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UNITED STATES WOMEN MARINES' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ABOUT  
COPING WITH SERVICE LIFE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this manuscript are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Navy, Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

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The survivors of any species are not necessarily the strongest....

They are those who are most responsive to change.

— Charles Darwin

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## Abstract

### UNITED STATES WOMEN MARINES' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ABOUT COPING WITH SERVICE LIFE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

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Women are expanding their numbers and roles in the United States military. This new generation of military women is exposed to unique factors related to their gender that contribute to challenges for psychosocial well-being and optimal performance. In support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), researchers have identified unique factors for military women, including increased combat exposure, continued military sexual trauma and harassment, and conflicting dual roles. These factors may create obstacles that inhibit help-seeking behaviors and support for military women, and remain an under-researched topic of study. Gender-specific research on military women is limited; current research has primarily focused on discharged veterans and has been remiss in addressing women-specific issues for

those currently serving in an active duty status. This study sought to address this under-researched phenomenon by exploring the military experiences of women on active duty in the United States Marine Corps. The purpose was to learn more about military women's experiences and perceptions of stressors, coping behaviors, and sources of social support within this context. This study used a feminist phenomenological methodology to better understand military women's experiences and specific stressors that influence their coping behaviors. A phenomenological data analysis procedure revealed five core themes and sub-themes that were synthesized into the essence. Implications for practice, policy, and future research are included to enhance women Marines' psychosocial well-being and optimal performance while they serve on active duty.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The number of women serving in the military is unprecedented in the history of the United States. Today, women comprise approximately 15% of those serving on active duty and approximately 18% of those serving in the reserves. Women's roles continue to expand and diversify over time. In 2013, Congress rescinded former policy as military leaders announced plans to begin the integration of women into combat designated billets. In spite of their expanded roles, little attention has been focused on the behavioral health needs and psychosocial well-being of women military personnel and the subsequent increased challenges they experience during service in a male-dominated military environment. Military women are increasingly exposed both to combat operational stressors in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and to gender-specific service related stressors. It is vital to understand the impact these stressors have on them and consider ways to enhance the coping skills they employ.

I will begin with a historical overview of women in the United States military, and follow by presenting current military service stressors unique to women as well as to military personnel in general. I will then describe the military culture and implications for stress and coping behaviors for servicewomen. Lastly, I present a problem statement designed to improve social justice for the new generation of women who serve in the U.S. armed forces today.

## **History of Women's Service and Roles in the Military**

Women have a long history of service in the U.S. military beginning with the War of Independence (1775-1783). They often accompanied male relatives into battle to serve informally as caregivers: cooking, cleaning clothes, and caring for the sick and wounded. In 1901, Congress established the Army Nurse Corps as an auxiliary of the U.S. Army. Shortly thereafter, in 1908, the Navy Nurse Corps followed (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). Women's roles in military service have continued to expand since the United States began officially recruiting women during World War I (Dean, 1997). Initially, women formally participated as nurses, but over the years their roles have become more diverse. There are several reasons for these changes including the overall shift of women into the workforce and the demand for women to become wage earners. Historically, although with much controversy, women were needed to fill gaps in male personnel in the armed forces and consideration was even given to drafting them into service.

By the end of World War II, approximately 280,000 women had served in the various branches of the military in roles such as nurses, clerks, and administrative assistants (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). Although women served in many important roles during that war, they were not afforded the same benefits as men serving in war zones and only a few nurses were retained. By the 1990s women's military roles had expanded further to include flying combat aircraft, serving on ships, and driving in convoys. These activities increased their potential exposure to direct combat, operational stressors, and traumatic events (Dutra et al., 2010; Friedman, 2006).

Currently, military policy has changed to rescind previous policy that excluded women from assignment to direct combat billets (Department of Defense, 2013). Although this policy

change will take time to implement, an assessment phase has begun and may result in further revisions and even some exceptions to the combat roles women will be assigned. Military women have not formally been assigned to combat designated roles, but they have been and still are active participants in combat and operational deployments in support of OEF and OIF (Burelli, 2012). During the Vietnam era women comprised 2% of the military population. The numbers have grown so that women now comprise approximately 15% (Murdoch et al., 2006). More than 218,000 military women have deployed in support of OEF/OIF (IOM, 2010), compared to approximately 41,000 during the Persian Gulf War (Gebicke, 1993). The high numbers of women in the military who are deploying and participating in direct combat-zone duty assignments emphasizes that these aspects are unique distinctions in the OEF/OIF conflicts when compared to previous conflicts (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009).

### **Military Service Stressors Unique to Women**

Women have not only increased in numbers in the military, they have also continued to expand the roles they are assigned. These changed aspects of military women's service have resulted in additional stressors and challenges that influence their well being and functioning in the military environment. This new generation of military women is not only exposed to combat, but also continual gender specific challenges such as rape, sexual trauma, sexual and gender harassment, and conflicting dual roles. These pressures may contribute to an increase in personal and interpersonal stress.

**Combat exposure.** As women's roles expanded to serving in combat support roles, the likelihood of exposure to direct combat has also increased (Street et al., 2009). Further, because of the lack of clarity on what constitutes the front line, there has been an increase in women's exposure to combat regardless of their official billet assignment during the OEF/OIF conflicts

(Hoge, Clark, & Castro, 2007; Kelly et al., 2008). In other words, women have had very different combat experiences than in previous wars and conflicts (Hoge et al., 2007; Street et al., 2009; Tolin & Foa, 2006). For example, military women were found to experience moderate levels of combat exposure when deployed in combat support roles in OIF (Mental Health Advisory Team [MHAT] – IV, 2006). They were also exposed to high levels of combat stress when coming under small arms and/or mortar/artillery fire, as well as having witnessed seriously injured personnel (Rona, Fear, Hull, & Wessley, 2007).

**Sexual trauma and harassment.** Sexual stressors can be viewed on a continuum that ranges from severe acts of sexual assault on one end, such as attempted or completed rape, to acts involving some form of coercion and physical sexual contact on the other end, such as unwanted touching (Street et al., 2009). Sexual harassment involves unwanted coerced sexual involvement as a condition of employment or used as the basis for work related decisions (Bell & Reardon, 2011; Street et al., 2009). These forms of sexual stressors create hostile, intimidating, and offensive work environments. These are criminal acts, termed in the military context as military sexual trauma (MST), and constitute violations of military law under chapter 47, title 10 in the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ, n.d.).

A recent Pentagon survey reported that 26,000 armed forces personnel were victims of sexual assault last year, representing an increase since 2010 (Steinhauer, 2013). Rates of sexual harassment for women in the military have been reported to range from 24% to 78%, and sexual assault rates were reported to be as high as 41% (Chaumba & Bride, 2010). Although these experiences are also relevant to military men, the rates are significantly lower for them (Bell & Reardon, 2011). Ten percent of men indicated sexual harassment experiences and 2% indicated

unwanted sexual contact versus 51% of women who reported sexual harassment experiences and 12.4% who indicated unwanted sexual contact (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012).

Street and colleagues (2009) stated that over 52% of military women have experienced some kind of sexual harassment. These authors explicated further that 9% of military women had dealt with some aspect of sexual coercion and 31% experienced other instances of unwanted sexual attention. Sexual trauma has been associated with deployment-related stress for women (Kimerling et al., 2010) and further associated with significant negative behavioral health consequences overall (Murdoch et al., 2006).

**Gender harassment.** Miller (2000) refers to gender harassment as harassment that is not sexual, and is used to enforce traditional gender roles, or in response to the violation of those roles. This form of harassment may also undermine women's attempts at gaining power or to describe that power as illegitimately obtained or exercised. Gender harassment is evident in various ways in the military environment such as resistance to authority or directions given by a woman, constant scrutiny, gossip and false rumors, sabotage, and indirect threats (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). Gender harassment can create hostile and/or degrading experiences for military women. Miller (2000) reported that military men demonstrated hostility towards military women because they believed that they were discriminated against and the women had easier physical standards and training. Although both military men and women experience gender harassment, women are more likely to experience it than men (Vogt, Pless, King, & King, 2005); 54% of military women reportedly experiencing some form of gender harassment annually (Lipari, Cook, Rock, & Matos, 2008).

**Conflicting dual roles.** The problems associated with the simultaneous roles of being a full-time caregiver of children at home and having full-time duty commitments may result in

feelings of stress, confusion, and conflict. Military women are more likely than military men to be married to an active duty service member, or to be single and raising children, while serving in the military (Boyd, Bradshaw & Robinson, 2012; Joint Economic Committee, 2007). The role conflict resulting from this situation can be difficult to negotiate and manage regardless of type of military duty. Military women may be at increased risk for behavioral health problems due to difficulty with family separations (Boyd et al., 2012). Handling these conflicting roles raises additional stress when negotiating post-deployment reintegration for women (California Research Institute, 2009; Mattocks et al., 2012). The post-deployment readjustment process is exacerbated for military women when they must quickly resume the primary caregiver role in the home. This especially difficult transition may become a prevalent source of negative stress for military women (Friedman, 2006; Mattocks et al., 2012).

### **General Challenges Associated with Military Service**

The military lifestyle involves frequent relocations and changes in duty assignments, limited and changing social support systems, and frequent separations from family and friends due to training and deployments. The increase in steady combat-related deployments creates unique stressors that influence risk for those in the military. As the military continues to participate in OEF/OIF, many service members experience multiple deployments with little dwell time. Some service members have experienced repeated cycles of separation from their families due to these conflicts. The U.S. Department of Defense Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Guidance for 2011 reports more than two million military service members have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Of these, more than one-third has been deployed more than once (Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, 2010). Saltzman et al. (2011) report that approximately 50% of those on active duty are parents.



The U.S. Department of Defense (2011) reports that 1.9 million children have a parent serving in the military. The National Military Family Association (2011) reports that half of those in the military are married and 30% have children, with the largest percentage of their children aged six to eleven years old. The increase in the number of service members who are married and have children presents a challenge for service members during reintegration as they face readjustment with family members. Sayers, Farrow, Ross, and Oslin (2009) report higher instances of communication problems, anger control problems, and rates of divorce for returning combat service members seeking treatment.

The Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control (2011) identified several risk factors that may exacerbate stress for service members post-deployment, including:

- duration of current deployment as more than six months;
- repeated deployments without sufficient time to recover and reset;
- current and previous psychological health problems;
- being new to the unit or military community;
- lacking trust with the military community members;
- family separation and/or personal relationship problems;
- financial difficulties and/or other home front stressors.

These risk factors are associated with a decrease in the quality of marital, personal, and work-related relationships, an increase in psychological symptoms for individual members, and increased risk for suicide in service members (Kuehn, 2009; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Mental health problems, possibly from cumulative and prolonged stressors experienced in deployed and non-deployed military settings over the years of the current war, may be linked to increase suicide risk for service members (LeardMann et al., 2013).

These risk factors combined with the stresses described earlier that are specific to military women place them at an even greater risk for challenges in coping. Psychological problems may include a lack of confidence in their ability to optimally function at home and/or work environments. The problems may result in psychosocial difficulties or even a diagnosis of psychiatric disorders that necessitates treatment. Failure to cope effectively may also result in an individual servicewoman's inability to take action to prevent problems or intervene early.

**Military culture.** Although there are various branches with different missions in the U.S. military, they share aspects of culture that distinguish them from each other and from civilian society (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011). Pryce, Pryce, and Shackelford (2012) reviewed factors that differentiate military members from civilians. One factor is discipline, which forms the basis for the military's organizational structure. Second, values such as loyalty, commitment, honor, and self-sacrifice are expected in the military culture to maintain order, especially in times of war. Third, customs and traditions are practiced to create and maintain common identities in the military environment. Lastly, the emphasis on teamwork, esprit de corps, and group cohesion are important aspects of military culture. These factors are evident in military language (branch specific acronyms and slang), civilian and military attire (which identifies rank structure and delineates leaders from subordinates), and interpersonal behaviors whether service members are on or off duty (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011).

These distinctions are inherent in the military environment and have traditionally reinforced gender roles in three ways in the U.S. (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). Gender inequality is reinforced in military training to identify and express gender in language (Sir and Ma'am, Ladies and Gentlemen), attire (women still wear pumps and skirts), and in expressions and interpersonal behaviors (aggressive and adversarial approaches that lack demonstration of emotion when faced

with problems). Further, restricting women from specific roles and activities limits their access to power and resources in the military (Bourg and Segal, 2001). Lastly, when women are restricted from specific roles, they do not have access to positions that influence policies and political leadership in the male-dominated military context.

Aspects of military culture serve as an important means for the member to exercise discipline and adhere to a belief system required for successful adaptation and acceptance into the military way of life. These traditional norms and values are taught during recruit training and reinforced continually during the service member's career. Understanding these unique attributes of the culture of military life may improve the understanding of how stigma can influence military personnel and how they function overall, especially women. Further, because the military is traditionally male-dominated, gendered norms have been cultivated in this environment (Miller, 2000).

As women's roles continue to expand and increase in the military context, women may experience unique challenges to infiltrating the interpersonal behaviors informed by the traditional norms inherent in this culture. These challenges have major implications for military women to successfully integrate into the group in a cohesive manner. These experiences may reinforce aspects of stigma for women if they are directly or indirectly not accepted as part of the military unit by some in the dominant group (Miller, 2000). If women experience a lack of cohesion due to negative factors such as stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination related to their gender, the stigma process may be further exacerbated regardless of other gendered military service experiences.

## **Stigma against Seeking Help**

Pryce et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of conceptualizing stigma in the context of the biological, psychological, and social milieu in which it occurs. Stigma can evoke individual and societal perceptions regarding mental health issues that affect how individuals perceive themselves as weak and not worthy of treatment. The individual may also believe the social stereotype that behavioral health services are not confidential, supportive, or helpful and thus may not access available care. Institutionally, if care is sought, the military member may no longer be viewed as an asset but be seen as one who may interfere with the mission and readiness.

Stigma may represent one unrecognized barrier unique to military culture that causes service members to avoid accessing support offered within the military environment. Stigma may cause service members to avoid seeking help for fear of the adverse consequences to their career and negative judgment by others (Boyd, Bradshaw & Robinson, 2012; Pryce et al., 2012). The Joint Chief of Staff, in the CJCS Guidance for 2011, highlighted the importance of finding solutions to “end the stigma that prevents our service members ... and veterans from seeking help early” (p. 3). When stigma is understood, it is possible to minimize its occurrence. A continual recognition and appreciation for the challenges faced by service members who adapt, adjust, acknowledge, and overcome adversities.

Stigma is still an obstacle to the acquisition of comprehensive support resources. Available resources will not be successfully used without changing the negative perceptions associated with accessing them. The military community must delicately manage this issue in order to enhance personal functioning and resiliency without the client’s perception of negative

consequences. Changed perceptions regarding the various resources can assist service members to avoid more severe functional problems and improve social support.

Feczer and Bjorklund (2009) posit that when injuries are not associated with combat, they are often viewed as a weakness, which results in most victims not seeking treatment unless their problems render them unable to perform their military duties. Friedman (2006) further reports psychiatric symptoms in the military environment to be perceived as an indication of a weakness in character. The dread of being viewed by colleagues as weak, and fear of potential negative consequences for future military careers, creates obstacles that result in unwillingness to seek help or care. This fear resulting from stigma can add to behavioral health problems for military service members (Hoge et al., 2004; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007). The failure to confront stressors, either resulting from combat or gender-related abuse, can lead to behavioral problems such as extreme weight loss, eating disorders (Jacobson et al., 2009), depression (Luxton, Skopp, & Maguen, 2010), and alcoholism (Jacobson et al., 2008).

### **Effects of Stressors on Military Women**

In another manifestation of stigma, military women may experience additional barriers to behavioral health and support services because of difficulty trusting peers or command leadership to disclose gender-specific injuries such as military sexual trauma (MST), sexual and gender harassment, or domestic abuse. This distrust renders these phenomena even more stigmatizing for military women, who may wrestle with whether to report incidents of abuse. They may fear appearing disloyal to their command or feel that revealing maltreatment is a betrayal of those with whom they serve. Moscarello (1990) indicated many women do not report victimization such as sexual assault for fear of judgment or potential for revictimization. This

can render military women less likely to reframe and normalize these confusing feelings and lead to greater isolation from their unit peers and leaders.

Sexual trauma has been associated with deployment-related stress for women (Kimerling et al., 2008) and is further associated with significant negative behavioral health consequences overall (Murdoch et al., 2006). There are many stressors associated with deployment, but military women experience additional stress because they are more frequently in locations where privacy and protections are less available, opportunities for help are even more limited than usual, and the mission is ever more critical, so they may be more likely to minimize sexual trauma when it occurs. Even if it does not occur, often fear of its possibility causes stress, added to the stress of being in a combat support deployment environment with much unpredictability. Military sexual trauma continues to occur at disproportionate rates for women than men, on and off deployment assignments. Its prevalence can create obstacles for women when they consider reaching out for assistance to deal with their gender specific traumas and experiences. The result adds to the lack of trust in resources and social support (Campbell & Raja, 2005).

Many women return from combat with significant physical or psychological injuries (Mullhall, 2009). These injuries are often compounded by behavioral health professionals' failure to accurately diagnose or understand military women (Sternke, 2011). The consequence of this misunderstanding contributes to feelings of distrust, isolation, and a decreased motivation to seek help or use the available resources.

In summary, military life can be both satisfying and difficult for servicewomen. Because the military is predominantly a male-dominated environment, it exposes women to an array of challenges that result in different effects from their male counterparts because of issues related to discrimination and role uncertainty (Rona et al., 2007). Aspects of the male-dominated military

culture, changing military roles, environments, and missions can influence risk factors, coping strategies, and sources of support for women in complex ways. Additionally, prior trauma life experiences and differing physiological and emotional response patterns may lead to an increased susceptibility for being exposed to negative psychological effects such as trauma, violence, and/or assault (Nayback, 2008; Street et al., 2009; Tolin & Foa, 2006).

### **Coping Behaviors for Military Women**

Women have been found to cope differently and in more self-destructive ways than men due to feeling misunderstood and unrecognized in their military environments (Maguen et al., 2012; Mattocks et al., 2012). This can increase the likelihood of women's risk for poor psychosocial functioning, increased distrust, and isolation that further inhibit their ability to seek help, use resources, and cope effectively (Mattocks et al., 2012). Military women frequently report feeling less prepared for deployment and combat exposure than military men (Vogt, Proctor, King, King, & Vasterling, 2008). All of these experiences contribute to gender specific challenges in coping and can lead to significant impairment in the psychosocial functioning for military women.

Sternke (2011) cautions practitioners when using formal assessment instruments with women because they are likely male-normed. Sternke's study raised critical awareness about the use of measurement tools related to combat exposure, as they may not adequately reflect the experiences of women. This can further explain why military women may feel misunderstood, and also what may lead to misdiagnosis or misguided treatment for women. These issues can offer explanations about why women may not seek help, feel supported, or trust others in their environment. Male-normed assessments also may contribute to perceived barriers for military

women when they do attempt to access help to improve coping behaviors in response to their unique stressors and situations.

### **Problem Statement Related to Military Women's Stressors and Coping**

Although the number of women and the roles they occupy in the military have expanded widely over time, there are few studies examining the unique challenges they face and how they cope with these expanded opportunities. Previous research has focused exclusively on men or included only small samples of women. Much of this research has only addressed combat exposure and neglected other non-combat traumatic events such as sexual harassment. (Street et al., 2009).

