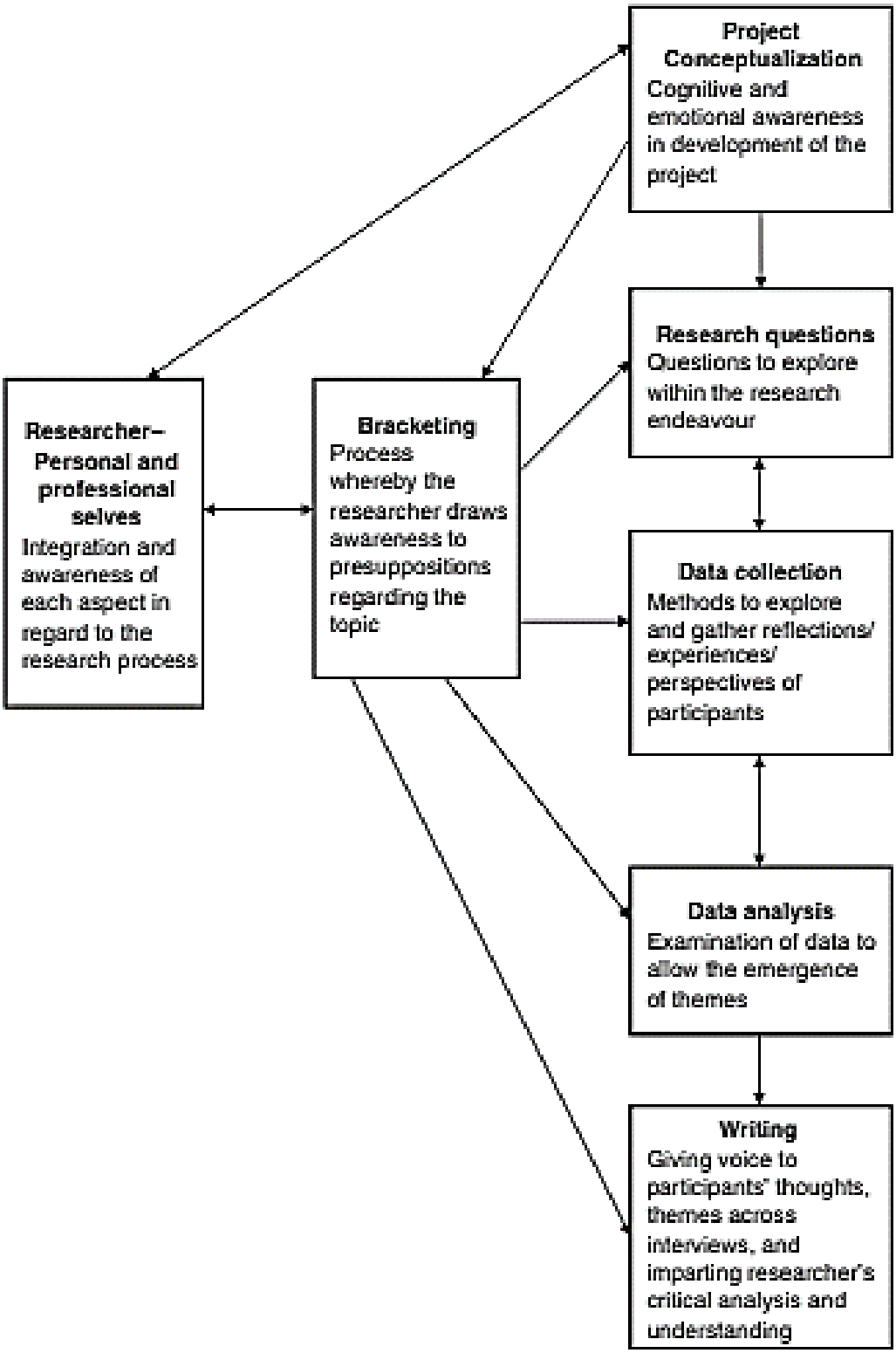
Veteran Affairs Benefits Administration: (888) 442-4551
Veterans Crisis Line: (800) 273-8255, Press 1 or Text 838255
Veterans Affairs Homeless Programs: (877) 424-3838
Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services: (877) 222-8387
Vet Center Call Center (Readjustment Counseling): (877) 927-8387
Women Veterans Call Center: (855) 829-6636

