

Running head: WOMEN WARRIORS

**Women Warriors: Exploring the Various Dimensions of  
Female Service-Members' Role Identities**

Submitted for consideration for the NJPA Scholarship for Research on Diversity Issues

The area of military identity development and its impact on psychological functioning is an emerging topic that has not received much scholarly attention to date. Identity is theorized as being composed of both the internal self and the roles that one fills in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Since individuals are typically embedded in multiple social contexts, they can hold multiple roles in multiple groups and therefore have multiple identities that intersect (i.e. gender, culture, developmental stage, etc.). An individual's multiple identity roles can present competing or conflicting expectations for their behavior. Additionally, various forms of identity are associated with self-esteem, stress, and general well-being (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Little research to date has explored the intersectionality of role-expectations associated with being both a U.S. Military service-member and being a woman. Though research on female service members has been growing, much of the research is problem-based and quantitative.

Many veterans experience difficulties upon reintegrating into civilian society after a deployment. Research estimates that between 19 and 42% of returning veterans from the Global War on Terror experience alienation, medical, and mental health difficulties upon returning home (Kimerling et al., 2010). Few studies have looked at veterans' perspectives on factors that may be contributing to this difficulty, however, Demers (2011) noted that veterans often described feeling caught between two cultures, and had difficulty reconciling their military and civilian identities. When veterans return to civilian culture, they are straddled between their military identity (warrior ethos) values of commitment to your unit and nation, sacrifice, discipline, obedience, duty, and honor (among others), and the values of the more individualistic civilian society (Redmond et al., 2015). This civilian-military cultural gap, evidenced by these

conflicting values, likely contributes to the difficulty that veterans experience upon returning home (Collins, 1998).

Orazem et al. (2016) describes that a major limitation of prior research on military identity's role in readjustment is that it includes very few women's responses. This is an important limitation because of women's unique challenges related to being a gender minority within the military that may have a substantial impact on their identities, mental health and well-being (Street et al., 2009). Demers (2013) has suggested that some of these challenges may include identity blending, perceived unit cohesion, social support, and sexual violence, among others. Women who enter the military are in the position of not only leaving their civilian identity, but also having to navigate gendered behaviors to define what it means to be both a woman and a soldier, a traditionally male role, at the same time. Warriors have typically been portrayed as large, muscular, brave men (Redmond et al., 2015). Female soldiers' gender and socialized behaviors may therefore represent the antithesis of the belief of what it means to be a warrior, or soldier.

Research has shown, while serving in the military, women actively re-define their identity by "blending," where they simultaneously play up and minimize their femininity to be both masculine enough to fit in with the men in their unit, but not so masculine as to be perceived as threatening. Other studies highlight the changes in gender role identity for women while in the military, the subsequent difficulties with their senses of self when transitioning back to civilian life, and a need to re-compose a new identity outside of the military (Demers, 2013; Prividera & Howard, 2012; Suter et al., 2006). Additionally, it may be the case that the warrior ethos has contributed to some of society's perception that women are not "real Veterans," and

are unsure of how to integrate the veteran woman identity, which results in veterans feeling unsupported and invalidated for their service (Street et al., 2009).

The unique needs of women veterans returning to civilian society are complex, spanning health care, emotional regulation, and sociocultural issues. Additionally, military and veterans' culture is not necessarily perceived as welcoming to women as evidenced by their limited participation in veterans' organizations and rates of accessing healthcare (Street et al., 2009). It is therefore of increasing importance to evaluate how the complex and multidimensional nature of identity impacts this understudied population.

This qualitative study will use semi-structured interviews to discuss the lived experiences of female service-members who served in any branch of the military between October 2001 to present. Study participants will be recruited from various military service organizations (i.e. Veterans Service Offices, Disabled American Veterans Offices), and through snowball sampling via word of mouth. I will collaborate with the Anxiety Disorders Clinic (ADC), which is a specialty clinic within the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University, and all interviews will take place on site at the ADC or over the phone.

Qualitative data analysis will consist of the use of the Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to explore female service-members' experiences before, during, and after their service. The interviews will be transcribed and coded through a three-stage process that will uncover themes based on identity development and female service-members' experiences in the military; specifically, I will seek out themes about military culture, perceptions of one's sense of self / dimensions of identity, and experiences of transitions (including barriers as well as effective strategies that influence the success of those transitions).

The number of women in the military is increasing, and will continue to increase dramatically over the next several decades (Department of Defense, 2017). This project promotes diversity by aiming to explore the intersectionality of role expectations associated with being a U.S. Military service-member and identifying as a female, and how those roles impact functioning. By advancing our understanding of the experiences of this understudied population, we can improve policy and practice for female service-members during and after service. Additionally, this understanding will facilitate the empowerment of women as warriors, and support the unprecedented increase in female service-members in all positions within the military.

Word count: 968

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