Additionally, Veterans Affairs (VA) and other military health services have focused primarily on services for men, and until very recently have failed to develop behavioral health services for women (Ouimette et al., 2011). These gaps include a lack of services to address women's health issues, specific physical and psychological health services focused on sexual harassment and assault, and others. Moreover, there has been little attention paid to the associated fear and the consequences that women experience about reporting violations or ways to seek help to remedy these situations. The failure of researchers to consider the unique situation that women face has resulted in a lack of understanding about women-specific interventions and services within the military community.

The experiences of military women continue to be under-researched. What is needed are substantive efforts to increase our understanding of the stressors they face, and how these stressors relate to healthy coping and psychosocial functioning. Many factors may influence how military women cope and make decisions about whether and what kind of help to seek. To begin



to address military women's challenges, research must focus on these issues, and how women can be better understood during their military service.

**Relevance to social work and social justice.** Understanding women's military experience, and how this awareness can improve their performance, is relevant to the field of social work. There is scant academic literature that explores the lived experiences of active duty women, nor the possibilities of such study to help servicewomen cope and access support while they are in the service. Literature does highlight the need to increase knowledge about military women in order to inform the development of gender sensitive assessments, interventions, and resources that will improve their coping and well being (Sternke, 2011). Yet available literature is predominantly quantitative and does not contribute enough to an understanding of the specific experiences of military women. Military women often feel misunderstood and believe that the military lacks appropriate resources to help meet their needs (Holmstedt, 2009). Women continue to experience exploitation by repeated exposure to sexual trauma, discrimination, and inequality by their historical exclusion from specific military billets when compared to men in the military. Friedman (2004) argues that the likelihood of developing mental health disorders and difficulty adjusting/reintegrating may be reversed if women are assisted in coping with current life stressors and post-deployment stressors. Further, reliable social supports are a necessary inclusion as part of military women's care (Chaumba & Bride, 2010) to improve the likelihood of healthy functioning.

Stein-McCormick (2011) argues the need for future research to be gender specific. There is growing awareness in the military that programs to educate military women about self-assessment, support resources, and formal services are needed (Chaumba & Bride, 2010). Further, gender sensitive assessments and services are necessary to reduce barriers to military

women seeking care (Sternke, 2011). Social worker researchers can improve social justice issues for military women by contributing to the body of literature that informs ways to provide direct services and advocates to improve policy and service delivery issues.

The military environment, peers and leaders, can also benefit from current research to better understand how military service distinctly challenges women. Altering the military culture can prove difficult (Stein-McCormick, 2011). Gender-specific research can lead to a better understanding of what is at stake and the development of strategies to support women, acknowledge their strengths in coping, and prevent problems from negatively impacting the command morale and mission readiness. As women's roles and numbers continue to grow in the military, more men will likely be affected by military women's performance and functioning.

This chapter provided a historical overview of women in the United States military, described current military service stressors unique to women serving today, and detailed the military culture and associated effects of stigma. This introduction highlighted the effects and associated implications of stressors on coping behaviors of military women. Lastly, the problem statement explicated matters in order to inform future research relevant to the social work profession and to improve social justice for the new generation of military women serving in the U.S. military today.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Critical Review of the Literature**

The literature available about women in the military is growing but still limited. This chapter will offer descriptions about what is known and not known about military women. Some researchers have attempted to fill the gaps in our knowledge about military women in an effort to highlight the implications of what these women face as they continue to grow in representation, expand their roles, encounter changes in military regimes, and experience different effects than their male counterparts. However, phenomena about military women and their active duty service experiences remains under-researched. Available research further includes many limitations that prohibit a rich understanding of military women's current experiences, coping styles, and needs. This chapter will critically review the literature to detail gaps that warrant future study.

An extensive literature review on military women will begin with an overview of women in the United States Marine Corps (USMC), the targeted population for the proposed study. A cultural perspective about women in the USMC and military women in general will then be discussed. Next, I will examine scholarly research that is specific to women Marines, active duty military personnel, and veterans with a special emphasis on gender differences. This section will be followed by a summary of the critical knowledge gaps about military women that require

further study. Last, the purpose of this study to explore the phenomenon of women Marines will be elucidated, as I summarize the gaps in the knowledge base about military women and state my central research question.

### **Overview of Women in the United States Marine Corps**

The USMC is a branch of the military under the Department of the Navy. The mission of the USMC is to “...make Marines...win our nation’s battles... [and] develop quality citizens” (www.marines.com). The USMC motto is *semper fidelis*, meaning “always faithful.” These statements represent the ideology the Marines have established to maintain a reputation as America’s fighting force in readiness, a commitment to serve honorably and train with tenacity so that they remain ready to fight as our nation dictates. The USMC has been an expeditionary fighting force since 1775 and remain forward deployed for swift, rapid, and aggressive response when crisis ensues.

The USMC is structured under three main components: Ground combat, Logistics, and Aviation. The hierarchy begins with Headquarters USMC and is broken down to Marine Corps Forces, Reserves, Security Forces, and Special Activity Forces. Marines participate in missions on land, air, and sea. All Marines are guided by 14 leadership traits in the performance of their duties and service. These traits, emphasized as qualities of thought and action, are: judgment, justice, dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, enthusiasm, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and endurance (www.marines.com). These leadership traits are practiced in daily military service life and serve as the foundation to improve and maintain cooperation, teamwork, and unit cohesion.

Although every Marine is considered a leader, Marines serve in either the officer rank structure (O1 to O9) or the enlisted rank structure (E1 to E9). The Marine Corps is a male-

dominated branch of service, as only 6% are women. The USMC has 62% of its positions open to women, with 6% of women serving as enlisted Marines and 6% serving as officers. The former Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, rescinded the military policy that previously banned women from integration in combat-designated roles (DoD, 2013). This policy change potentially opens positions for more than 280,000 women in the armed forces overall.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) is a committee established by the Secretary of Defense in 1951 to provide advice regarding ways to increase the number of women serving on active duty, increase retention rates of military women, and better use their capabilities (OSD DACOWITS, 1951). DACOWITS began to study specific issues pertaining to women in combat in 2009 and 2010, and then completed a follow-up study to better understand preparations for the integration of women into combat roles. To investigate potential implications about the assignment policy of women in the military, in 2011 the qualitative study collected data from 21 focus groups held at seven locations derived from a total sample comprised of 199 men and women participants representative of the entire active and reserve components.

The results, depicted in the committee's annual report, indicated ways to successfully integrate women into combat units as follows:

- have consistent and equal performance metrics and qualification criteria for both men and women;
- use leadership emphasizing strong roles in supporting the transition;
- integrate large numbers of women at a time;
- improve training and mentoring throughout the transition (Norris, 2011).

About 20% of the women participants indicated training was inadequate or that they received no weapons training at all. Some indicated that equipment fit (such as the helmet) was inadequate for women. Others indicated they had previously participated in combat roles to which they were not officially designated and received little to no recognition for their combat services as compared to men. Most of the research participants described positive feelings about women's integration in combat roles if standards and leadership supported it. Challenges acknowledged in the focus groups were concerns that men would not readily accept the change, women would have to work harder to overcome stereotypes, and sexual harassment, fraternization, and pregnancy would be more problematic.

This DACOWITS study explicates that men and women serving in the armed forces have differing views about women's expanded roles. Results emphasized the need for leadership to better understand specific experiences and unique dynamics of the current, changed generation of military women in order to best support the smooth transition, given policy changes. As military women become fully integrated into combat designated roles, effective mentoring was encouraged as a vehicle to ease the transition for military personnel. The study noted that effective mentoring can be achieved when it followed accurate depictions of the new generation of active duty women's military experiences.

### **Understanding the Culture of Women in the Military**

Literature has become more available as public interest in military women continues to increase. *Band of Sisters*, written by Kirsten Holmstedt in 2007, presented the stories of 12 American military women from various branches that served in Iraq. Six of the military women presented in the book were Marines. Highlights entailed unique military experiences of women deployed in Iraq, with descriptions of them in firefights and in the role of a combat pilot, and

detailed the accounts of two women Marines' experiences of a day in war that resulted in officially killing the enemy. These women shared stories about surviving multiple attacks and other war experiences and stressors. This book reflects women's voices and their lived experiences in combat zones. These reflections illuminate how women today experience military service differently than they had in the past.

Holmstedt wrote a follow-up book, *The Girls Come Marching Home* (2009) to depict the post-deployment experiences of 18 American military women. Three of the 18 women described in this book were Marines. Physical, emotional, and social challenges were highlighted, such as how many female veterans felt misunderstood by those in the public sector and those who felt the military could not always provide the care they needed. Post-deployment challenges included the dynamics of reclaiming their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, military members, and civilians while simultaneously struggling with the impact of their war experiences. This book emphasizes that all military women return from deployment changed in some way. Both books offer journalistic views that raise consciousness about women's changing military experiences and the stressors that resulted from their participation in the war on terror, but these books are not the result of scholarly research. Further, Holmstedt's books address only the stories of a small and varied group of military women who participated in combat deployments, leaving the voices of those who have not deployed or were not interviewed still unheard.

Pryce, Pryce, and Shackelford wrote a trade book, *The Costs of Courage: Combat Stress, Warriors, and Family Survival* (2012) to elucidate unique aspects of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This book is well-referenced and provides a clear overview of these wars to improve cultural competence in social work practice with military personnel. One short section in the book details general information about "women warriors" (p. 88). The authors described

the current issues that led to military women's expanded roles, including: the increased need for volunteers due to the lack of male volunteers; women's demonstrated ability to perform well in the military; and required cultural restrictions for warfare in Muslim countries that prohibited all military men from performing necessary aspects of routine duty, such as physically inspecting Muslim women and the like, and required servicewomen to perform those duties.

These expanded roles and needs for women in the military highlighted an increase in the unique issues faced by military women to effectively perform their duties. The authors illuminated gender-specific challenges, such as how military women continue to face negative stereotypes about their involvement in combat support roles; unique struggles related to hygiene, birth control, and pregnancy; interpersonal stressors (i.e., gender and sexual harassment), and dual roles (i.e., single parenting issues associated with deployment). Although men also experience some similar challenges, women are reported to experience them more and differently. It is argued that women must cope with interpersonal stressors in addition to living and working alongside men, whether or not in a deployed setting (Meyers, 2009; Pryce et al., 2012). Further, the authors described complex problems such as sexual assault and the lack of gender-specific health care services faced by this new generation of military women. These issues require continued research and advocacy to provide more gender relevant education, services, and advocacy to challenge cultural norms and practices.

### **Scholarly Research on Women in the Military**

Scholars have conducted research on military women as women's roles expand and they are depicted in the media more frequently. However, few studies specifically sampled active duty women Marines or focused on all military service life experiences to improve our understanding about the spectrum of stressors and coping in both non-deployment and



deployment settings. Further, no studies were discovered that highlight women's unique experiences, and examined both positive and negative stressors and coping mechanisms related to military service over the course of their service during the current conflicts.

**Research specific to women Marines.** There is no known research on *active duty* women Marines that is current. One study examined several mediators between the relationship of gender role egalitarianism and women's adjustment during initial recruit boot camp training in the Marine Corps (Weatherhill et al., 2011). Recruits are distinguished differently from Marines. Those who enlist to become a United States Marine must first successfully complete 13 rigorous weeks of training and are labeled recruits until graduation when they earn the title of Marine. This quantitative study sampled 658 USMC recruit women using various scales and questionnaires to measure sex role egalitarianism, sexual experiences, and performance-related training stress, unit cohesion, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Results indicated that sexual harassment, performance stress, and unit cohesion mediated the relationship between egalitarianism and symptoms of mental health. These reported findings suggest that understanding beliefs about gender roles are important considerations to improve women's adjustment in the military environment. The authors suggest further that women's adaptation to challenging military service experiences may be influenced by their participation in male-dominated environments, such as the USMC.

**Research on women in all branches of U.S. Armed Forces.** Women are more likely to experience the added stressor of sexual harassment (Chaumba & Bride, 2010; Lipari et al., 2008; Street et al., 2009) as well as other interpersonal stressors related to being a woman in a male-dominated setting (Miller, 2000; Rona et al., 2007; Vogt et al., 2005; Weatherhill et al., 2011). These stressors have been associated with an increased risk for depression (Luxton et al., 2010),

suicidality (MacFarland, 2010), alcoholism (Jacobson et al., 2008), disordered eating (Jacobson et al., 2009), PTSD, anxiety, and other behavioral health problems (Hoge et al., 2007; Murdoch et al., 2006). These findings make ongoing investigation of current factors unique to women Marines' service experiences even more vital, especially following the gender segregated, highly supervised, and structured context of USMC recruit training. As the authors of these studies stress, it is important to explore all factors, strengths, and challenges within the Marine Corps context to eliminate harassment and other interpersonal stressors. Importantly, these authors suggested future research should consider examining gender specific training interventions that focus on gender role attitudes and the concept of egalitarianism. If gender role egalitarianism is found to be amenable to change, training experiences can include this type of education for recruits and drill instructors, with the potential to enhance women's adjustment to military training, life, and well being (Weatherhill et al., 2011).

**Research on active duty military personnel.** Miller (2000) investigated gender harassment in the military. Using a qualitative design, she observed and interviewed United States Army men and women from 1992-94 to examine their hostility toward military women. This researcher reported that resistance from the men was based on their perceptions of being subjected to discrimination in the military environment. Miller specified a number of stereotypes held by the men about military women: that the physical training standards were easier for women; that women should not be allowed to participate in the military due to inherent physical weaknesses; that military women took advantage of pregnancy; that women were allowed more time to improve their education; and that women were assigned less difficult and less labor-intensive duties than military men. Miller recognized that gender harassment is caused by

perceptions of power and enabled by limited forms of protest available to men in the military context.

The implications of this study suggest that more subtle forms of gender harassment could occur as a continued form of resistance from military men. Further, as gender harassment increased during the timeframe of Miller's study, it became increasingly difficult to regulate, even with new legislation regarding anti-discriminatory behaviors. Men's resistance to the stereotypes resulted in unexpressed anger, continued resentment, use of the term *equality* to advance their own interests, and hidden prejudices (such as, women are privileged already, and women are unwilling or unable to fully meet the demands required of soldiers). From this study we can infer that unintended future consequences of expanding women's presence in the military may include increased gender harassment of servicewomen, regardless of policy changes that aim to improve equal opportunities in the military environment. Miller's study was limited in that the sample focused solely on U.S. Army personnel. Furthermore, the study was done two decades ago, 1992-94, and its findings are outdated. Future research must seek to determine if these findings apply today to the new generation of military women and different branches of service.

A more recent study was conducted on a sample of active duty women soldiers in the U.S. Army who presented for routine post-deployment screenings as part of a larger longitudinal study of women's deployment stress and health outcomes (Dutra et al., 2010). This quantitative pilot study examined combat exposure experiences and military sexual harassment to assess the impact of these stressors on self-reported post deployment PTSD and depression symptoms among 54 active duty U.S. Army women. About 75% of the sample endorsed combat exposure, more than 50% endorsed sexual harassment, and one third endorsed symptoms of PTSD that

resulted more from military sexual trauma (MST) than from combat exposure. Data were collected shortly upon return from their deployment and may not reflect the long term impact of deployment. Limitations included convenience sampling with data collected from women's self-reported symptoms and no pre-deployment baseline data measurements for comparison. Thus, these findings cannot be generalized to active duty military women overall. Despite these limitations, this research does add to the literature about active duty military women's stressors and experiences.

Jacobson et al. (2009) conducted research to investigate post-deployment issues for military personnel who participated in at least one deployment during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) to account for disordered eating and weight problems. This study was part of the larger longitudinal Millennium Cohort Study that randomly selected from all U.S. military personnel rosters to extract sampling data from 2001-2006. This sampling method resulted in 12,641 women and 33,578 men, of whom 265 were female Marines and 1,716 were male Marines. Findings depicted that deployed women who experienced combat exposure were more likely to report new-onset disordered eating and a loss of more than 10% of their body weight when compared to deployed women who did not experience combat exposure. This study concluded that deployed women with combat exposure may demonstrate a "prospective association" between combat exposure trauma and the development of disordered eating (p. 426), and therefore may be at higher risk for developing eating problems and weight loss. However, the authors then purport that combat exposure traumas, development of disordered eating, and deployment during OIF/OEF were not associated with new-onset disordered eating among military personnel, which appears to contradict the previously stated findings.

These results are confusing and lack focus on the stresses and strengths of the participants. Additionally, this study reported that enlisted, white, women Marines with a deployment history were found to be at a higher risk for disordered eating, but did not describe why. Further, those least likely to complete the follow up survey were more likely to be Marines. Although this study adds to our knowledge about active duty military personnel, an exploratory study focused on active duty women's lived military service experiences would better enrich our understanding of this unique population. Jacobson et al.'s results indicate the need to further stretch our focus to include military women who have not deployed. Servicewomen may be rendered unsuitable for deployment because of medical problems raised during pre-deployment screenings, possibly as a result of previously ignored stressors that were experienced in garrison.

Mota et al. (2012) completed a study designed to address limitations noted in previous research. This study included a standardized assessment of mental disorders and a validated measure of work stress in a representative sample of Canadian armed forces personnel. The sample was stratified by regular versus reserve duty status and accounted for several confounding variables. Findings discovered that active duty women reported higher work stress related to job control, psychological demands, and physical exertion. Further, active duty women were more likely than men to be divorced/separated/widowed, work in air operations, be officers, and to have experienced spousal abuse, stalking, and sexual trauma. The authors contended that simply being a women, as a minority sex in the military setting and likely subjected to negative gender-stereotyping, may contribute to the greater work stress that women reported.

Mota and colleagues' study is a good example of an effort to fill important gaps and address limitations in previous research. However, its generalization is limited, in part due to differences in military missions and culture between Canada and the United States. Other

limitations are that the data were cross-sectional and that the mental health diagnoses were assessed without the use of clinical interviews to supplement standardized responses retrieved from lay interviewers. These limitations render one unable to determine associations between stressor exposure, development of mental disorders, and their relationship to military service for this population.

**Research on women military veterans.** A systemic review of the literature was conducted by Cromptvoets (2011) to explore the experiences of women veterans, specifically nurses, from the United States, Australia, and the UK. The study suggested that personal and professional identity conflicts and gendered stereotypes could impact women's health and access to services, and lead to adverse affects by inhibiting their ability to seek help. Military women, suggests Cromptvoets, may be best supported by a recognition and appreciation for gender specific forms of coping and social support.

This study is one of the few that emphasized women's strengths in coping behaviors, acknowledged the value of recognizing and not problematizing the unique attributes of military women, and offered gender relevant suggestions that may improve support and reduce barriers for women to access care. However, the study sampled women veterans who served in a specialized role, nursing, and may not generalize to most military women. Future research must seek to explore similar strengths, needs, and coping behaviors exhibited by active duty women who perform duties in a variety of military occupational specialties.

Chaumba and Bride (2010) systematically reviewed 23 quantitative research studies to understand the impact of trauma and PTSD among U.S. military women and explore what services were developed to assist them. Twenty of the 23 studies sampled veterans prior to 2007. The findings focused on social support defined as "perceived emotional sustenance and

instrumental assistance from others” (p. 294) and further described support as the availability of family and friends to discuss problems with, and people to depend upon, when in need of help. Social support was perceived to be an important protective factor in the prevention of behavioral health problems such as PTSD.

These researchers pointed out that the changing roles and types of trauma exposure experienced by military women may increase their risk for the development of PTSD. The authors caution readers to consider how different researchers may not use similar measures of PTSD or adhere to full diagnostic criteria, thus limiting comparisons across studies. Overall, the authors urge future researchers to contribute to the current literature to improve advocacy, services, support, and policies for this population.