Kindest Regards,

Tundra Gatewood
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Southern Mississippi
Phone: (501) 952-9984
Email: tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

*The Institutional Review Board of The University of Southern Mississippi reviewed and approved (IRB-22-483) this project, ensuring research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Direct any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant to the Chair of the IRB at (601) 266-5997 or irb@usm.edu. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.*

APPENDIX J – Bracketing Framework and Copyright Permission



**Fw: Copyright Permission Request: Bracketing in Qualitative Research**

Tundra Gatewood <Tundra.Gatewood@usm.edu>
Mon 8/1/2022 6:40 PM
To: TTGATEWOOD@GMAIL.COM <ttgatewood@gmail.com>

---

**From:** Lea Tufford <ltufford@laurentian.ca>
**Sent:** Monday, August 1, 2022 3:47 PM
**To:** Tundra Gatewood <Tundra.Gatewood@usm.edu>
**Cc:** p.newman@utoronto.ca <p.newman@utoronto.ca>
**Subject:** Re: Copyright Permission Request: Bracketing in Qualitative Research

Hello Tundra,

Thank you for your email. That is fine to use the conceptual framework; please ensure to cite Dr. Newman and myself.

Best wishes with your research.

Kind regards,
Lea

On Wed, Jul 27, 2022 at 6:58 PM Tundra Gatewood <Tundra.Gatewood@usm.edu> wrote:

> Hello Dr. Tufford and Dr. Newman
>
> I am Tundra Gatewood, a doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am conducting a qualitative research study using the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology for data analysis. In researching the topic of bracketing, I came across your article titled, 'Bracketing in Qualitative Research' in the Qualitative Social Work Journal dated December 2010 (DOI: 10.1177/1473325010368316).
>
> Specifically, this is to request your permission to use Figure 1 – The Integration of Bracketing into Qualitative Methodology, unmodified, to explicate the bracketing process I adopted in my research process. Thank you for your contribution to the field as well as your time and consideration relative to this request. Please advise if additional information is required.
>
> Respectfully,
>
> Tundra Gatewood, PhD Candidate
> Human Capital Development
> University of Southern Mississippi

APPENDIX K – Interview Guide

**PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL AND PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY: EXPLORING WOMEN VETERANS' MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN CAREER TRANSITION**

**Interview Date**: _____

**Interviewee Alias**: _____

**Start/End Time**: _____/_____

**Introduction**: First, I want to thank you for your military service. I am Tundra Gatewood, a U.S. Air Force veteran and doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am researching women veterans' lived military-to-civilian career transition experiences. The literature shows that veterans' successful reintegration outcome remains a national priority. While the military-to-civilian transition is relatively well-studied, research reveals that the women veteran cohort's employment situations remain scarcely investigated. You are invited to participate in this study because *your voice* is important to gain in-depth insight into women veterans' transition from military service to the civilian labor force.

**1. Purpose**: The research explores women veterans' perceptions of their military-to-civilian career transition and employment to inform veteran-related policies, programming, and support, potentially bridging service-delivery gaps for this unique cohort.

**2. Description of Study**: Your decision to participate in this research study is entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Participation entails a synchronous, semi-structured interview using Zoom—this Internet medium. The interview requires 45-60 minutes. I will provide you with any new information emerging during the research process that may be relevant to your willingness to continue participating. To be eligible, you must be (1) age 18 years or older; (2) a Post-9/11 service-era woman veteran; and (3) served minimally 12 months in the active U.S. military. Once you complete the interview and verify the transcript, you will receive a $20 Visa or Amazon electronic gift card, based on your preference, as an incentive for participation. Be advised that this incentive will not be extended should you withdraw from the study. If interested, you will receive a report of the approved study results, which may be published in academic journals and books and presented in live or written forms.

**3. Benefits**: Although there may be no direct benefit for you, the participant, the research results may potentially impact future women veterans' career transition success. Veteran-facing employment service providers may potentially benefit from gaining deeper insight into women veterans' differentiated transition needs to inform organizational policies, programs, practices, and service delivery.

**4. Risks**: There are no known or foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study beyond routine life discomforts and inconveniences. Should you experience any sensitivities resulting from the interview, you will be granted time to attend to yourself and provided the contact information for confidential veteran support.

**5. Confidentiality**: Information provided during this interview will be kept confidential and secure. Any information that could potentially identify you as a participant will not be divulged, published, or otherwise made known to the public. The research incorporates pseudonyms in lieu of real names in all textual and digital files, reports, articles, and presentations.

**6. Alternative Procedures**: There are no alternative procedures that may be advantageous to you as the participant. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

**7. Participant's Assurance**: This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997. Direct any questions concerning this research study, any time during or after, to me, Tundra Gatewood, the principal investigator, at tundra.gatewood@usm.edu or (501) 952-9984.

→ Do you agree to participate in this research study? Yes ____ No ____

→ Are you 18 years or older? Yes ____ No ____

→ Audio-recording captures what you say as accurately as possible while allowing me to engage with you during the interview actively. Do you agree to audio-recording? Yes ____ No ____

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Instructions**: Thank you for consenting to participate in this study and agreeing to audio-recording. So, let us begin with the interview. This section covers eight core facilitative questions designed to **explore** your military-to-civilian career transition experience. **In this research, the change in job/career characterizes as an external <u>event</u> or <u>situation,</u> whereas transition refers to an individual's internal reorientation or process.**

1. To start, in general, how would you describe *your* journey from military service to civilian life?
   - *Prompt: What did you do to prepare yourself in advance for the career transition?*
   - *Prompt: How did the transition affect your social support system (e.g., family, friends, peers)?*
   - *Prompt: What impact did the transition have on your well-being (e.g., physical, financial, psychological)?*
   - *Prompt: How long did it take you to adjust and adapt to civilian life (e.g., culture and gender norms)?*

2. What were your career plans when you left the military?
   - *Prompt: How did the military's transition assistance program facilitate/hinder your career development?*
   - *Prompt: What other steps did you take to achieve your career goals?*

3. How confident were you in your ability to *find* and *maintain* a job commensurate with your experience, skills, training, and education?

- *Prompt: What were your perceptions about your career marketability? Employment opportunities?*
- *Prompt: How easy/difficult was it to acclimatize to the civilian employment culture and norms?*
- *Prompt: What reemployment successes and setbacks (e.g., rejections, skills translation, skills transferability, and salary negotiation) did you experience? How did you cope with challenges?*

4. What was it like for you to move from the military to the civilian labor market?

- *Prompt: How would you describe the differences between the two military and civilian environments?*
- *Prompt: How did you prepare yourself for the psychological and cultural aspects of the transition?*
- *Prompt: What specific coping resources proved most beneficial in your transition process?*
- *Prompt: How did you handle any transition-related stress?*

5. In retrospect, what would you do differently if you were to go through the transition process again?

- *Prompt: What support may have been helpful in your readjustment process that was not available?*
- *Prompt: What was the **least** and **most** difficult aspect of the transition process?*
- *Prompt: How did you maintain your well-being (i.e., physical, psychological, and emotional) during the transition process?*
- *Prompt: What did you learn about **yourself** during the transition (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)?*

6. How would you describe your military versus civilian identity?

- *Prompt: What does your veteran identity mean to you?*
- *Prompt: How did you (re)negotiate your identity as a veteran-civilian? Woman veteran?*
- *Prompt: How do you think others perceive you as a woman veteran?*
- *Prompt: Do you self-identify as a veteran? Explain why or why not.*

7. What specific challenges/constraints did you experience in achieving your **full civilian employment potential**? How did you overcome them?

- *Prompt: How did you overcome them?*
- *Prompt: Any gender-related impediments (i.e., child/dependent care, pay equity, and time-to-employment).*

8. Using your *past* and *future* as frames of reference, how do you describe your general outlook on life?

- *Prompt: How does your current employment situation fit into your overall life plan?*
- *Prompt: Expectations for future career endeavors?*

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**

**Instructions**: This section captures demographic-level details to understand each research participant's experience better. Please answer the response that **best** describes you for each of the following nine questions.