Mattocks et al. (2012) also focused on the trauma experiences of women veterans. These researchers completed a qualitative study nested within a larger study, with a sample of 19 women veterans from two regions who received Veteran’s Health Administration (VA) care and services. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to explore women’s military experiences related to stress and coping. The authors found women to experience various types of trauma such as combat exposure, sexual harassment, rape, problems with parenting and marital relationships, and post-deployment adjustment issues. The authors also identified a variety of coping strategies the women employed to help them negotiate their stress. Coping included behavioral and cognitive avoidant strategies. This finding led the researchers to argue for the importance of distinguishing between positive and negative coping strategies, given the likelihood that positive coping may improve prognosis and serve well to promote post-deployment interventions for women veterans. This study’s findings may not apply to active duty women.

Kimerling et al. (2010) sampled veterans (17,580 women and 108,149 men) who deployed at one time in OIF/OEF, were discharged from service by September 2006, had used VA mental or primary health care services between 2001-07, and were screened for military sexual trauma (MST). Although the data were retrospective and based on a convenience sample, this study offered a quantifiable description of findings based on predetermined criteria to demonstrate the significantly high rates of mental health illness (PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders) associated with MST for this population. In addition to the retrospective nature of the study, other limitations included a cross-sectional design comprised of a sample of those women who sought care, an inability to determine causal relationships regarding MST and mental health problems because there was no account for prior trauma experiences, and a lack of representation for those who may not seek care. The authors indicated the need for future research to examine broader ranges of participants.

Street et al. (2009) confirmed that women sustain higher risk for experiencing sexual assault and gender harassment during military service than men due to the traditionally male-dominated military environment setting. The authors concluded over 52% of military women report some form of offensive sexual behavior or experience, which was associated with negative implications during and after military service for them. Lack of support was identified as another interpersonal stressor, and declared to be an under-researched factor for this new cohort of military women. Positive relationships with peers in the unit were previously identified as a major resilience factor for military-related stress, while cohesive relationships can effectively ameliorate the association between stressors and PTSD. Further, strong unit cohesion in combat can engender confidence and promote adaptive responses to psychosocial problems.



The authors posit that many practitioners, military leaders, and the general public often do not have favorable views about women serving in the military, or likely do not understand how women's roles have changed and expanded. This can lead to servicewomen's increased isolation and feelings of being misunderstood, as well as a lack of acknowledgement and recognition for the contributions and sacrifices of military women today. Future research can improve understanding and raise awareness about military women's current service-related experiences, and thereby conceptually improve supportive resources, change inaccurate views, and encourage military women to seek help that is less of a stigmatizing experience.

Many studies have sampled women veterans to improve our knowledge base and guide the development of effective interventions to assist women as they transition out of active duty service. However, more investigation is needed to inform what constitutes as effective interventions for active duty military women to improve services and support to them during military service. This kind of research may increase opportunities for their optimal functioning and well being, perceived sense of support, and possibly even increase retention decisions. Further, research with a focus on this population may lead to the production of knowledge aimed to prevent future problems from developing and decrease potential adverse effects often associated with their transition out of the military.

**Research on gender differences.** Street et al. (2009) reported there are few studies that have examined gender differences in combat exposure with OIF/OEF samples or that examine different types of traumas or exposures between military men and women given unique distinctions of combat for the current war. For example, results from two Mental Health Assessment Team-IV (MHAT-IV) studies conducted in 2006 and 2007 indicated women's combat experience to be moderate (12%) and high (3%). Comparable rates for military men were

not reported. Other studies have reported women to be negatively affected by combat exposure, although these studies were not based on OIF/OEF samples nor represent military women's participation given the changed dynamics of this war. These results indicate the need for future studies to examine the current gender specific experiences for improved knowledge pertaining to this generation of military women.

Several studies were located that compared diagnoses, symptoms, and coping abilities based on gender differences. One, conducted by Maguen et al. (2012), examined gender differences in those who have undergone traumatic experiences and subsequent mental health for active duty soldiers redeployed from Iraq and Afghanistan. Self-reported data were collected from 2006-09 as part of a routine, non-anonymous, pre- and post-deployment screening at a large U.S. Army medical treatment facility (MTF). The sample consisted of 6,697 men and 554 women. Findings indicated that women reported greater exposure to MST (12% of women compared to 1% of men in sample), and were more likely to report depression symptoms than men, which possibly reflects acute responses measured shortly upon return from deployment. No gender differences regarding PTSD symptoms were found. However, the authors emphasized that not all types of combat exposure were equally represented across the men and women. Limitations included the lack of representativeness regarding demographics and military service experiences. Further, the potential for "false" positive or "false" negative reporting rates were evident and may represent a bias in the data collected. This is a possibility because many of those sampled had deployed more than once and likely participated previously in the same routine screenings that used the same instruments.

This study demonstrates how research focused on military service experiences may not account for the accurate measurement of phenomena relevant to the gender or type of exposure

(military women are more likely to experience exposures related to the aftermath of combat whereas military men are more likely to experience exposure related to active combat participation). These kinds of inaccuracies can lead to misdiagnoses and demonstrate a lack of appreciation for gender differences in service experiences and coping mechanisms (such as internalizing versus externalizing behaviors, symptom presentation, and resulting diagnostic impressions). Accurate examination and measurement of relevant service experiences can improve gender relevant interventions.

Vogt et al. (2011) designed a quantitative study to analyze gender differences in combat-related stressors and their association with post-deployment in a nationally representative sample of U.S. OIF/OEF veterans following a one-year deployment. These researchers found that women reported less combat exposure than men but endured higher exposure to other stressors such as prior life stressors and sexual harassment while deployed. The researchers argued this new generation of women veterans may be as resilient to combat stress as men and that other stressors warrant further examination to determine the implications. The authors suggest future research should focus on factors that contribute to aspects of resiliency for women.

This study demonstrated an effort to improve research to build the knowledge base for accurate gender comparisons by measuring across different types of combat exposure, and collected data from a nationally representative, stratified, and randomly selected sample to produce results more representative of the larger population. Limitations included the use of cross-sectional data from both the deployment and post-deployment experiences, which increased the likelihood for retrospective reporting biases and leads scholars to exercise caution when interpreting results associated with stress and post-deployment mental health. Further,

these findings may not reflect current military women's experiences because the sample was surveyed during 2007-08.

### **Gaps in Research about Military Women**

Sternke (2011) examined combat exposure measurement instruments used to assess military personnel. This study systematically reviewed the literature to identify combat exposure measurement instruments since the Vietnam War era and determine their applicability with military women exposed to combat. Six of the eight instruments examined were developed and validated on male veterans' combat experiences from the Vietnam and Gulf war eras. The author concluded that women veterans were underrepresented in the development and psychometric testing of combat exposure instruments and suggests a male gender bias. Only two of the instruments examined used women in their samples and six indicated gender-neutral terminology. This critical analysis indicates the instruments included in the review lack the accurate experiences for applicability to military women. The author cautions clinical practitioners to consider the limitations of using these male normed measurement instruments to assess combat exposure because they may lack gender specific application for military women.

Research is virtually non-existent on how military service experiences might impact the servicewoman positively, and if so, what strength-based forms of coping have been used. Historically, military women's issues have gone unrecognized by society in general (Van DeVanter, 1983). This pattern is still evident today. Durrer (2011) posits the experiences of military women have been for the most part ignored. Research must seek to examine military women's current experiences and coping behaviors. Military women's experiences often go unrecognized because they are internalized and may not be perceived by them to be safe or appropriate to bring to the surface in the military environment. Further, in a male-dominated

environment, women's experiences may be rendered invisible when their issues are framed in male terms and then ignored, or remain hidden for fear of being stigmatized as different in the context of the military. If women's roles are not considered, it may inhibit them from seeking help or support. When they do seek help, and if the help focuses on gender issues, it reinforces the male perspective that women are not strong enough for combat or operational missions.

It may become a challenge to research women's positive attributes if they do not surface until treatment is warranted. This dilemma may increase the likelihood for women's coping with military service to be pathologized or otherwise negatively labeled. Previous studies predominantly have focused on negative implications resulting from women's involvement in combat deployments, represented samples of women who have presented with clinical impairment in functioning or a diagnosed behavioral health condition. Previous studies have been remiss in that they do not address military women who will not seek services or have not yet needed formal behavioral health services or support. Studies that aim to accurately portray women's combat and operational experiences and highlight their positive attributes can reinforce the recent decision to increase their combat roles. Moreover, such studies may result in the development of services to enhance their well being and military performance, and at the same time, develop programs to increase the military's understanding of the gender-related issues that women face. The result of such efforts may be that the experiences of active duty military women will be assessed more accurately and their strengths and contributions to the war effort better understood.

### **Research Question**

In this study, I proposed to learn how military women who have served during OEF/OIF define their service-related experiences and its impact on their overall functioning. The research

was designed to access knowledge of how a number of women Marines articulate the meaning of their “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 36). The research was centered on the question: How does the United States woman Marine on active duty recall and articulate her military service-related experiences and respond as a result of these experiences? A qualitative research design using an interview guide improved the likelihood of eliciting responses to better understand the women Marines’ unique experiences, challenges, and functioning while serving on active duty.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the military service experiences of military women to better understand their current challenges and coping behaviors. It was hoped that this exploration might lead to an accurate depiction of the military woman’s perception of her environment and improve our knowledge about how to enhance her social support and improve her well being. There are critical gaps in the current knowledge base about the new generation of American military women that limit our understanding about how they can optimally function in their military service environment. These gaps inhibit our opportunity to conduct gender-specific assessments and formulate relevant interventions to improve support and behavioral health services for this population. Further, this deficit in our knowledge base can complicate traditional ways of defining symptoms and negative effects observed in this population.

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted scholarly literature about what is known and what is still not known about military women. Military women’s health and well-being are essential to the optimal functioning and overall mission readiness of the military organization. Research that is focused specifically on military women’s experiences can improve our overall understanding

of their gender-specific challenges and coping behaviors, as well as implications for their optimal performance while serving in the military. Research has suggested that several types of military service-related stressors can result in negative stress responses and harmful coping behaviors for military women. The literature reviewed provided an understanding about the lack of useful information regarding women in combat and some suggestions about how future research can seek to inform clinical practices to improve the well-being of military women.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology and Design**

This chapter presents the methodology and study design used to explore the unique military service experiences of women Marines to discover issues that affect their psychosocial well-being. The chapter begins with the stated aims for this research project. Next, this research is positioned paradigmatically, epistemologically, and methodologically to guide information gathering and examination. Lastly, qualitative research methods are detailed.

The experiences of military women continue to be under-researched or ignored. This calls for a substantive focus in social science research to increase our understanding of the stressors they face, how these stressors relate to their coping abilities, and their overall functioning. Many factors may influence how military women cope and make decisions about what kind of help to seek to improve their ability to deal effectively with stresses related to life in the military. These challenges, which may include exposure to military-related service stressors and traumatic events, have increased due to the increased numbers of women in the military and their expanded and changing roles in service.

The existing literature on military women emphasizes that future research needs to focus on gaining an understanding of the new generation of military women in order to develop gender relevant practices and policies to improve their well being. Knowledge generation is needed because empirical literature specific to the experiences of the new generation of active duty



women Marines is virtually non-existent. Qualitative methods are better suited to address the research questions posed in this study so as to explore and describe the new generation of active duty women Marines' experiences and meanings relative to the influence of the military context in the USMC.

The purpose of this research study was to explore unique military experiences of women to learn about their stressors and coping responses and how help-seeking and social support were perceived by them within a military context. Specifically, the objectives for this research project were:

- To explore the perspectives and lived experiences of active duty women Marines.
- To identify gender specific perspectives about their military service stressors.
- To identify their specific perspectives about coping.
- To understand their social support and help-seeking perspectives.

This inquiry was an attempt to gain an understanding of what military women experience in the context of their military service and whether or not specific stressors and coping responses influence help-seeking behaviors or influence perceptions about the levels or types of support available to these women.

### **The Interpretivist Paradigm**

To get to the meaning of military service experiences for women in the U.S. Marines, it is important for the researcher to frame the research topic and conduct research from a paradigmatic perspective that allows for a variety of meanings to emerge. For a researcher engaged in interpretivist work, the research question will seek to uncover the subjective meaning of the phenomena under study. A qualitative research design would allow for the research to “emphasize meaning” (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2008, p. 135). This perspective allows for the

focus to be on the way U.S. women Marines interpret and make sense of their experiences and the military context they work and live in. Therefore, research within this worldview is seen as nominalist, antipositivist, voluntarist, and ideographic (Burrell & Morgan, 1994).

A researcher engaged in interpretivist work seeks to understand the social reality of individuals, groups, and cultures by uncovering the deep and complex meaning within the context of their experience of the problems under study. This occurs through the exploration of behaviors, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people and what lies at the center of their lives. To reach this level of meaning, the central research question generally asked, “What does it mean to be a woman in the military?” and more specifically, “What are the lived military service experiences of the new generation active duty women in the United States Marine Corps?” The new generation active duty women in the United States Marine Corps is defined as women contracted to serve full time in active duty status during some time since Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and/or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), from October 2001 to present, following successful completion of USMC recruit training in any billet designated by the United States Armed Forces branch of the United States Marine Corps.

In the interpretivist paradigm, the assumption is that people are understood best through a constructed and shared social reality. The meaning of the shared reality emerges when the participants, and those socially involved with the participants’, create or reconstruct their meaning as experienced in their social environment (Fay, 1996). This is communicated to the researcher from the participants’ perspectives, observations, and experiences.

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology and Methodology**

The methodology chosen was based on a feminist epistemological position that challenges positivism. Feminist standpoint epistemology posits that all knowledge is situated and

cannot exist independent of the knower (Harding, 1991). This is in contrast to traditional positivistic assumptions, which assert the need for objectivity in research. Feminist standpoint epistemology represents aspects of Marxism transformed with a feminist lens (Harding, 1991). Feminist theorists paralleled Marx's class analysis with gender relations in a patriarchal society as it related to knowledge and power. Social life is assumed to be structured by hierarchies, where different standpoints are produced. Feminist standpoint epistemology asserts that knowledge is produced from specific vantage points and multiple perspectives of marginalized people in societies, and structured within hierarchies that produce greater insights into the society. Women gain knowledge from everyday lived experiences, which have historically been systematically excluded by dominant masculine documented points of view (Harding, 1987). These insights are developed in relation to the particular marginalized positions of specific people, such as women, who understand the dominant discourse in unique ways that are shaped by their everyday experiences. Harding (1991) posits that standpoint is the result of lived experience based in a struggle to be heard that occurs in relation to social power. To legitimize women as producers of knowledge, this theory argues that investigation must originate with women's discourse about their lived experiences (Harding, 1987).

Standpoint methodology challenges the traditional, objective relationship between research and researcher as proposed in positivistic science. This critical approach to methodology impacts each phase of the research process. Feminist research accomplishes this dynamic by engaging the researcher and the researched, imposing a context of discovery, and reconceptualizing the concept of values in the research process (Reinharz, 1992). Standpoint methodology asserts that all research is ultimately value laden and must be illuminated through an initial and ongoing discussion of values throughout the research process. This methodological

approach produces new and transformed knowledge, allows marginalized voices to be heard, and politicizes the research by challenging the dominant power and knowledge relationships in that research context (Ackerly & True, 2010).

### **Feminism and Feminist Theory**

Ackerly and True (2010) define feminism as “a critical perspective” on social and political aspects of life that draws attention to the ways in which social, political, and economic norms, practices, and structures create injustices that are experienced differently or uniquely by certain groups of women (p.1). These authors emphasize one does not have to participate in direct social or political action or even label oneself as a feminist to take this approach to research.

Ackerly and True go on to describe how a critical feminist perspective uses critical inquiry and reflection about social injustices through gender analyses to transcend mere explanation and transform the social order. This perspective encourages the discovery of new lines of inquiry focused on more than simply filling gaps. Feminist perspectives argue for research focused on bringing women’s voices from the margins to the center. This is accomplished by an emphasis on the importance of studying silences, drawing out what is ignored in normed institutions, and by studying marginalized and excluded women’s experiences to better understand our social world. To best achieve this end, Harding (1987) asserts that feminist research must attempt to satisfy three criteria: first, to include women’s experience in the production of knowledge; second, to seek explanations for women to address their needs, and third, to make the researcher explicitly visible in the process.

Feminist standpoint theory emerged in 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power (Harding, 2004).

This theory is intended to explain successes of emerging feminist research in a wide variety of projects. Feminism was described as a political movement and politics were seen as the vehicle to obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge. Feminist standpoint theory challenged this assumption. It was proposed as an explanatory theory, a prescriptive methodology, and a theory of method, all to guide feminist research.

As a type of critical theory, the goals of feminist standpoint theory are to empower the oppressed to improve their situation. According to Naples (2007), this is accomplished by:

- Representing the social world in relation to the interests of the oppressed.
- Supplying an account to them that enables their ability to understand their problems.
- Being useful to improve their condition.

Critics of standpoint theory assert that relying on the notion that marginalized groups can embody a consistent standpoint leads to essentialism, and traps the group into one identity (Naples, 2007). Different intersections of women may have different understandings of oppression. Questions circle around what would constitute a unified standpoint of women resulting from the argument that all women are not alike and cannot be categorized as the same. Feminist standpoint theory is argued by some to essentialize one position for women, historically that of white, middle class women, and represented a unifying standpoint and universal identity for all other women (Harding, 1991).

According to Harding (2004), feminist standpoint theory specifies that:

- Knowledge is socially situated and must be gained from the perspectives of women.

- The focus of knowledge development must be on gender differences between men's and women's situations.
- Aspects of women's social location generate superior knowledge (i.e., about their social role or subjective identity) and must be the starting point for scientific research.
- This kind of knowledge can decrease distortions about women in the social world derived from dominant knowledge claims and lead to greater accuracy and ability to represent accurate truths about women.

This theory claims epistemic privilege over the character of gender relations and social and psychological phenomena in which gender is implicated on behalf of the standpoint of women (Ackerly & True, 2010).

Therefore, feminist standpoint theory can:

- Offer deep knowledge of society.
- Produce superior knowledge of human potentialities.
- Clarify the standpoint of the disadvantaged that correctly represents social inequalities as socially contingent and describes ways they may be overcome.
- Illuminate a standpoint that historically has represented social phenomena in relation to the interest of the privileged and ideologically misrepresents these interests as coinciding with universal human interests.

Sandra Harding (1991) asserted that women, because of their oppressed position, possess the ability to see things both from the perspective of the dominant and the oppressed, and to comparatively evaluate both perspectives. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described this similarly as the concept of *outsiders within*. These feminist theorists argue that these qualities reason for

women's ability to contribute to knowledge development in more superior ways than men. This lens provides critical information to best understand the standpoint of women that historically has been unnoticed, unspoken, or mistaken by excluding women from inquiries or generating knowledge by men from the male perspective.

### **Phenomenological Approach to This Inquiry**

The nature of this study was qualitative, with the intention to explore the current, new generation of active duty women in the United States Marines Corps and arrive at rich descriptions of the impact of military service experiences for this group of women. The new generation of active duty women in the USMC comprise women who have successfully completed recruit training and earned the title of Marine, aged 18 or older, and who are currently participating in full time service. This exploration leads to a deeper understanding of the common experiences of active duty women Marines in order to develop better practices and policy to improve gender relevant support and resources. A phenomenological approach to study aspects of military service experiences for women Marines improves the opportunity to glean rich interpretations and capture a common description of military service life (stressors and coping) for the women participants. A universal essence is described by van Manen (1990) as a "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 177).