9. With which racial and ethnic group do you primarily identify?

- ☐ American Indian and Alaska Native
- ☐ African American or Black
- ☐ Asian American
- ☐ Caucasian American or White (Non-Hispanic/Latino)
- ☐ Hispanic and Latino
- ☐ Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander
- ☐ Multiracial American
- ☐ Not Sure
- ☐ Specific Ethnicity: _____

10. What is your current age?

- ☐ Under 25 Years Old
- ☐ Between 25-29 Years Old
- ☐ Between 30-39 Years Old
- ☐ Between 40-49 Years Old
- ☐ Between 50-59 Years Old
- ☐ 60 Years or Older

11. Which one of the following best describes your current marital status?

- ☐ Single/Never Married
- ☐ Married/Domestic Partnership
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Widowed

12. How would you view your current employment status?

- ☐ Labor force participant but not enrolled in school
- ☐ Labor force participant and enrolled in school
- ☐ Not currently participating in the labor force or enrolled in school
- ☐ Not currently participating in the labor force participant, but enrolled in school
- ☐ Self-employed but not enrolled in school
- ☐ Self-employed and enrolled in school
- ☐ No employment intent
- ☐ Other, please specify: _____

13. What is the highest level of education you completed?

- ☐ High School Diploma
- ☐ Vocational/Technical Training
- ☐ Associate Degree
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Doctoral or Professional Degree

14. In which active component of military service did you serve?

- ☐ Air Force
- ☐ Army
- ☐ Coast Guard
- ☐ Marines
- ☐ Navy

15. What was your final military pay grade?

- ☐ E1 – E3
- ☐ E4 – E6
- ☐ E7 – E9
- ☐ O1 – O3
- ☐ O4 – O6

16. How many total years did you serve in the military?

- ☐ 1-5 Years
- ☐ 6-10 Years
- ☐ 11-15 Years
- ☐ 16-20 Years
- ☐ Greater than 20 Years

17. Do you have a military service-connected disability? Service-connected disability refers to an injury or illness incurred or aggravated by military service.

- ☐ Yes, I have a service-connected disability
- ☐ No, I do not have a service-connected disability
- ☐ I have not completed the disability compensation process
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

**You have reached the end!** Reflecting on this experience, is there any other question you think would be helpful in this research that I did not ask? Do you have any additional comments you would like to share? Do you know any Post-9/11 era women veterans you would recommend as a candidate for this research?

**Debriefing Statement:** I appreciate your contribution to this important research. When your interview transcript becomes available, I will forward it to you for verification. Once complete with the transcription verification process, I will email you an electronic $20 Visa or Amazon gift card (as preferred) within five business days. **If you have any questions or concerns about this research project, please do not hesitate to email me at tundra.gatewood@usm.edu or call or text at (501) 952-9984.** Again, thank you for the privilege of your time and your military service!

APPENDIX L – Pilot Interview Protocol

## Interview Guide Pilot Interview

**Project Title:** Psychological Capital and Perceived Employability: Exploring Women Veterans' Military-to-Civilian Career Transition

**Principal Investigator:** Tundra Gatewood, (501) 952-9984, tundra.gatewood@usm.edu

**Instructions:** Please review the attached preliminary semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were developed based on the study's research objectives and informed by the scholarly literature. To assist with identifying potential problem areas, critique each instrument item using the below review questions.

1. Do the interview questions sufficiently cover the scope of research?

2. Does the instrument adequately measure the operationalized concepts (career transition, psychological capital, perceived employability)?

3. Are the questions relevant based on the research objectives? If not, which question should be modified or deleted?

4. Are the interview questions clearly worded, understandable, and conversational?

5. Are any of the interview questions value-laden or leading?

6. Are the interview questions free of technical jargon?

7. Are the questions explicit enough to evoke rich, descriptive responses?

8. Do you anticipate that the participant's responses can be properly interpreted in relation to the data sought?

Please provide any recommendations to improve the interview questions in alignment with the study's research objectives. Thank you in advance for your time and support!

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