Phenomenology is a philosophy originally drawn from Edward Husserl, known as the principal founder of it (Beyer, 2011). Many others (such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty) have expanded Husserl's views and share some common philosophical assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). These commonalities in philosophical assumptions include the study of lived experiences of people, the situation of these experiences in the consciousness of people, and the

engagement of these experiences that lead to the development of rich descriptions (Creswell, 2013), emphasizing knowledge that is rooted in meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Perception is the primary source of knowledge. Major concepts in phenomenology are *noema* and *noesis*. *Noema* (external perception) is the concept to describe what is experienced, *noesis* (internal perception) is the way in which it is experienced, and both terms equate to meanings of the phenomena (McNamara, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher intentionally reflects on these perceptions to grasp meanings that may not at first glance be evident in order to arrive at complete descriptions.

A phenomenological approach is conceptualized as without presuppositions. All judgments about what is real are suspended until they are founded on more certain terms. This suspension of judgments is termed by Husserl as the *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Experiences are representations of particular objects and described by the individual experiencing it at a given time, which ultimately lead to the intentional *horizon*, defined as a sense of identity through time. This process is interpreted by the researcher and occurs by bracketing the research question. The researcher *brackets* to ensure the objects described are exactly as experienced by the participant about the topic(s) central to the study.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

The researcher is a human instrument throughout the research process and affects the research process, from design to interpretations leading to the final product. Using a feminist lens to guide this inquiry, the researcher's position is that eliminating bias is not possible (Hall & Stevens, 1991) and is best handled through an explicit and honest account prior to beginning the process of inquiry (Ribbens, 1989). To accomplish this, reflexivity is necessary. Reflexivity is a process of reciprocal interactions of researcher and research participants where the researcher is



in the same critical space as the “object of her inquiry” (Harding, 2004, p. 161). This improves opportunities for the researcher to recognize her own values, assumptions, and biases. In addition, it can address compliance issues relating to the lived experiences of the participants to envision strategies to empower and raise consciousness for participants to enact change. The researcher acknowledges both real and perceived power dynamics and explicitly confronts these issues through honest interactions with research participants (Webb, 1993).

**My position within this research.** To initiate the process of reflexivity, the positionality of the researcher must be highlighted. I align with three central cultural values inherent of a Marine who served honorably for four years as an enlisted woman on active duty in the United States Marine Corps: honor, courage, and commitment. These values are further reinforced in my current position as a commissioned officer in the United States Navy, mainly in service and support of Marines, and the Department of the Navy (DON) and the USMC mission. I am also influenced by the ethics and values of the social work profession as a licensed clinical social worker. The social work values include principles of professional conduct and ethical responsibility to those who are served, as well as colleagues and larger society (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). These social work values tie in with the military core values of honor, courage, and commitment, expected of a U.S. Navy social work officer (Department of the Navy Core Values Charter, n.d.). These values lend important guidance for professional behavior when challenged ethically, and can be useful in all my roles of social work practice, teaching, and researching, as well as in the performance of duties as a naval officer. However, they are also values which must be openly described and reflected upon so that they do not inadvertently bias the chosen methodology.

Specifically, honor is tied to the social work value of integrity, service, competency, and a focus on the importance of relationships as demonstrated in professional behaviors and attitudes. I acknowledge a responsibility to recognize the importance of ethical conduct in all relationships and strive to develop and maintain competency in my military duties and social work practice. Courage is connected with the social work values of respect that honors the worth of people, fair and equitable practices, and the ability to challenge social injustices. Commitment is reflected in the genuine care and concern for the well-being of others, respect for all people without regard to issues such as race and gender, and a motivation to seek positive change. These values serve as reminders of the steps necessary for the “moral and mental strength” required to overcome challenges or obstacles experienced during the professional service of others (Department of the Navy Core Values Charter, n.d., p. 1). The Navy core values further encourage seeking consultation as needed and require frequent solicitation of feedback from those being served, peers, and superiors. These ethical guidelines can assist when wrestling with challenging issues such as what constitutes fair and equitable practice when facing problems.

At the same time, these are all positions of status, privilege, and power. I align with the value of military service as dedicated to selfless service to put the mission first. I align with the value to respect positions of authority and follow legal orders as directed, without question. I respect the value of teamwork and adapting to the needs of the team to meet the mission. Simultaneously, I esteem the social work values that respect the worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and service for social justice (NASW, 2008). Continual recognition of the tension and discomfort of being in a position of power and authority, and challenging my continual awareness of my own values and biases that influence the research relationship and data interpretation, are necessary for honest and credible interactions and

findings. I must acknowledge my highly educated status, rank, credentialing, and position in the military community that likely influences my ability to access and conduct research within this population as well as impacts the relationship with the research participants. I must take responsibility for the decisions I make and maintain awareness about how my position creates privileged opportunities for me to make decisions throughout the research process (Ribbens, 1989).

## **Methods**

**Participants and sampling.** Purposive, also known as criterion, sampling methods assisted the researcher in locating participants who have experienced the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2013). The researcher was concerned with achieving a sample comprising a variety of detailed descriptions based on the meanings of the participants' experiences that could not be achieved in the functionalist paradigm. A purposive sampling strategy sought to maximize the likelihood of collecting data from women Marines who:

- Were currently serving on active duty (full time contract for enlisted or commissioned service);
- Were at least 18 years of age;
- Were assigned to a USMC base installation on the east coast, U.S.;
- Volunteered to participate in the study.

Polkinghorne (1983) recommends a sample of 5 to 25 and Creswell (2013) recommends a sample of 3 to 15 as adequate for phenomenological research. This study sought to recruit at least three participants, the minimum number recommended above, to allow for adequate interpretations and analysis. Due to restrictions imposed by the United States Marine Corps and

Department of Navy during access, networking, and the research approval process, a total sample of no more than 15 women Marines was permitted in the study.

**Recruitment, access, and risks. *Military access.*** The researcher networked extensively with military leadership for the targeted military installation for data collection. This location was chosen because of close proximity (about 75 miles) from the researcher's location and the potential to recruit women Marines assigned to the targeted installation. Further, the researcher developed a trusted relationship with the community by active duty affiliation with the U.S. Navy and former affiliation with the USMC. The researcher established a relationship with key military leaders and networked extensively with the representative for the Office of Research Protections Program on the base, which resulted in successfully completing a previous entry-level research project. The previous project entailed following a specific protocol and ethics expected of a uniformed military researcher with regards to the mission and welfare of active duty military personnel. The researcher developed cultural competence about how to study active duty personnel within the USMC context and developed current knowledge about specific policies and protocols required by the USMC organization to conduct ethical research. These pre-established networks and experience offered insights that helped to design this current study and appropriately request access to conduct research with active duty military personnel. Once military access was approved, the proposal was routed through the Virginia Commonwealth University's institutional review board and then routed through the Department of Navy board for active duty military human subject protections review and approval required prior to beginning the project.

***Protocol.*** Participants were recruited with the aid of the recruitment flyer attached (Appendix B). This flyer was distributed in women-specific locations identified throughout the

approved battalion areas (i.e. women's locker rooms). Once women Marines contacted the researcher and elected to schedule an interview, the researcher asked the potential participant to choose a convenient and private location to review informed consent and conduct the interview. The flyer provided a brief summary of the research project, a description of what voluntary participation involved, and what type of participants the research project sought to recruit. The researcher's contact information was provided for women Marines to ask questions about participation, the project, and to schedule an appointment to consent and participate in the study.

Once contacted, the researcher discussed details, answered questions about the research and scheduled a face-to-face meeting to review the informed consent process. Each participant was invited to schedule this meeting at a time and location that was convenient for her schedule, at an agreed-upon location where the participant felt most comfortable to respond. The woman Marine was offered the opportunity to take the informed consent form home and participate at a later time or begin the interview process immediately following informed consent to collect data.

**Risks.** There are always potential risks for participants throughout the research process. Participants may experience distress when discussing aspects of their military service experiences if they were unpleasant or traumatizing. This may occur during or after the interview. The researcher addressed this risk on the informed consent form to allow the participant to consider this possibility prior to electing to participate. Additionally, the researcher, as a trained clinician with this population, was knowledgeable about appropriate resources and referrals for the participant if needed.

Another potential risk involved mandated reporting. Active duty military personnel are mandated by military policy to report any criminal violations under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice and/or any statements that pose a threat to self or others. These policies are

familiar to all who serve on active duty; however, the researcher included a reminder on the informed consent form. This policy was also verbally discussed with the participant during the consent process because both the researcher and participants were on active duty status and mandated by the military to adhere to these policies.

The last potential risk was the possibility for violations of confidentiality. This violation could have been brought about by the participant or the researcher. The participant may have shared with others on the base or in her command details about her participation in the study. The researcher included a statement on the informed consent form describing that if the participant chose to share her participation with others, it was the only way, aside from mandated reporting, that anyone would learn of her participation in the study. Additionally, the participant could have been identified by her signed name on the informed consent form. The informed consent form was the only document that could potentially link the participant to any data collected. The researcher requested that both review boards offer each participant the option to waive their signature on the informed consent form, which was approved. Those participants who chose not to sign the form were asked to verbally consent in order to participate in the study. Further, a plan to store the informed consent forms separately from the other data materials was indicated in the design and on the informed consent form. All other data collected were de-identified, as previously discussed in the details of the design.

### **Data Collection and Feminist Interview Process**

The researcher approved all participants in person and provided all participants with a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A). The researcher conducted all interviews and digitally audio recorded each interview for accuracy. This aided the researcher to best capture all the details described by the participants. The researcher manually transcribed all digital

recordings. The researcher also consulted with peers, committee members, and maintained a self-reflexive journal about aspects of the researcher's position, decisions, and interpretations in an attempt to reduce biases between interviews and during data analysis.

Qualitative research is concerned with gaining insights through the in-depth study of a few description-rich cases. Qualitative research is considered to be rigorous by collecting data phenomenologically (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2008). Phenomenological data are best captured by conducting in-depth interviews using broad and open-ended questions, and following up on themes or ideas that emerge during the interviews (see Appendix D). Here, the intent was to lead to a rich description using the language of the participants as to the meaning of the experiences of women Marines serving on active duty currently.

Following informed consent, these qualitative interviews were conducted "in vivo" (in real life) and lasted approximately one to three hours each. Feminist theory guided the format, word choice, and overall structure of the interview process. The women Marines were termed participants and chose a pseudonym for de-identification of data collected. The interview process emerged by the way participants chose to respond. The relationship between the researcher and participants was mutually interactive and allowed the participants to choose how the interview emerged based not only on their response to questions but also on the interactions during the process of data collection.

The participants were asked to choose a specific location for the interview. Participants were asked to provide demographic information (Appendix C) and then asked to respond to the central question and possibly other questions from the interview guide (Appendix D). During the interview, participants chose to provide additional information related to past experiences about their military service and differentiate between them, which further improved insight and

understanding. This data were collected in a narrative, word form and analyzed in aggregate to thoroughly describe the demographic and military context of participants' experiences.

The researcher digitally audio recorded the interviews for accuracy of interpretation for data analysis. The recordings were manually transcribed following the interview by the researcher. The main focus was the researcher's attempt to understand the nature of what was being communicated well above the importance of accurately analyzing how frequently a term was used or the specificity of words used (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

All data was stored in a locked file cabinet designated solely for this research project in the PI office. The informed consent forms were stored separately from the de-identified data transcripts and other notes and documents related to the study. The digital audio recordings for each interview were transcribed to a computer data file that was password protected. Digital recordings were destroyed by deleting them from the recorder once the transcriptions were determined to be free from error. The consent form, when signed, was the only form that contained the signature of the participant and was labeled with the pseudonym that corresponded with each participant. All information and data collected, with the exception of the informed consent form, were de-identified. Inspired by feminist and phenomenological goals, the interview process began with the participants being asked to choose a pseudonym and then proceeded where the women Marine chose to begin (Webb, 1984). This aided in the protection of confidentiality and also increased the likelihood for the interview process to be an interactive process.

The researcher used raw data collected from each participant (transcribed from recordings and verbally articulated by the participants) and analyzed the data manually. The



method to organize and analyze the data collected was derived from the modified version, termed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, explicated by Moustakas (1994). This data analysis method entailed four main steps. The first step was to gain a full description of the experience of the phenomenon. Then, using verbatim transcriptions, detail significant descriptions, relevant statements, non-overlapping statements and eventually cluster the text units of meaning into themes. These meanings were synthesized into descriptions with examples from the text to construct a description of the structures of the experience. This resulted in a rich description of the “meanings and essences” of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). This was accomplished from the experience of the researcher and the participants and eventually led to an integrated universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole.

The interview responses from the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim to describe the experiences of the women interviewed. The goal of data interpretation was not to generalize findings, but rather to communicate the genuine, honest, and authentic research process that produced information to arrive at a better understanding of the participants. The findings were then used to offer suggestions to improve or modify existing theories or suggest new theoretical constructs for future research and exploration.

### **Aspects of Rigor**

Qualitative inquiry is concerned with outcomes that are trustworthy, credible, worthy of explanation, and reflective of the relationship dynamics between the researcher and those participating in the research (Webb, 1993). This researcher employed efforts to set aside prejudgments (the *epoche*) and began each research interview with an account of her biases and position, which allowed for a receptive presence focused on the participant’s perceptions to be explored. This process sought to intentionally develop an informal and mutual relationship with

those involved in the research study to allow for a more intimate view of how these women experienced stress and coped in the military setting. This research was an interactive and shared process that allowed for results that were collective interpretations of all involved (Harding, 1987). This ensured that the rigor of the interpretivist research involved methods to demonstrate a commitment to the inclusion of all perspectives.

Other aspects of rigor for phenomenological studies are notable (Creswell, 2013). The first of these is that a clear phenomenon is the focus of the study. For this project, the social phenomenon of active duty women Marines offered a clear distinction about who was best suited to provide information. Participants were examined in close proximity to the USMC environment as a way to stimulate and capture rich descriptions about their circumstances. Next, a study should depict reflexivity throughout. This component was described throughout the design of this project, where the researcher positioned herself initially, during the first interaction with each participant prior to data collection. The third component to improve rigor is by use of a procedural data analysis method. The method of choice for this study was a structured method that was specifically modified to add clarity to the analysis process and offer a consistent analysis, especially for researchers with limited experience analyzing phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). The last component for rigor is the synthesis of meanings derived from the interpretations of the phenomenon under study. The intention here was to relate and differentiate the findings from the study to findings in the literature review, and suggest how these new findings could be utilized for future research and theory development, practice, and policy.

The interpretivist paradigm afforded this researcher the opportunity to improve her understanding of those people studied. This occurred with a research design that allowed for emergence through the ongoing and flexible research process characteristic of the interpretive

paradigmatic perspective. This focus allowed for the potential of new developments in theory or clinical insights to help determine better practices and solutions for problems people experience in their situations based upon this study's interpretations. A reconstruction of meaning may result in changing perspectives about a women's military service experience.

The focus and goal was to arrive at the meanings that can improve our understanding of how these female participants experience military service life, and reveal new aspects of diversity not yet discovered. This process opened up opportunities for redefining or shaping the views held by the status quo. It called into question the researcher's ability to know enough about the diverse population under study and emphasized the importance of the researcher ensuring the participants involved knew what the researcher's assumptions were before the research began (Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2008).

The findings from this study are described in various forms in Chapter 4. The demographics for each participant are displayed in table form. Narrative statements are used to describe significant statements and link themes to perspectives derived from the participants. The overall interpretations of meaning achieved from the data analysis method are best articulated in narrative form.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the systematic research and knowledge building process related to the research topic of active duty women serving in the United States Marine Corps and how they experienced military service. This knowledge was achieved best with a qualitative design to offer an inductive process of inquiry guided by feminist standpoint epistemology and methodology situated in the interpretive paradigm perspective. This chapter argued that a feminist phenomenological methodology was best to guide this research process and demonstrate

opportunities to produce enhanced knowledge and understanding regarding the problems experienced by women in the military that research to date has failed to produce. Additional pertinent design issues were discussed to explain important conclusions relevant to social work values and ethics in research to meet the needs of those involved in the process. Chapter 4 will present an in-depth analysis of the data and presentation of the study findings.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Analysis and Presentation of the Data**

The goal of phenomenological research is to enrich our understanding of a specific phenomenon across the experiences of several individuals (Shaw & Hector, 2010). The findings discovered in a phenomenological study describe the everyday experience and the situations in which they occur for a select group (Padgett, 2008). For this study, the researcher sought to identify women who had active duty service experiences in the United States Marine Corps (USMC) and elected to describe those experiences during a digital audio-recorded interview.

The qualitative methodology used in this study allowed the participants to share their experiences and perspectives about being women on active duty in the United States Marine Corps in their own words. Their service-related experiences were described to depict the essence of the unique challenges attributed to being women in the Marines and to learn about how they cope and seek support. These perspectives were revealed during the interviews and through the researcher's analysis of the data.

This chapter contains an overview of the data collection, organization, and analysis procedures, as well as a presentation of the study findings. A description of the women who participated in the study is detailed to add depth to the presentation of findings. Five themes are summarized as the main findings. These themes are depicted using thick, strong excerpts from

the participants' narratives and reflective analysis by the researcher to explain the meaning of the experiences for the women participants as a whole.

**Description of the women participants.** Phenomenological research typically relies on a small number of purposively sampled participants to focus on core meanings about a specified phenomenon described from the experiences of several individuals (Polkinghorne, 1983; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, 15 participants volunteered to be interviewed. Each participant met the criterion to share lived experiences about the specified phenomenon. All participants self-referred and completed the informed consent form. Four participants waived signature on the consent form and verbally consented to participate and 11 elected to sign the informed consent form.

All of the participants were asked to complete a demographic information form (Appendix C). The demographic information collected descriptors about the participants and was used to help the researcher understand and interpret their experiences. An overview of the participant demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Summary of Participant Demographics*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Status / #Children</u>	<u># Combat Deployment</u>	<u>Education</u>
Louisa	E-3	21	Native Am.	Single / 0	0	Some College
Arlene	E-3	26	African Am.	Single / 0	0	Baccalaureate
Maggie	E-3	21	Hispanic	Married / 1	0	High School
Jamie	E-4	24	Caucasian	Married / 0	0	High School
Valencia	E-4	21	Hispanic	Married / 1	0	Associate
Ashley	E-4	21	Caucasian	Married / P	0	High School
Hayden	E-4	20	Caucasian	Married / P	0	High School
Sophie	E-5	25	Caucasian	Married / 0	0	Some College
Jessica	E-5	25	Caucasian	Single / 2	0	Some College
Autumn	E-6	35	African Am.	Separated / 2	0	Some College
JoJo	E-8	37	Caucasian	Married / 2	2 (total: 9 mo.)	Associate
Victoria	WO	34	Hispanic	Married / 1	0	Baccalaureate
Marysol	CWO3	41	Hispanic	Divorced / 2	0	Associate
Suzie	CWO4	43	Caucasian	Married / 4	2 (total: 14 mo.)	Baccalaureate
Robin	O-6	53	Caucasian	Married / 2	0	Master

Total Participants: 15 women Marines; 4 verbally consented and 11 consented with signature

Range of Time in Service: 1.5 years to 34 years

Eight of 10 women participants: are married to another Marine (7) or Soldier (1).

The participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years old. Eight participants identified as Caucasian, four as Hispanic, two as African American, and one as Native American. Ten participants were married (eight of whom had married active duty service members); three were single, one separated (from an active duty Marine), and one divorced (from an active duty Marine). Nine participants had dependent children (under the age of 18 years), two were pregnant, and four had no children. The sample of participants consisted of 11 enlisted women Marines ranging in rank from Lance Corporal (E-3) to First Sergeant (E-8), and four officer women Marines ranging in rank from Warrant Officer (WO) to Colonel (O-6). Most (ten) of the participants had never deployed, three had participated in routine, non-combat deployments, and two in combat-support deployments. The participants worked in a range of military occupational specialties (MOS) identified in fields such as comptroller, motor transport, supply, administration, and food service. The demographic education level identified four participants who earned a high school diploma, four who completed some college courses, three participants who earned an Associate degree, three who earned a Baccalaureate degree, and one participant who earned a Master degree.

**Data organization, coding, and analysis procedures.** Following completion of the interviews to collect data, the researcher manually transcribed the digital audio recordings for each of the 15 interviews conducted. The manual transcriptions resulted in 166 pages of raw transcripts of the verbatim words from the interviews. The data was then organized and managed manually by the researcher.

To begin the analysis procedure, the researcher performed bracketing to set aside pre-judgments about the research topic and questions and study the data with the least amount of bias possible (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then began the process of phenomenological



reduction by reading the transcripts over several times and highlighted significant statements. This is termed horizontalization of the data. Horizontalizing of the data is described by Moustakas (1994) as the consideration of every statement that is relevant to the topic and research question(s) as having equal value. This process resulted in the completion of 785 note cards. These note cards of horizontal statements were analyzed further to remove any that were redundant or overlapping. Eventually, this process resulted in the removal of 648 note cards.

The statements that remained, termed meaning units or horizons, were sorted (clustered) into common themes. Horizons represent distinct characteristics that help us understand the experience (Moustakas, 1994). These themes were grouped and developed into textural descriptions of the experience for the participants. The researcher's observations and consideration of underlying factors throughout examination of the data developed into structural descriptions about the experience. The result was the construction of the phenomenon from the combined textural and structural descriptions of the participants, which was integrated into the meaning or essence of experiences specific to the group (Flood, 2010).

This phenomenological data analysis procedure is described fully in Moustakas (1994). The overall goal of this data analysis procedure is to create a thematic description of the phenomenon explored using the participants' own words and phrases (Shaw & Hector, 2010). An overview of the data collection, organization, coding, and analysis procedures conducted is listed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Data Collection, Organization, Coding, and Analysis Procedures*

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Data Collection:

1. Researcher shared positionality and epoche with each participant prior to consent process.
2. Participant consented to participate, chose a pseudonym, and completed demographic form.
3. Participant responses to research question(s) were digitally audio recorded during each interview.

Data Organization:

1. Researcher manually transcribed each recorded interview verbatim (raw data).
2. Each transcribed interview document was labeled with a header (pseudonym and demographics), and each page and line was numbered.
3. Each statement identified the respondent (R = researcher and P = participant).
4. Each raw data transcript was stored on a password-protected computer.
5. Each transcript was re-read to determine accuracy and corrected.
6. Once verified as an error-free transcript, the recording was deleted.

Data Analysis:

1. Researcher performed bracketing to focus on research topic and question(s), then read each of the transcripts over several times.
2. Researcher went through each individual transcript and highlighted significant statements (horizontalization of the data).
3. All significant statements were gathered from all individual transcripts, and overlapping and repetitive statements were removed to reveal the meaning units (horizons).
4. These meaning units were clustered into themes and sub-themes from all of the interview transcripts and result in textural descriptions from the participants' narratives.
5. Researcher considered her observations collecting data and analyzing horizons and arrived at structural descriptions (underlying factors or "how" about the experience).
6. Researcher intuitively integrated the textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the phenomenon as a whole.

External Audit:

1. Reviewed audit criteria and examined chapters 1, 3, and 4 of the dissertation report.
2. Examined IRB documentation of approved documents: approvals of plan, informed consent form, and interview guide.
3. Examined participant interview transcripts, epoche, and self-reflexive journal and memos.
4. Upon examination of relevant documents, verified the research was conducted ethically, according to design and paradigmatic position, and the findings were trustworthy and represented the participants' experience using their own words.

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Overview of Moustakas (1994), Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method:

1. Epoche: Achieved in Step 1 during data collection and Step 1 during data analysis.
  2. Phenomenological Reduction: Achieved in Steps 2 - 4 during data analysis.
  3. Imaginative Variation: Achieved in Step 5 during data analysis.
  4. Synthesis of Meanings and Essence: Achieved in Step 6 during data analysis.
-

## **External Audit Process**

An external auditor examined several relevant documents to verify the authenticity of the design and credibility of the findings that were presented. To accomplish this task, the researcher developed criteria based from the literature on qualitative research using a phenomenological approach to generate knowledge. Padgett (2008) asserts an audit for phenomenological research must be carefully conducted to be sure the process does not “contaminate” the process of discovery (p. 194). Therefore, the auditor does not focus efforts on the interpretations and deep meaning found during the analysis. The role of the auditor is to verify that the study is trustworthy, conducted fairly and ethically, and the findings represent the experiences of the participants and can be traced back to the participants’ own words. Once the data analysis was complete, the researcher emailed relevant documents to the external auditor to conduct a thorough review. The details for the external audit are listed in Table 2. The audit criteria and external auditor report are listed as Appendix E and Appendix F.

## **Thematic Development**

Fifteen participants responded to four questions during the interview process. The participant data were analyzed, after being organized and managed, through the examination of statements and emerging themes from the thorough study of the responses provided from the interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This examination occurred as the researcher continually reviewed the raw transcripts, highlighted statements, removed repetitive statements, and clustered the meaning units to achieve core themes and sub-themes. The researcher coded the participants’ significant statements and clustered them to determine emerging themes. This process involved a re-examination for overlapping and non-research specific statements for elimination.

Once this process of elimination was completed, the horizons or meaning units remained for the basis of further analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The individual textural descriptions were collated and arranged into themes by key words, phrases, and sentences. The sub-themes that emerged from the core themes offer additional details about the complexity of the experience or perspective identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The core themes emerged from this inductive process (Flood, 2010), a process that is also reflexive and iterative (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The results of the phenomenological interviews were organized into a thematic portrayal to illuminate core themes and sub-themes. The core themes offer a context to better understand each of the sub-themes. All of the themes appeared repeatedly throughout many of the participants' narratives, and some were also intertwined. Table 3 lists the core themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Table 3

*Thematic Portrayal: Core Themes and Sub-Themes*

<i>Core Themes</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>
Theme 1: Active duty women Marines described perspectives, unique challenges, and conflicts they experienced because of the lack of representation of women in the United States Marine Corps.	(a) Male-Dominated World (b) Harder Work (c) Outnumbered (d) Conflict Being Women
Theme 2: Stereotypes and harassment perspectives and experiences contributed to a decreased sense of worth and belonging for women in the Marines.	(a) Stereotyping (b) Harassment (c) Women as Inferior
Theme 3: Women Marines recognized gender issues that they attributed to stressful experiences adapting to constant change; these issues contributed to role uncertainty, lack of opportunities, and challenges to manage multiple roles to be a Marine.	(a) Variable for Change (b) Role Uncertainty (c) Against Combat (d) Lack of Opportunities (e) Manage Multiple Roles
Theme 4: Women Marines employed various strategies to cope with the challenges and stressors they experienced to serve in an active duty capacity in the Marines.	(a) Positive Self-Coping (b) Positive Coping—Others (c) Negative Coping
Theme 5: Women Marines identified qualities of supportive leadership and expressed the need for mentoring from senior women Marines to improve their well-being in the Marines Corps environment.	(a) Supportive Leadership (b) Same-Gender Mentoring

## **Findings: Textural and Structural Descriptions**

The findings include five core themes and sub-themes discovered during the data analysis procedure. Participant descriptions, such as key words, phrases, or sentences highlighted from their narratives, are depicted to detail the themes that emerged. The findings are depicted using selected direct quotes from the participants' narratives. The participant responses were the basis for the researcher to generate the individual textural, structural, and textural-structural descriptions as the study findings (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions are the “what” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193; McNamara, 2005, p. 701) or qualities about the life experience, and structural descriptions comprise the “how” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194; McNamara, 2005, p. 701), the underlying conditions that are connected to the experience to reflect its deep meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

To describe the phenomenon for this study, the textural descriptions summarize participants' perceptions, reflections, feelings, and events related to the experience of being an active duty Marine and a woman. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, the raw interview transcripts were not included. Portions of the narratives from the transcriptions are presented with the themes to best illustrate the women participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The themes provide information to answer the overarching research question, with details to satisfy the aim and purpose of exploring the experiences of active duty women in the U.S. Marine Corps today. Table 4 lists individual data points for each of the core themes and sub-themes from the participant responses articulated during the interviews.

Table 4

*Individual Data Points for Core Themes and Sub-Themes*

<b>Core Theme</b>	<b>1</b>				<b>2</b>			<b>3</b>					<b>4</b>			<b>5</b>	
<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>
<b>Pseudonym</b>																	
Arlene				x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x
Ashley			x			x						x	x	x		x	x
Autumn		x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Hayden				x	x			x	x			x	x		x		
Jamie	x			x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		
Jessica				x	x	x		x					x	x			x
JoJo			x				x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x
Louisa	x	x			x	x	x			x			x	x	x		x
Maggie		x					x	x		x		x	x	x	x		
Marysol		x	x		x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x		x
Robin			x			x			x	x		x	x	x	x		
Sophie	x				x		x						x	x	x		x
Suzie		x	x		x			x	x	x	x		x	x			x
Valencia			x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x		
Victoria	x	x			x		x					x	x	x	x		

**Theme 1: Active duty women Marines described perspectives, unique challenges, and conflicts they experienced because of the lack of representation of women in the United States Marine Corps.**

All of the participants articulated perspectives and challenges related to their experiences as women serving on active duty in the United States Marine Corps.

**Male-dominated world — *A piece of meat in the middle of a dogfight.*** Victoria described her experience as “all of a sudden you are in an environment where there are of course so many males” (p. 1, line 29-30).... [I]t is a male-dominated world” (p. 1, line 42-43 and p. 3, line 95). Jamie described her experience of being a woman in a male-dominated Marine Corps environment. She was “the only female in the motor pool, so 40-45 men around me, and it’s kind of like I am a piece of meat in the middle of a dogfight” (p. 2, line 81-82). Another participant shared that “it’s more stressful just being a female...because it’s such a hypermasculine environment” (Sophie, p. 3, line 95 and 100). Another participant perceived that “all male Marines are against the idea of female Marines, and there are too many of them and not enough of us. In different conversations and things we are left out” (Louisa, p. 1, line 20-23).

**Harder work to be a woman Marine — *The superstar.*** Victoria explained, “because you are a woman, you have to work harder just to be a Marine and you will never be at the same level as the men! They are always watching and we will always be below it!” (p. 2, line 79-81). “We are women trying to be them, we gotta do everything they do plus everything else! So it’s difficult” (Victoria, p. 3, line 96-97). Suzie perceived that it is “so fucking hard to be a woman and a Marine and every day you have to prove yourself in the Marine Corps, you can never relax. [silence] I feel like everyday you have to be a superstar” (p. 8, line 338-343). As a woman Marine, Autumn explained she must “work twice as hard to get half as much” as her male



counterparts (p. 1, line 4-5). Marysol spelled out how she “was judged based on my gender. I had to prove my credibility every single time I PCS’d<sup>1</sup>” (p. 4, line 174-176). Maggie believed it is “harder to try to meet the new standards.... [T]hey are trying to make them more equal to the men” (p. 2, line 73-74) and wondered if “that maybe they are trying to get rid of us” (p. 3, line 86). Louisa explained that for “all female Marines it’s harder to go through every day because you don’t feel that you can trust anybody and that makes it even harder to work there” (p. 6, line 237-239).

**Outnumbered to men in the Marines — *The outlier*.** Robin articulated her experience: “[A]s a woman in the Marines, I am an outlier” (p. 23, line 976 - 977). Suzie reported, “it just seems like there are so few women they get noticed more and usually in a bad way.... [N]othing about being in the Marines can be associated with being a woman! Women have to manage a lot of different kinds of stress and pain than the men.... [T]hey will never understand it” (p. 10, line 403-404 and p. 17, line 724-726). Valencia explained, “it is hard to be outnumbered. There are not many women to men in the Marines...and things keep changing for us and not them” (p. 5, line 193). Another participant shared that “there is a stigma attached to being a woman already because there are less of us, any sign of a problem or weakness makes it worse, especially in the Marines” (JoJo, p. 7, line 286-288). She added, “I have definitely been treated different and it feels unfair at times, for being a woman Marine” (JoJo, p. 8, line 323-324). Ashley felt “like I would be kind of plain if I wasn’t in the Marine Corps” but at the same time was “bothered and annoyed” when she was not recognized for being a Marine, and was seen by others as “too pretty” to be one (p. 5, line 211 and 217). Ashley further acknowledged this to be part of her experience of being outnumbered relative to men in the Marines (p. 6, line 245). Marysol termed

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<sup>1</sup> PCS is a Permanent Change of Station to a new duty assignment.

women Marines as “the fewer and the prouder” (p. 10, line 447) and another participant confirmed, “we are the fewer and the prouder...and there are even fewer that actually stay in to retire!” (Ashley, p. 7, line 277-278).

**Conflict being women while being Marines — *Hide being a woman to be a Marine.***

Autumn explained having a complex for about the first nine years of her enlisted career and felt challenged to even participate in “a conversation with a male Marine...you could just see them paying attention to your body parts and not you.... [I]t happened so much.... I would cover myself up as much as possible, even when it was really hot outside, it was so uncomfortable...until I got a breast reduction” (p. 7, line 279–285). She explained further, “to be a Marine I had to deal with that and hide being a woman as much as possible” (p. 7, line 287-288).

Arlene struggled with the physical demands to be a woman and a Marine: “[H]ow do I get my body to adjust and how come we have to be able to do what males do? Male Marines haven’t had to adapt to a lot of changes like us, we are constantly having changes to adjust” (p. 2, line 56-59). And she was concerned about her future if she cannot meet the new standards: “[Y]ou are not gonna be recommended for promotion.... I have heard from other males.... [T]here’s gonna be a lot of Corporal slots open...cuz females are not gonna be able to even make the physical standard for pull-ups and such” (p. 3, line 92-95). She concluded, “[I]t seems like the Marine Corps is trying to push the women out” (p.3, line 101-102). Jessica felt similarly to Arlene, and stated, “I do feel like the Marine Corps is trying to weed us out.... [W]e are just not recognized for being women and it’s just hard to explain!” (p. 4, line 165 and line 168).

This struggle between how to be both a woman and a Marine resulted in Jamie experiencing problems in her work environment, because “I guess in so many words, I was being

a woman and I wasn't being a Marine" (p. 4, line 137-138), and "[I]t's just hard being a female in the Marine Corps because you can't do things that a woman would do without other guys viewing you as different" (p. 4, line 159-160). Hayden shared how "the transition is hard to make" and that she struggled because "I didn't know how to not be a Marine. I was so stuck on the way that I had become and didn't know how to be a woman or a wife! I got so stuck in being a Marine, that I completely forgot about who I was as a woman! I knew who I used to be but it's like I couldn't figure out how to do it again" (p. 8-9, line 360-363).

**Theme 2: Stereotypes and harassment perspectives and experiences contributed to a decreased sense of worth and belonging for women Marines.**

**Stereotyping women Marines — *The object.*** More than half of the women participants described how they perceived or experienced negative stereotyping and labeling for being both a woman and a Marine. Jamie shared her perspective about why women Marines are stereotyped: "I feel like in my Marine Corps career I have dealt with being seen in a bad way because I am a woman.... [B]eing a female in the Marine Corps is hard because if you can't do what the men can do or want you to do, then you're viewed differently and in a negative way" (p. 4, line 148-152). Sophie explained how she was stereotyped upon arrival to her first command assignment: "[W]hen I first checked in, you had three labels, you were either a bitch, a lesbian, or a whore, and you know as soon as you check in they will stereotype you.... I was a lesbian...cuz I wore basketball shorts my first two weeks there. It was tough" (p. 2, line 45-55). Valencia articulated her knowledge of the negative stereotyping about women in the Marines as "you are either here to date, to have sex, or they just see you as an object" (p. 1, line 39-40).

These derogatory terms were used as rumor by others regardless of the character of the woman Marine: "[E]ven though I was not that type of Marine, people will always talk about

you...that me and my First Sergeant slept together and that is a total lie and things like that get me really mad and upset because first of all it's not true and second of all, I can't do nothing, I mean what is there to do?" (Valencia, p. 3, line 114-122).

Many of the women participants expressed various terms used by men to negatively label or depict women Marines. Louisa explicated how one derogatory term was used frequently in her work section: "B-I-T-C-H...this is the saying for a female dog.... [W]hen people talk about females... 'those bitches' ...they are referring to a female and it is derogatory.... [E]ven when they say it around the office supposedly joking around, I would get very, very offended and I hate it!" (p. 9, line 362-366). Another derogatory term, "barracks rat," was used to stereotype single women Marines who live in the barracks. Arlene defined this term as, "a barracks rat is someone that sleeps around with a whole bunch of men...and even if I am dating someone else, they may think of me as a barracks rat" (p. 5, line 199 and 203). Hayden was called a "PFC" and wrongly assumed it was the acronym for her rank of Private First Class (E-2), until she learned that it meant "Pussy For Corporals" to her Corporal (E-4 section leader), who was a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and senior to her in rank and position (p. 4, line 177).

Another participant explained her perspective about how stereotyping occurs when a woman Marine is in charge of men: "[M]ost if not all males have a problem with female leadership cuz we are 'inferior'...that is the stereotype" (Jessica, p. 4, line 144-145). Suzie reported that the Gunnery Sergeant and Captain she worked for both informed her, "I don't think women should be in the Marine Corps because they are just a pain in the ass" (p. 6, line 246-247). Women in the Marines must understand and accept that "females get labeled....[L]ike, we are only here to get married...are having babies back-to-back...have a baby when not even married" (Victoria, p. 2, line 55-57). These derogatory stereotypes greeted these women Marines

as they initially check in for billeted command assignments and during their daily routines and performance of assigned duties. These stereotypes were negatively depicted, experienced, and perceived by the woman who shared these experiences.

Another woman participant spoke of how hard she worked to earn a promotion while struggling with rumors circling her work section that women Marines were the “quota filler,” and felt confused and disheartened when her senior leadership congratulated her upon selection for the promotion while simultaneously exclaiming, “I don’t like your kind, I don’t care for your kind and I don’t believe you belong in my beloved Corps” (Marysol, p. 3, line 104 and line 109-110).

**Harassment: women Marines’ perspectives — *Men discriminate against the women.***

The women participants shared their perspectives about issues of harassment in the Marines. One participant expressed, “[Y]ou are a woman in the Marines and that’s the reason all the rumors start and everything else bad happens to us” (Valencia, p. 6, line 261-262). Ashley “knows those issues are out there with sexual harassment and assault...where men discriminate against the women” and felt “lucky” she had not “run into that” (p. 1, line 7-10). Robin realized that “there are times that I am being discriminated against because I am a woman but I am too busy to worry about it” and so chose to ignore it (p. 23, line 979-981). Jessica described her perception that sexual and gender harassment occurs to all military women: “[E]very woman that wears a uniform has been harassed sexually for just for being a woman” (p. 5, line 211-212).

More than half of the woman participants described actual experiences of gender or sexual harassment perpetrated against them since they have been in the Marine Corps environment. Gender harassment, as a non-sexual form of discrimination, may be a strategy to enforce traditional gender roles in response to a violation of those roles, or to undermine

women's attempts at gaining power or authority, and/or to challenge women's authority as illegitimately obtained or earned (Miller, 2000). Some behaviors associated with gender harassment may involve constant and excessive scrutiny, gossip and rumors, indirect threats, and/or resistance to authority (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). Perpetrators of gender harassment can be subordinates, peers, and leaders of women Marines. Sexual harassment, as a form of sex discrimination, may involve various type of behaviors or acts such as unwelcomed sexual advances, and verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, such as unsolicited or unwarranted touching that occurs in a workplace setting and could lead to a hostile work environment (SECNAVINST 5300.26D, 2006). Sexual harassment can involve aspects of "gender harassment, which is inappropriately calling attention to women's or men's bodies" (Lorber, 2000, p. 291). Both forms of harassment were described by many of the woman participants and were perceived by them to be degrading experiences.

**Harassment: women Marines' experiences — *Being hit on and violated.*** One form of harassment described by many of the participants was achieved with acts of intimidation from men in the Marines, often in positions of seniority to the woman participants. JoJo recalled this experience when she was a junior Marine: "I was seen as the little girl to them, like they could kind of bully me" (p. 1, line 27); and she shared an example: "I used to smoke and he came up to me and just grabbed the cigarette out of my mouth and starting smoking it" (p. 1, line 18-20). "I just felt like they thought they could take advantage of me and walk over me and it was okay...because I was a female" (p. 1, line 20-22). Another instance involved the experience of "one Staff Sergeant told me that my eyes were talking to him" and left her confused about what this statement meant ( p. 1, line 15-16). JoJo shared how these experiences left her feeling "like I can't stick up for myself" (p. 1, line 44).

Other participants detailed accounts of harassment, in the form of direct and indirect threats or fraternization, perpetrated by senior leadership. One participant described, “this one Sergeant Major made it his mission to run as fast and as hard to drop<sup>2</sup> any female Marines” (Marysol, p. 5, line 180-181). Jessica experienced “enough harassment to fill a 25-year career!” from one Master Gunnery Sergeant; this recollection included her detailed description of being stalked after hours and verbally threatened by him: “‘I don’t fucking like you...and I am gonna get you the fuck out.’... [H]e tried to get me NJP’d<sup>3</sup>, he tried to stop my promotion to Sergeant” (p. 9, line 375-379). Jessica went on to explain how she “almost didn’t re-enlist, he made my life hell, I hated the Marine Corps because of one single person!” (p. 8-9, line 359-360). She recalled another example that occurred during her deployment to Bahrain when she was routinely “being hit on by senior leadership like ‘when are you gonna go out drinking with me’ and I am like, ‘no Master Sergeant or Master Guns, [I’m] not going out with you!’” (p. 6, line 227-230). And Jessica shared another experience: “[L]ike they would do eyes right when the drill instructors were marching their platoons by us to have every single recruit look at us.... [I]t is like being violated.... [T]hey are teaching male Marines to harass female Marines!” (p. 7, line 275-280).

Other women participants described experiences of sexual harassment in the form of unwanted sexual contact and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Autumn described a sexual harassment experience when she was a Corporal, perpetrated by her senior leader, a Gunnery Sergeant, “who would come in to my room when I lived in the barracks all of the time, and he would make these sexual comments and sit on my bed.... I was so uncomfortable and didn’t know what to say because he was such a higher rank than me” (p. 7,

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<sup>2</sup> Physical training for the unit often is comprised of running in formation. When those in front of the formation, such as the Sergeant Major, run very fast, those in the back have to run very, very fast to try to keep up. Many women, smaller and shorter, have a difficult time keeping up, especially if in the back of the formation.

<sup>3</sup> NJP is Non-Judicial Punishment.

line 302-304). She stated, “[T]here is still this feeling that women are not safe,” and she speaks with authority as she routinely responds to sexual assaults in the role of Uniformed Victim Advocate (UVA) for her current command. She reported that “sexual assaults occur in the barracks and some of them are covered up” (Autumn, p. 7, line 299-301). Autumn described how these experiences “makes you feel powerless.... [I]t was confusing.... I was scared” (p. 8, line 320 and line 323).

Louisa recently experienced a sexual harassment incident, one specifically by her senior section leader, a Master Sergeant, who messaged her on Facebook and “definitely said some inappropriate things — that he wanted to engage in sexual activity” (p. 3, line 112-118). This experience left her feeling “very guarded and very overwhelmed...like I can’t do this anymore...please get me out of here.... I would complain all the time” (p. 4, line 133 and 140-142 and p. 2, line 67). Arlene “felt awkward” when she had to assume the position called “guard the mount” during martial arts training (MCMAP) and experienced her higher ranking partner making “sexist comments” (p. 8, line 341-343). Marysol reported how she screamed and ran away following an incident while traveling from the port-o-potty at a field training site when her platoon Sergeant “came up from behind, grabbed me, and placed both his hands on my side from my hips and touched me all the way up to my breasts and up to my armpits...then licked the side of my face and said, ‘you like it?’” (p. 1, line 29-34). Jamie experienced her Sergeant in the motor pool “come by me and brush against my butt” (p. 2, line 89-90). Many choose not to report harassment when it occurs in the Marines because they “are afraid of the reprisal against them,” worry about what “is gonna happen to them and their career,” or fear that leadership will “look at me differently for ruining that person’s career — [I]t’s a small Marine Corps and they don’t see the fact that they’ve jeopardized my happiness at work — they don’t see any of that,



they just see ‘oh you’ve ruined his career’ if you report it or take action” (Jessica, p. 6, line 255-262).

**Women Marines are inferior to men in the Marines — *The quota filler*.** Several of the women participants described how they perceived being negatively viewed in the day-to-day Marine Corps environment. This perception was described as concurrent with various situations, such as when women were selected for promotion, their performance abilities, their assumed physical limitations, during pregnancy, their unequal treatment during training, and negative perceptions when and if women they knew decided to leave the military. This perspective was described by the women participants as negative and based on the status of being women in the Marines.

Autumn perceived that the degraded perspectives about women originated in boot camp: “[A]s an instructor at SOI (School of Infantry)...I got to interact with many of the male Marines who come right out of boot camp with these perceptions that females are inferior.... [T]hey already have negative thoughts in their mind[s] that females are bad in the Marine Corps” (p. 2, line 62-64). Louisa confirms this possibility: “I feel as a woman Marine that we are held to a certain standard.... [M]ale Marines view female Marines are weak.... [W]e are viewed in the whole Marine Corps as...still not 100% with them” (p. 1, line 2-6). Louisa reported that the male Marines question her, “‘why aren’t you as good as the rest of us?’ meaning male Marines” and, she added, “it’s like we’re not good enough to be here.... [T]hey yell at us like ‘oh, just another female Marine not being able to do what we do’ as Marines” (p. 1, line 26-31).

Maggie asked her fellow Marines to treat her the same as the men she worked with: “I told the other Marines that I don’t want the male Marines to favor me cuz I have had it before and it doesn’t go well.... [T]hey will give me crap about it.... [W]hen it is time to pick up

Corporal...my fellow Marines will think that I got it through favoritism... [A] lot of times when females pick up the next rank...they will say...‘oh, you know how she picked it up.’... [T]hat’s what I don’t want.... I want to be respected” (p. 5, line 190-195).

Although Louisa “can shoot a pistol or rifle better than anyone in my office! I am actually a coach...at the range.... [S]ome people will talk and say females can’t shoot and they can’t run a PFT<sup>4</sup>” (p. 9, line 353-356).

Sophie, while on limited and then light duty after sustaining injuries from a car accident, would “get the jokes — ‘oh, you’re another female hurt or you’re another female on light duty.’ I mean you get that a lot.... [Y]ou’re just being a typical female, you know — light duty” (p. 3, line 111-112 and p. 5, line 199-200).

Marysol believed she avoided the possibility of fitting into the negative perception “for the women at that 10-12 year mark, who walks away and says ‘I am done,’ and she is criticized like ‘oh you couldn’t hack it or make it’” by staying in the Marines (p. 10, line 408-410).

Victoria believed that because there are so many male Marines, “[T]hey don’t have to work as hard as I do to get to where I am at.... I have done more than you and you got this and I only got that? And when I do get something for my work, they say it’s because I am a woman!” (p. 5, line 205-209). She explained one example of this: “I went up on a meritorious Sergeant board [and was told] ‘well, you only got it because you’re female.’” She expressed disbelief: “[T]hat doesn’t make sense! Look at the paperwork!” and felt confused and wondered, “why am I not considered good enough?” (p. 5, line 210-215).

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<sup>4</sup> PFT is a Physical Fitness Test.

**Theme 3: Women Marines recognized gender issues that they attributed to stressful experiences adapting to constant change; these issues contributed to role uncertainty, lack of opportunities, and challenges to manage multiple roles to be a Marine.**

Many of the women participants shared their perceptions and experiences about the impact they felt when subjected to degraded perspectives about being women, a reaction that involved challenges, uncertainty, confusion, and concern about their role or purpose in the Marine Corps as women.

**Women Marines are the variable for change — *Because we are different?*** The women participants recognized issues related to gender and the experience of being the variable, the exception that doesn't fit when continually changing standards are set for physical training, uniform requirements, and designation into combat military occupational specialty (MOS) roles. Many of the women did not understand why they were the focus or variable for many of the changes in the Marine Corps. JoJo "believes in equality for women, but I don't believe they understand what equality means in the Marines. To be equal in the Marines, you can't be a woman because they don't value me equally for being a woman. They keep trying to make me do things like them and look like them and I will never be able to do that. It feels isolating" (p. 6-7, line 262-266).

Jamie reported, "[W]ith the uniform changes and the pull-ups and stuff like that, they are trying to make men and women equal, and in Marine life we are never gonna be equal" (p. 7, line 283-285). JoJo reported, "It is stressful always having to be the one who has to change!" (p. 5, line 196). She emphasized that this stress related to being the variable of change because she is a woman Marine. "[W]hy are they always changing the female standard to meet the male standard? This adds to the stress of being a woman here" (p. 5, line 199-200). To JoJo, women

will never achieve equality with men in the Marines, because “we are not equal, we are different species, men are different from women. To try and put us all on the same playing field, is not fair. Men have to do 20 pull-ups for 100 points and women now have to do 6 for 100 points. They see that as unfair, we have to do less to get the same points.... It will never be equal in their eyes” (p. 5, line 189-193). Jessica emphasized the lack of equality between men’s and women’s physical standards in the Marines, and said, “it’s not equal in their eyes” (p. 4, line 158), as women are faced with doing pull-ups now instead of the flex arm hang. When she challenged her Staff Sergeant to attempt the flex arm hang, he could not accomplish it. “I don’t think it is fair to ask us to meet the male standards...like pull-ups.... [I]f we can’t do it, I feel like we get punished (Maggie, p. 3, line 90-94). Arlene affirmed, “I don’t think it is fair that women have to change their standards.... [J]ust because I can’t lift a hundred ammo cans...doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be a Marine.... [I]t doesn’t make sense” (p. 3, line 110-114).

JoJo declared, “I don’t understand why we have to keep trying to fit into higher and harder standards” (p. 8, line 340 - 341), and was concerned that “as they keep changing the standards for women and it is harder and harder to keep up..., this may make it harder for us to get along and harder to see how I perform well when the standards are getting harder and harder.... [I]t will be more difficult for me to keep up and look like I am a good performer” (p. 8, line 330-335). Jessica wondered “why haven’t they weeded out the males who can’t even do their pull-ups?” (p. 4, line 174-175). Suzie exclaimed, “[I]f they want us to be just like men — do you know how fucking hard that is gonna be? I am 43 years old and I have to do pull-ups now? Are you friggin’ kidding me? I work out like three hours a day for the past nine months and I can only do five pull-ups.... [Y]ou can’t have your cake and eat it too! You can’t have the experience I have and also have me meet those kind of physical standards too!” (p. 16, line 701-

714). Hayden perceived the pull-ups and new PFT requirements as “very nerve wracking! The majority of females have never done them before” (p. 6, line 263-264), whereas men have always been trained to meet this standard.

Valencia shared her challenge to perform the physical training standards because she is “small and short,” having experienced problems with her hips for most of her enlistment because of improperly fitted gear required to be worn during training evolutions such as the CFT<sup>5</sup> (p. 11, line 457-458). She went on to describe how the “helmets don’t fit either”...everything is big on me...even the flak jacket...you can literally put your hand in (pointed to the underarm area)...they don’t actually have a woman size for that.... [T]hey should like they do for regular uniforms.... I feel like if they are gonna go and change uniforms, they should look more into the training or protective gear.... [M]any women have the same problems” (p. 11-12, line 452-491). Maggie emphasized, “[W]e are obviously built different than males are.... [W]e have other needs that they don’t have..., like we have menstrual cycles...and many times there is no bathroom to change myself during hikes and field training.... [A]nd because of our height we struggle to keep up with the men on hikes...the daypack...frame...LB pack doesn’t fit me physically...and it was very painful.... [A]nd the males would say ‘oh you females can’t keep up with us’” (p. 2, line 48-63). Autumn described the situation similarly: “[B]iologically...with our cycles every month... [It was] even worse when I was pregnant.... [M]en don’t have to deal with it and it affects women differently.... [Y]ou now have to balance all of that and still get out there and act as though nothing is wrong” (p. 3-4, line 130-137).

Some of the women participants described their struggle to meet the weight standards, especially after pregnancy. Maggie stated, “[T]he biggest challenge right now for me, personally,

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<sup>5</sup> CFT is the Combat Fitness Test.

has been the whole weight issue” (p. 1, line 1). “I know the military only gives you six months after your due date to lose that weight.... [I]t was hard to lose it all, I just lost it all...but it was a very hard struggle” (Maggie, p. 1, line 2-5). Marysol remembered ruminating about her weight after the birth of her second child: “[A]ll the stressors and staying physically fit.... [H]ow am I gonna lose the weight, how am I gonna get back in Marine Corps standards?” and was thankful she could finally meet her weight standard eventually (p. 9, line 379-380). Valencia had “seen a lot of females struggle with the weight” after having a baby and with only a short time to return to full duty standards (p. 10, line 423). Hayden shared that “one main stressor for me is the weight thing” (p. 1, line 6). The male Marines were seen as “not understanding why I couldn’t lose the weight.... [T]hey would compare all females being pregnant as the same.... I felt like they were a lot harsher on me...and made it sound like they didn’t think I was actually putting my all into it...like, ‘are you really PT’ing<sup>6</sup>?’.... [T]hey made me keep a food diary of what I was eating.... [D]o you not trust me that I am doing it?.... [I]t was really stressful” (Maggie, p. 4, line 146-157).

**Role uncertainty experienced by women Marines — *But I am a woman!*** “You have to lose your womanhood to meet the male standard.... [T]hat is not okay with me” (Hayden, p. 7, line 287-289). “To be a Marine I had to hide being a woman as much as possible” because as a woman “when you take care of yourself...it is a sign of weakness” (Autumn, p. 4, line 162-163). Suzie described “this huge turmoil...during a period where I felt like in order to matter to the Marine Corps I had to be just as good as the men” (p. 19, line 830-832).

JoJo contemplated the possibility of not being able to be a Marine because of the stress related to changed standards: “[O]ur uniforms keep changing, our physical standards keep

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<sup>6</sup> PT is Physical Training.

changing...the men never have to change!” (p. 5, line 207-209), and her perceived difficulty in meeting the standards: “It may be time for me to get out because it is harder and harder to even try to meet it” (p. 5, line 206-207). JoJo felt “like they don’t want us in the Marines” (p. 7, line 209). Jamie shared, “I am getting out...because of the pull-ups and all the stuff that’s changing” (p. 7, line 291-293).

“It seems like the Marine Corps is trying to push the women out...because of the whole females in the infantry thing” (Arlene, p. 3, line 101-103). In the event Arlene ends up in a combat-designated billet, she worried that her training was inadequate. She reported that the male Marines were “too lenient on me [during MCMAP training<sup>7</sup>]... [H]ow am I going to be able to fight if in combat when I am getting trained like a female with them being lenient on me?” (p. 1, line 10-12). Autumn also “worried about the combat designated changes” (p. 3, line 117-118).

“Listen, I am a woman and they are men and there is a difference.... I don’t want to be gender neutral! I am a woman! (Robin, p. 12, line 499-501). Robin provided an example of how being a woman is not consistent with uniform changes: “[T]hey are making the covers and the uniform look the same...absolutely stupid...trying to make this androgynous-looking uniform and I am sorry, I am a woman and have womanly curves, I am a woman...and they are men” (p. 12, lines 503-505). Valencia agreed that the uniform changes erase important differences between men and women: “[I]f they are gonna change it, then make it different from the males’ uniforms because that is what makes us different right there, is the uniforms. If that was not the case, then why weren’t they the same since the Marine Corps first allowed women in?” (p. 5, line 210-218).

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<sup>7</sup> MCMAP is the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. Every Marine is required to be trained in it and earn belts as part of hand-to-hand combat readiness training.

**Against women in combat-designated billets — *Who decided that?*** Several other women expressed their views and concerns about the changes to military policy allowing women into combat-designated billets. Autumn was “concerned about women being combat-designated. Who decided that? I know me and other women I know are against it. But they are pushing forward and we don’t know why or who is behind it” (p. 3, line 110-112). “Women in combat is a bad idea,” said Valencia (p. 4, line 170). JoJo agreed: “I don’t think females belong in the infantry.... I never joined to be in the infantry” (p. 5, line 183-185). “There is not a lot of women in the Marine Corps!” said Robin (p. 11, line 457) and “there are jobs we [women] can do well in the Marine Corps.... I don’t think we should be in infantry, period” (p. 11, line 469-472) because “I am putting someone’s life on the line” (p. 12, line 488). Robin thought that women should not be in combat billets because “a women’s body is different and I don’t see a women’s body doing it...can’t handle the rigor of sustained prolonged combat.... [E]ven when we get our pull-ups in, we are still not gonna be matched up for combat.... I am a woman and they are men and there is a difference” (p. 12, line 484-500).

Maggie acknowledged some inner conflict on the matter: “[B]eing a female Marine, it’s hard saying it, but I don’t think we should be in combat,” and went on to note: “whole combat issue — we speak about that a lot around here!” (p. 1-2, line 36-43). Louisa feared that if women are in combat, it would “make male Marines want to protect females...and I don’t want it to be that way” (p. 10, line 411-412). Suzie wondered “about the whole thing with putting women in the infantry... ‘[O]h, if you put women in the infantry they will be more respected.’... [N]o, they fucking won’t be! Because you are trying to make them be men.... [W]e will be respected if we could be treated like the women that we are!” (p. 17, line 732-736).



Although the military is moving forward with plans to integrate women into combat-designated billets, several women shared how opportunities continue to be limited. Some women participants expressed the lack of opportunity to share their voices about changes or other issues that affect women Marines or described billets they wanted to occupy but were not allowed in because they are women.

**Lack of opportunities for women Marines — *Never given the chance.*** Autumn described how she has never been offered the opportunity to give feedback about being a woman in the Marines: “[N]o one wants to hear about us” (p. 3, line 98). Another woman shared her lack of opportunity to give input about changes for women Marines: “[N]o one ever has asked me...about uniforms, standards, or about women being in the infantry” (JoJo, p. 5, line 209-211). Further, opportunities were unavailable for specific duty assignments: “[A]s a female I was not ever given the chance to try certain things.... I wasn’t allowed in the live pits where the grenade range was...or any of the chief positions...because you had to be an 0311<sup>8</sup> and we could never be an 0311, or in an infantry position of any kind, so we could never be in a chief position” (Autumn, p. 2-3, line 87-92), and concluded how “chances to excel in certain billets were never possible because of my sex” (p. 3, line 92-93). Suzie shared her desire to be part of an “enlisted flight crew...or a navigator on a C-130.... [B]ut women couldn’t do that...women weren’t put into those fields” (p. 3, line 125-130), so she was assigned to a billet that was open to women and expressed how she “hates” her job (p. 4, line 142).

**Manage multiple roles to be women Marines — *Being not just a Marine.*** Many women participants described the challenges they faced to manage multiple roles while also serving as Marines. “Many of us are wives and mothers, and our male peers don’t understand it.

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<sup>8</sup> A 0311 is an infantry designated military occupational specialty in the USMC.

All those responsibilities fall on us” (Autumn, p. 1, line 4-6). Autumn went further to explain her perception: “I do the same as your wife but also the same job as you!” (p. 1, line 6-7).

Some women found it easier than others because they were married to active duty men in the military who “understand” the demands of being a Marine (Robin, p. 1, line 22; Ashley, p. 2, line 55; Valencia, p. 4, line 161). Others made decisions to be a Marine first. “If you are gonna be a good Marine, you gotta focus more on meeting the standards, not having kids and getting married. It’s too hard to do both!” (Arlene, p. 8, line 322). One woman participant, who was also a wife and a mother, managed her roles “by putting my career first.... [I] put my work before everything else, they [children] knew that [they] were second place and I think it bothered them, especially when they were teenagers” (Robin, p. 1, line 5-12).

Other women participants perceived their roles as wives and mothers a struggle to balance along with the demands of being a Marine, whether they were married to a Marine or not. Jamie reported her husband “doesn’t understand...and it makes my job and being here harder” (p. 4, line 177-178). Victoria shared that her difficulty in balancing being a wife, mother, and a Marine was causing problems in her marriage, because her husband routinely complained, “[Y]ou are always at work...you put work first, then the baby is second and then I am last.” This caused her to feel “exhausted from the day...because too much is expected out of me!” (p. 4, line 150-154). Maggie also reported feeling exhausted from managing her multiple roles; she explained, “that is one hard part of being not just a Marine but also a wife” (p. 6, line 253). Hayden struggled to negotiate her work and home life simultaneously. She explained that when you have “a family, you can’t make that a priority...like being married...and not letting it affect my work ethic, but it did.... [A]nd I wasn’t getting what I needed done” (p. 7, line 297 and 307-309).

Some of the women participants expressed the challenges of being pregnant while serving on active duty in the Marines. Autumn described her experience during her first pregnancy this way: “[I]t was bad, my Staff NCO at the time was like ‘we can’t use her for anything’ and always made a point of making me feel as though I was a burden” (p. 4, line 141-143). Valencia perceived that “when I was pregnant, I feel like that is one of the biggest things that marked me as a woman because, yeah, you wear a uniform but you are just like any other pregnant woman, just because you wear a uniform doesn’t make you any stronger.... [Y]ou are still in pain and they tell you ‘take it like you are a Marine and suck it up.’ So to me, I was like, I never want to get pregnant again in the Marines. I can’t and don’t want to deal with it. It was too hard” (p. 1-2, line 42-48). Another participant tearfully reported that “I was scrutinized for being pregnant...told that I did it on purpose to get out of [being deployed to] Iraq.... [T]hen when I didn’t get selected [for promotion]...I hated being pregnant. I wanted an abortion. I felt like a failure as a Marine” (Marysol, p. 8, line 339-344).

**Theme 4: Women Marines employed various strategies to cope with the challenges and stressors they experienced to serve in an active duty capacity in the Marines.**

All of the women participants described various strategies to cope with the stressors and challenges of being women in the Marines. Many women detailed ways to cope that involved use of self-generated strategies such as exercise, being assertive, setting boundaries, humor, and positive attitudes to be helpful. Others described seeking support from friends, family, peers, and leaders and explained that accessing external resources were helpful for support and assistance. Many of the women participants shared strategies they knew were unhealthy but perceived to be necessary because they lacked trust, opportunity, or a sense of belonging that might have let them approach others.

**Positive coping strategies: Use of self — *Stick up for or push yourself*.** Several of the women participants described using exercise as a positive way to cope with the stressors they experienced in the Marine Corps (Autumn, p. 5, line 176-177; Sophie, p. 9, line 380; Victoria, p. 3, line 106; Maggie, p. 7, line 265). Other women enacted assertive behaviors to manage the stress experienced in a male-dominated environment. Suzie asserted, “you need to stick up for yourself” (p. 19, line 808) and described this further as “you need to be able to be assertive and stand your ground” (p. 9, line 392). Sophie told male Marines who made negative comments to her: “dude, just shut up” (p. 6, line 237). One participant shared her belief that women Marines must be assertive because “the Marines is male-dominated and as women we are definitely outnumbered.... [T]he biggest thing you can’t do is let the men run over you.” Ashley emphasized how women must be strong, not act timid, and assert themselves to avoid being treated badly (Ashley, p. 6, line 244-253).

Other women described their ability to set boundaries that help them cope in the Marines. JoJo perceived as she has gotten “older, I do set more boundaries and use my judgment to decide what I will really put my all into” (p. 6, line 221-222). This was described as a helpful strategy for women participants to manage multiple roles or avoid negative labels. Arlene described, “I am a Marine 24/7 but I try not to bring my social life into work” so as to decrease the possibility of being labeled “another way than what you actually are” (p. 5, line 191-194). Hayden has “learned to set boundaries” to help her transition from the role of Marine in her work environment to the role of wife in her home environment, and admitted, “in the beginning it was extremely hard” (p. 7, line 311-313). Ashley believed her ability to set boundaries helped her avoid being victimized: “I don’t put myself in the type of a situation where something bad could

happen.... I come to work, do my work and Marine thing, and then I go home with my husband” (p. 4, line 156-163).

Humor was described by many of the women participants as a way to cope with aspects of being women in the Marines. When reporting to a new command assignment, “I make a point of making jokes” to alleviate the discomfort of being in a large group of male Marines because “we could laugh at ourselves, and it made the guys more comfortable and easier to be around us” (Suzie, p. 18, line 772). Arlene, a 26-year-old Lance Corporal, coped with the challenges of having male leaders who were “five years younger” than her by jokingly referring to herself as the “old lady” in conversations to “adapt and overcome” (p. 6, line 249-260). Robin laughingly admitted she coped by agreeing with men she worked with to avoid conflict, although she “would rather be responsible for it” because she knew she “can do a better job!” (p. 2, line 67). Robin often relied on “pretty spiffy comebacks” to cope with negative remarks voiced to her by male Marines about issues such as how women should not be in the Marines, rather than getting “offended” (p. 14, line 585-593).

Other women participants expressed aspects of a positive attitude or specific mindset about efforts to cope in their environment. “No matter what they ask of me, no matter how much stress and pressure, I still try my hardest” (JoJo, p. 5, line 211-212). Jessica understood that male Marines “are just gonna whoop my ass...but I am still gonna be there trying.... [I]f you try and put forth your effort, a 110%, and they see that, then they are gonna respect that” (p. 4, line 146-150). Arlene dealt with “whatever as a suck-it-up kind of thing” (p. 9, line 360). Jessica stated, although she may “suck” at something, she still “gives it 110%...just try, try again and don’t give up!” (p. 4, line 154). Marysol coped with her multiple roles by managing many demands with an attitude to “refocus...slow down...step by step...find a way to balance it all” (p. 13, line 542-

545). Maggie reminded herself “that the pain is not forever, it is only temporary!” while looking ahead of the obstacle (p. 3, line 101). “I am an 80% solution person.... [I]f you are a 100% solution type of person...in an organization this big...then you are screwed in the Marine Corps,” laughingly admitted Robin, who took comfort from her realization “that this too shall pass” (p. 9, line 380-383 and p. 3, line 89). Sophie coped with uncertainty about her next duty assignment and billet by stating “everything happens for a reason.... I wanna see what tomorrow brings” (p. 8, line 330 and 346). Arlene explained her motivation to push herself because “I want to be a Marine. The way I think about it is I have to push myself if I want to meet a certain goal and hearing those negative remarks about female Marines is just a stepping stone for me to get to where I need to be and motivates me to keep going” (p. 3, line 115-117).

Several of the women participants shared characteristics about themselves that motivated them to keep trying in spite of the unique challenges they experienced as women in the Marines. JoJo believed she “is just stubborn and has too much pride,” qualities that propel her to “just do it, whatever it is, no matter what...even if that means you die trying, then that is what you do” (p. 6, line 242-251). Arlene described how “I have to push my own self. Nothing is gonna change unless I change myself” (p. 2, line 78). Suzie explained, “[W]omen suck it up...we can handle shit better. I can’t bust out 20 pull-ups or whatever, but emotionally, women are stronger than men” (p. 13, line 551). “I just got to a point where I have been okay with me” (Suzie, p. 15, line 643). “The longer you are in the USMC, the more you realize that this is just how it is and you don’t take it as personal as maybe earlier in my career” (JoJo, p. 8, line, 310).

Several women described ways they relied on their intuition as a coping strategy to be women Marines. JoJo “likes talking about her feelings but it is hard to find someone to trust.... I listen to my gut and if my gut tells me NO, then I just suck it up and move on.” JoJo indicated

that she relied on her intuition to determine when it is safe for her to open up and express her views (p. 8, line 345-347). Autumn also relied on intuition: “[W]hen I get a bad vibe and listen to my— [pause] It is like a shield...it has worked so far!” (p. 8, line 328 and 334). Victoria expressed her intuition as “knowing it is a male-dominated world...and knowing when you don’t put yourself in that predicament where bad things may happen” (p. 1, line 42-44). Suzie “would just know” when a situation was potentially unsafe for her and would listen to her intuition to create safety, such as asking a trusted friend to walk her home (p. 5, line 206).

**Positive coping strategies: Use of others — *Seek support from others.*** JoJo “copes with my fellow First Sergeant” (p. 2, line 52) about her work related stressors. Autumn routinely talked with friends to cope with issues related to her pending divorce and parenting (p. 1, line 21-22; p. 5 193-194). Some women participants coped through the support of their non-military friends for child care support (Autumn, p. 6, line 227-230; Jessica, p. 1, line 17), work-related stressors (Jessica, p. 1, line 17; Autumn, p. 5, 193), and issues about whether to take medication (Suzie, p. 14, line 597-598).

Other women relied on family members to support them. Ashley relied on her husband if she experienced problems (p. 3, line 115). Arlene “may seek support from my mom.... I don’t seek support from anyone else” (p. 4, line 158). Jessica, as a single parent and active duty woman Marine, relied on her mother when she was deployed: “[M]y mom got custody so I knew they were taken care of then” (p. 1, line 4-6).

One participant shared how she frequently used the internet to “do a lot of research online and read up on other people’s stories...how failed marriages turn in to successful marriages” as a way to cope with her marital stressors (Jamie, p. 5, line 192-193). Louisa perceived her boyfriend, who is also a Marine, to be her “support system” (p. 9, line 370). Robin “consults with

peers” although she “doesn’t consider them friends or hang out with them” (p. 4, line 157).

Victoria relied on female Marines she has known since “boot camp...we talk to each other about our different experiences and we help each other...on the phone...because we are all over the place” (p. 6, line 227-229). Jamie felt “comfortable going to another female Marine” and shared how another woman Marine who works in her section was a source of support because they had similar experiences (p. 9-10, line 402-405).

Several of the women participants articulated ways they found command leaders to be helpful and sources of support. Arlene readily admitted how she sought out junior command leaders to help her practice pull-ups and improve her running time to meet the changed physical fitness standards (p. 2, line 81). Maggie described how one Sergeant helped motivate her to lose weight after she had her baby (p. 4, line 132). Jessica talked often to her Gunnery Sergeant, also a single parent, about her challenges to be a Marine and a single parent (p. 3, line 101). Louisa received advice and support from her First Sergeant when she was being sexually harassed (p. 5, line 214). JoJo called upon “some other Sergeants Major that I look up to and talk[ed] to them” about her work stressors and requested advice from them to seek resolutions (p. 2, line 78).

Other women described the importance of spirituality or religious practices to help them cope. Autumn said, “My relationship is stronger with God since I joined the Marines.... [B]eing a mom and a Marine is conflicting and I pray on it a lot” (p. 5, line 212-213). Robin sometimes found it relaxing when she went “to church” (p. 4, line 168). Sophie “believes in a greater force” to help her cope with being a woman in the Marines (p. 8, line 334). Valencia has gone “to church a lot so I leave all my problems to God.... I am religious and have so much faith...and going to church is where my peace and state of mind is at...like I am relaxed” (p. 3, line 125 and p. 8, line 350). Marysol tearfully expressed how a sense of “faith, not church” improved her



sense of pride in being a woman while serving in the Marines. She reported reading literature and “going back to scripture...about women persevering, women realizing that God made us in such a unique way” (p. 10, line 442-444).

Suzie sought formal counseling even though she “was worried about my security clearance,” to cope with an accumulation of work and family stressors. She stated that she trusted her doctor, a psychiatrist, after being reassured by him that if something needed to be disclosed to her command about her fitness for duty, “he promised he would tell me beforehand...so I would have time to make a decision” about whether or not to continue care or change her treatment (p. 14, line 607-619). Sophie sought help from “Military One Source and base therapy.... [T]hey have helped me more than my leadership has” (p. 4, line 138-141).

Louisa sought counseling “off base through Military One Source” and found it to be a supportive experience. After one session, “it felt good to get everything out and have somebody actually listen to you and contribute to your conversation” (p. 2, line 75 and p. 3, line 93-101).

Marysol sought counseling services when she “went into a depression,” concerned she “had become a Marine Corps statistic” after she was divorced from her husband, became a single parent, and was faced with juggling all of her responsibilities while being a woman Marine. She admitted she “finally broke down and got into counseling” (page 9, line 390). Autumn admitted she “had to find a release or else I would have blown a gasket and it would have cost me my career.” She sought counseling on base, although “she had to hit a brick wall before I would go there” (p. 4, line 171-174). Jamie “went to behavioral health” after she “got sick and started losing weight from all the stress” and recently she initiated counseling again “to balance out my marriage and my career” difficulties (p. 6, line 237-238 and 251-252). Although Autumn found counseling helpful, she was “still iffy about it, if I needed it again, because they have their rules

about certain things and I am still worried about any backlash from reaching out...or anyone knowing something is really wrong” (p. 5, line 183-186). JoJo sought help to manage her stress and found it was not helpful to her after all. “I did call DSTRESS<sup>9</sup> once but they asked so many questions, like profiling type questions that it didn’t seem anonymous to me, like they could find out who I was, so I hung up but I was stressed out and tried to call and didn’t like the questions, so I was like ‘forget this’” (p. 7, line 302).

**Negative coping strategies — *The most unhealthy way.*** To meet the weight standards, three of the women participants described disordered eating behaviors to help them lose weight. Hayden described how “myself and multiple females will take laxatives and won’t eat for several days before their weigh-in.... [W]e are just walking zombies...it is very stressful...gagging...dry heaves.... [I]t really puts a toll on your body...which is hurting me in the long run, but it was my last resort.... I had to get down or else I was gonna be put on BCP<sup>10</sup>” (p. 2, line 47-57). After her pregnancy, Hayden was challenged to meet the weight standards, and admitted, “I lost it in the most unhealthy way, I starved myself to do it” (p. 1, line 8). Maggie similarly perceived the only way she could lose weight to meet the Marine Corps standard was “to starve” herself (p. 4, line 162). Valencia shared her knowledge that “a lot of females out there try to not eat so they can make weight” (p. 10, line 431), and felt fortunate she did not have the same trouble losing weight after her baby was born.

Many of the women participants explained how avoidance was a necessary coping strategy to deal with maltreatment or work stress. After being sexually harassed, one woman acknowledged she “didn’t know what to do, I kept it in” (Louisa, p. 5, line 208). When Autumn was sexually harassed, she told herself, “I would never put myself in that position where they

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<sup>9</sup> DSTRESS is a hotline where Marines can call in 24/7 and gain advice and support by trained professionals outside of the Marine’s command environment — a way to reach formal sources of support without one’s command knowing directly.

<sup>10</sup> BCP is the Body Composition Program.

could do that to me and it made me put up a wall not to let people in, there is definitely a wall still there, even after 17 years in” (p. 8, line 330-332). Arlene knew she was “not supposed to let it slide but I did. I should have said something, but I didn’t” after sexist comments were made to her during a training event by her Sergeant (p. 8, line 352). Jamie tried to “stay to herself” to avoid the possibility of being “misinterpreted as a flirt” in the motor pool, her daily work environment (p. 5, line 208-209). JoJo tried “to avoid it if possible” or manage difficulties “on my own” when she experienced problems at work (p. 2, line 78 and p. 7, line 276). Sophie would go out to smoke when she was subjected to negative comments in her work place (p. 6, line 261). Although she could not afford the expense as a junior enlisted Marine, Valencia described spending “\$300 to go home every weekend...to deal with it,” that is, problems associated with being a woman Marine (p. 2, line 84).

Many of the woman participants described their inability to seek out other Marines as sources of support because they felt unable to trust them or to feel understood as women. Valencia reported, “I try not to go to a Marine.... [Y]ou just can’t trust them” (p. 1, line 9). Jamie related the difficulty of finding someone to help her cope with gender-related stressors: “I can’t trust you.... [A]s a female, trying to find someone to talk to, I can talk to these guys all day...[but] they don’t understand from a female’s point of view...just how to be there for a female” (p. 4-5, line 161-162 and 184-186). Victoria admitted, “I don’t have anyone...to tell my girl problems to...who know[s] exactly what you’re going through...have a common ground” (p. 6, line 240). Lack of trust in others caused two participants to “keep a lot of things bottled up” (Sophie, p. 10, line 427; Autumn, p. 2, line 45). “I was not doing a good job taking care of myself at all...pretending like all was fine although I was hurting inside” (Autumn, p. 4, line 167 and 169).

Other women participants delineated the limitations to seeking out command leadership as sources of support, and some were challenged to enjoy friendships because of the senior leadership positions they occupied. Marysol and Robin shared that “it is hard to have real friends...it is very difficult,” and went on to say that time spent to meet their work demands left little time to enjoy friendships outside of work, and how very few women share commonalities with them as senior women Marines (Marysol, p. 12, line 528 and Robin, p. 4, line 137). One senior woman Marine emphasized how she won’t seek others for help because “everybody will know and officers are supposed to lead and not be weak...not need help.... I wish there really was a way to do it anonymously...just go to the civilian community and get help without anybody knowing.... [T]hat would be ideal...and help prevent that breaking point!” (Victoria, p. 5, line 185–203). These women Marines, as senior leaders, often cope alone with their stressors and challenges.

**Theme 5: Women Marines identified qualities of supportive leadership and expressed the need for mentoring from senior women Marines to improve their well-being in the Marine Corps environment.**

**Supportive leadership qualities — *A leader who understands and cares about me.***

Autumn identified qualities in command leaders that she found supportive during her pregnancy: “[S]enior leadership was versed in what I could or could not do.... [T]hey sat me down and made sure I understood what it meant to take care of myself during that time” (p. 4, line 153-157). Similarly, Ashley explained that during her pregnancy her leadership was supportive “when I don’t feel good or need to go to an appointment or just need to talk to somebody — I have that right now.... I have a leader I know cares about me and if I have a problem I can go to them and

talk to them or if I need to do something.... [T]hey won't give me a hard time or ask me 20 questions about why I need to do it" (p. 1-2, line 41-48).

Louisa articulated her ability to approach a senior command leader she perceived to be supportive by "giving me really good advice about everything" when she experienced sexual harassment. She knew "he cared about me as a person and it wasn't more than on a professional level" (Louisa, p. 6, line 230-232). Sophie recalled working for "a really good Staff Sergeant" who encouraged her to re-enlist after she approached him with struggles in dealing with aspects about her sexual identity and inability to openly express them in the Marine Corps, given policy during that time (p. 2, line 67).

JoJo perceived her company commander to be approachable and supportive because he "understands family issues and never gives me a hard time if I need to take off" (p. 4, line 155). Suzie shared her perspective about Gunnery Sergeants she worked with; they knew "how to deal with women Marines and understood if a WM<sup>11</sup> had a childcare issue." She believed this knowledge was an important leadership quality to support women Marines who had children (Suzie, p. 12, line 499).

**Same-gender mentoring needed — *There are so few and we need them.*** Several women described the need for mentoring and positive role models as sources of support to them in the Marine Corps environment. Ashley shared, "[W]hen I see older female Marines I love trying to get to know them because it is so cool, because there are so few of them.... [T]he females in higher ranks gets smaller and smaller as you go up the chain.... [W]e gotta push some females up there because it's male-dominated and it's nice to have that female leadership,...female Marines need that" (p. 7, line 280-288). Arlene had "a female Master

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<sup>11</sup> WM is a woman Marine.

Guns<sup>12</sup>...I looked up to” (p. 7, line 271) and explained how this senior female Marine recently retired. Arlene went on to describe how “you barely see African American females officers and just senior female Marines, as female mentors and taking charge.... [I]t is motivating to me.” She shared how senior female Marines inspired her to strive to become one (p. 7, line 283-284).

Marysol stated, “I have yet to have a female mentor and believe it really would have helped me handle the stresses I have dealt with this whole time” (p. 3, line 116). Sophie explained how a senior woman Marine motivated her to practice her pull-ups to meet the new physical standard: “I remember when I saw her do that [the flex arm hang and then pull-ups], I started working on pull-ups.... I just bought a pull-up bar so I am working on them now at home” (p. 7, 274). Jessica described how women must improvise because senior female mentoring is lacking. Women Marines, she thought, “need to consider other female mentors they have had in their life...to be their mirror image, like how I mirror my mom, she was so strong. I want women in the Marines that I can mirror and have never had that. It’s so difficult because there are too few that ever get that far” (p. 6, line 247-250).

### **Essence of the Phenomenon of Being Women in the United States Marine Corps**

The major focus of the findings was to describe the participants’ experiences while serving on active duty in the USMC as women and illuminate their perspectives about coping and sources of support. These experiences were analyzed and interpreted from the narratives derived from the women participants as they shared their experiences in response to the central research question during the in-depth interview. The experience of being a woman on active duty in the United States Marine Corps today was described by the participants to be littered with unique challenges: women felt they exist as the outnumbered in this male-dominated

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<sup>12</sup> Master Gunnery Sergeant.

environment. These challenges were related to experiences of harder work and accompanied by various struggles and conflicts to negotiate the tension between their multiple roles and identities as women and Marines. These struggles involved perceptions that women Marines must live with a degraded perspective, a lack of positive recognition, and lack of understanding in an environment where they are always outnumbered to men and under constant scrutiny. The woman participants articulated their conflicted feelings and a decreased sense of belonging. Their struggles to fit into this environment were attributed to chronic and pervasive negative stereotyping, labeling, and harassment experiences because of their status as women in an environment based on dominant male standards. The women participants were left to face changing billets, standards, and increased demands to perform while living with a degraded perspective.

The women participants recognized as the predominant variable of change a number of entrenched issues related to their gender that contributed to the unique stressors they experienced as they strived to adapt. These experiences left the women conflicted even more about their purpose and role in the Marines, and added to the challenge to find a balance and simultaneously manage multiple roles well. To manage these conflicts, changes, and challenges, the women participants utilized various strategies to cope and continue to perform to the best of their abilities.

The women adopted a variety of strategies to navigate their journey and negotiate their unique challenges as women, while faced with gender and sexual harassment, a confused sense of belonging in the Marines, and uncertainty about their future in this environment. These descriptions about coping and seeking support led the participants to share conclusions and perspectives about supportive characteristics they found helpful in leadership and their desire and

need for same-gender mentoring to improve their well being. A visual depiction of the essence is presented in Figure 1. The findings portrayed the *oxymoron of being a woman Marine*. Both roles are contradictory and create a tension from the contrasted juxtaposition because of the

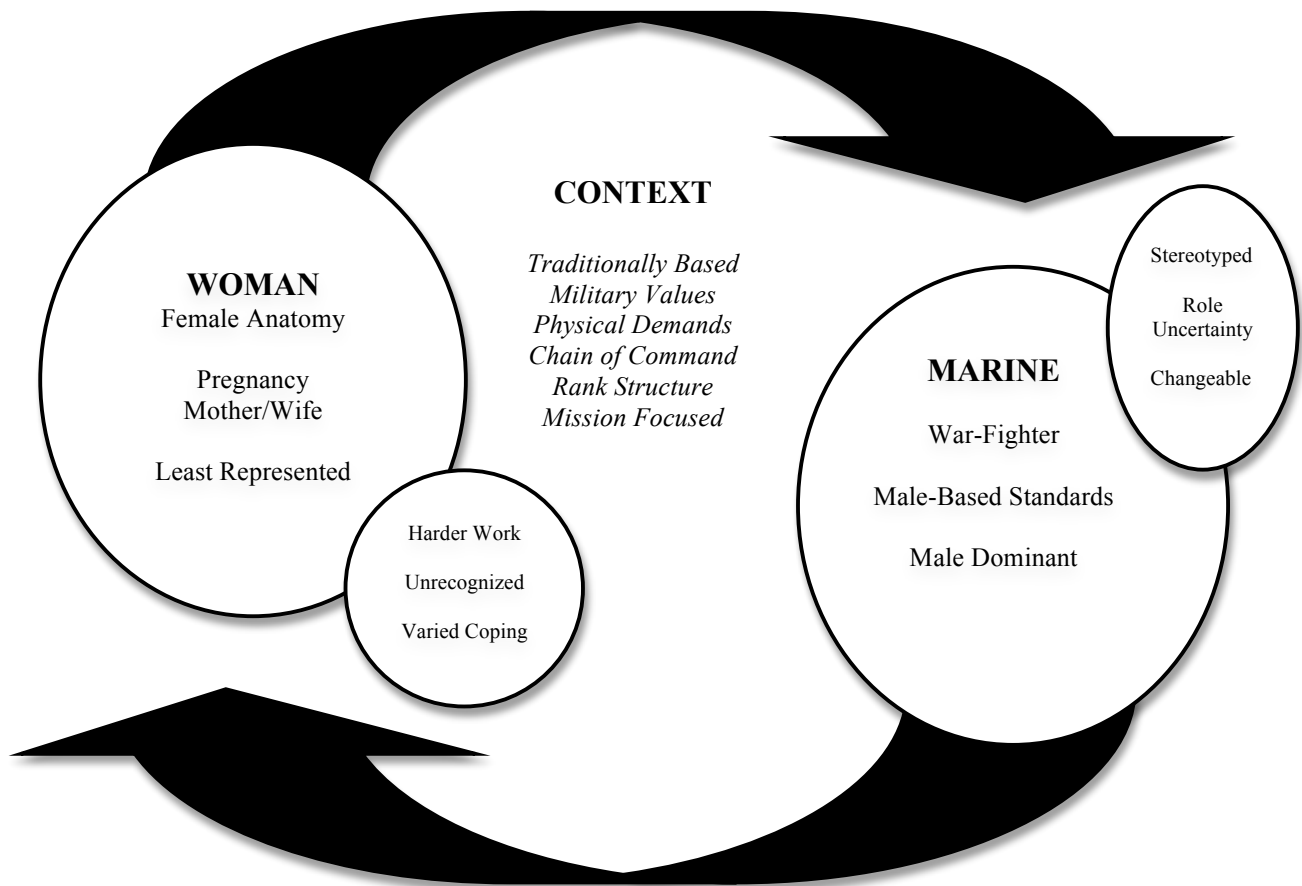


Figure 1: Visual Depiction of the Essence of Being Women Marines.

systematic inequalities inherent in the traditional male-dominated USMC organization. This tension has many implications for women Marines regarding their well-being and sources of support, and affects their sense of belonging, performance, and ability to seek support.



## **Conclusion**

This chapter summarized the data collection, organization, and analysis procedures, then presented the study findings. A description of the women who participated in the study was presented to add depth to the findings. Five themes emerged as the main findings. These themes were described using thick and rich excerpts from the participants' narratives and reflective analysis by the researcher to explicate the meaning and essence of the experience for the individuals as a whole. The following final chapter reviews the methodology, findings, and conclusions of the study. The final chapter then discusses social work implications of the study findings and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary and Implications**

This chapter includes a summary of the study. A discussion follows about how the findings answered the central research question and examined the four sub-questions. The findings are then evaluated and compared to the existing literature. Implications for social work, and military practices and policy are then considered. Last I will highlight recommendations for future research and details about how this study contributed to the body of knowledge for social workers and military leadership in the United States Marines Corps.

#### **Summary of Study**

This qualitative study was designed to explore the common meaning of active duty military service experiences for 15 purposively sampled women serving in the United States Marines Corps. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years old and consisted of 11 enlisted women Marines ranging in rank from Lance Corporal (E-3) to First Sergeant (E-8) and four officers ranging in rank from Warrant Officer (WO) to Colonel (O-6). The women participants ranged in active duty service time in the USMC from 1.5 to 34 years. The participants held a range of military occupational specialty (MOS) billets such as comptroller, motor transport, supply, administration, and food service. Ten women participants were married, eight of them to active duty servicemen. Ten women participants had children, two women were pregnant, and three participants had no children.

This inductive approach to the study allowed knowledge to be generated based on how the women Marine participants constructed the issues and perspectives from their everyday lived experiences. These 15 women Marines participated in this phenomenological study by sharing their experiences and outlooks, which were synthesized into the essence of being active duty women in the Marine Corps. From the participants' responses, five themes emerged that enhance an understanding of the common meanings articulated by all of the participants about the experience of being an active duty servicewoman in the male-dominated Marine Corps environment.

Each participant described her active duty military service experiences from the standpoint of being a woman, and each detailed unique challenges commonly attributed to being outnumbered by men. A recurrent perceived challenge was harder work that conflicted with their identity as women in a male-dominated environment. Each participant individually shared experiences of stereotyping or harassment that they perceived to originate from the gendered belief that women were inferior to men in the Marine Corps context. This sense of inferiority and degradation increased their perception of having to work harder and constantly adapt because they, as outsiders, were the basis for constant change. These changes and increased demands experienced by the participants contributed to their perceptions of role uncertainty, lack of opportunities to share their voices, inability to be positioned in desired billets, and increased challenges to manage multiple roles as women and active duty Marines. The women participants employed various positive and negative coping strategies to navigate the unique stressors and challenges they experienced, and shared qualities about command leaders they found supportive. Further, several women participants expressed the need for senior women Marines to mentor other women Marines.

## **Delimitations**

Qualitative research does not intend the findings be generalized to other settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). However, transferability is often a goal in qualitative studies to improve the potential for knowledge gleaned to be useful in different situations. Transferability of findings can prove valuable by allowing the locally generated knowledge and meanings discovered to extend beyond this study for larger meaning in similar groups or contexts (Padgett, 2008). For this study, women Marines were purposefully sampled from one United States Marine Corps base installation situated on the East coast. The reader must determine whether or not the richly described findings may readily transfer to different USMC settings, such as the environments found in forward deployed units, field training units, and formal military training schools. Therefore, it is a challenge to determine how far reaching the findings from this study may radiate.

Although this study was not a traditional community-based design, specific parameters were set by influential leaders in the military context to add protections for active duty research participants. These parameters included protections set a priori to conduct social science research in the Marines Corps environment as well as the recruitment strategies and pre-determined number of participants allowed for inclusion into the study. These a priori parameters may have limited the opportunity for other women Marines, not assigned to the specific battalion where solicitation of research participants was approved, to participate. Further, the researcher turned away volunteers after the maximum allowed sample was obtained, which prohibited their choice to share their voice and contribute to the development of knowledge.

Active duty women Marines were allowed to volunteer to participate in the study given their participation did not interfere with the performance of their military duties. Research in this

setting must prioritize the military mission and consider the possibility for a military participant to have limited or no availability for a follow-on interview or future contact. Given this possibility, member checking was not feasible and was not proposed following the in-depth interview. Member checking is one approach used frequently by phenomenologists to verify the accuracy of the meaning of experience for the individuals, and guard against researcher bias in the study (Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2008). Given the military context for this study and the sensitive nature of studying the phenomena of gender in a male-dominated organization, an external audit was conducted by an independent scholar with extensive experience in the USMC environment, qualitative research, and phenomenological data analysis to verify the trustworthiness of the process and credibility of the product for this study.

### **Summary of Findings**

Marines in the study represented junior and senior enlisted and officer ranks, varied in years of military service, partner status, and occupational specialties. This variation added a vibrancy and power to the commonly held meanings discovered about being women in the Marines, in spite of the participants' varied positions in this context. This variation further added a depth to understanding the many ways women Marines in various positions and with a range of service experience coped with their challenges. All of the women shared challenges and stressors, as well as aspects of coping and sources of support with minimal to no prompting. Most of the women participants began the interview by sharing specific experiences of stereotyping, harassment, coping, and sources of support in response to the central research question.

To explore the lived experiences of women on active duty in the United States Marine Corps, the central research question was asked of each participant to initiate the in-depth

interview: *How does the United States woman Marine on active duty recall and articulate her military service-related experiences and respond to the effects resulting from these experiences?*

The study included four sub-questions associated with prompts to guide the interview, as needed, to fully explore the phenomenon and elicit generous descriptions about it.

R1: Tell me about any specific military service-related experiences that may have affected you as a woman.

R2: Define your military service experiences since you have been on active duty as related to being a woman.

R3: Tell me about times you had recollections of experiences related to your military service.

R4: In what ways have your military experiences impacted you as a woman?

The underlying rationale of the central research question and sub-questions was to explore the common meaning for all of the participants as it related to the phenomenon of being a woman on active duty service in the United States Marine Corps. The data collected from the in-depth interviews emerged into five themes based on the commonality of meaning.

**Theme 1: Active duty women Marines described perspectives, unique challenges, and conflicts they experienced because of the lack of representation of women in the United States Marine Corps.**

Theme 1 related to the central research question describing the military service-related experiences of women on active duty in the United States Marine Corps. This theme also related to sub-questions 2 and 3. The women participants articulated unique experiences that involved their perception of having to work harder while simultaneously trying to manage conflict between their identities as women and Marines because they were outnumbered relative to men

in the Marines. The contradictory roles of being a woman and a Marine create unique challenges for individual women Marines to negotiate between these two different identities. Cromptvoets (2011) asserted that military women must compartmentalize their contrasting identities in an effort to negotiate the conflict between them. This strategy may improve a woman's sense of self, belonging, and overall health. All of the women in this study described dilemmas related to unique stressors associated with being women in a male-dominated environment, and some of the women described ways they struggled to compartmentalize their sense of womanhood in order to fit in and focus their efforts on meeting the demands of being a Marine. According to the research by Mota and colleagues (2012), active duty military women were found to report highest levels of stress associated with higher demands and stress from lack of social support in the work environment that are not gender-balanced. The participants related similar struggles and articulated that these stressors negatively impacted their sense of identity and well-being as women Marines.

One scholar asserted that culture is established and organized through social institutions, and sets forth guidelines for acceptable behavior to ensure that the needs of that society are met and known by all members in it (Lindsey, 2011). The United States military is one such social institution that still bars women from equal representation, and the United States Marine Corps bars the highest numbers of women from the most billets, resulting in the most unbalanced representation between men to women than any other branch of service (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). The women participants of this study confirmed the reality of being significantly outnumbered by men in the Marines and the resultant unique consequences that affected their ability to be fairly represented or positioned. The findings from this study point to the possibility that the experiences of women Marines are related to systematic inequalities in the USMC

because of the over-representation of men. Foschi (1992) argued that some consequences for women who perform alongside men included biased evaluations, status, and expectations based on gender. This gender-based phenomenon is maintained by different standards of competence for women than men. Foschi's argument is based on research that found men to be favorably evaluated and enjoyed positive status and expectations, whereas women did not. In this study, the women participants articulated similar experiences and perceptions that contributed to a degraded perspective about them and destined them to work harder in an attempt to change the bias while managing more difficult standards.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service (DACOWITS) concluded in a study pertaining to the issue of integrating military women into combat-designated billets that military women would need to work harder to overcome gendered stereotypes. The DACOWITS study further indicated that sexual harassment and women-specific issues would be more problematic for military women as they are integrated into combat roles. The findings from this current phenomenological study provide support for conclusions reported by DACOWITS (Norris, 2011).

**Theme 2: Stereotypes and harassment perspectives and experiences contributed to a decreased sense of worth and belonging for women in the Marines.**

Theme 2 related to the central research question and sub-questions 1 and 2 by offering definitions, descriptions, and detailed accounts about the women's experiences of maltreatment and their difficulties in fitting in a male-dominated environment. Each participant shared experiences of stereotyping or harassment and understood these to contribute to the belief that women are inferior to men in the Marine Corps context. This degraded perspective of women Marines based on their gender contributed to a decreased and conflicted sense of worth, purpose,



and belonging in the Marines. In a masculine-oriented organization such as the United States Marine Corps, with a ratio of approximately 94:6 male to female, women may be more likely to experience more and different stress than men because of their lack of representation as a group. Kanter (1993) concluded that any group in an organization with the largest representation controls the entire group and the organization's culture. This scholar further theorized those representing the least numbers in the group (such as women in the Marine Corps) will be challenged to develop alliances and impact their future treatment in the organization.

Kanter (1993) suggested that the differences associated with the minority group tend to be exaggerated while commonalities associated within the majority group became more obvious. This phenomenon sets the stage for those least represented to be fitted into categories based on their differences from the majority group, generalized based on distorted views and assumptions, and stereotyped based on these distorted perceptions or fitted into preexisting stereotypes. The women participants of this study described their experiences when they were negatively categorized, labeled, and often associated with preexisting stereotypes, regardless of their actual performance in the Marines. This reality, as articulated by the women participants, affected their sense of belonging in the Marines, and added to their conflicted sense of worth and purpose as women Marines.

Gender harassment is thought to occur more frequently than other forms of harassment (Lipari et al., 2008). Over 50% of military women have been found to have experienced and reported some form of offensive experiences (Street et al., 2009). Many of the women participants described gender harassment as something that occurred in their everyday experience as women Marines. This study's findings were consistent with the previously mentioned literature and highlights the importance of considering gender relations in the military

context, especially the damaging effects from the negative perceptions and behaviors of subordinates, peers, and leaders about women's role or fit in the military organization. These perceptions are often expressed in "interactional, indirect forms of protest" by those members in the military who object to women's presence in the armed forces, or as a form of resistance to positions of authority held by women over men (Miller, 2000, p. 409). Miller termed these "resistance strategies" as "gender harassment" and described it to include behaviors such as "sabotage, foot-dragging, feigning ignorance, constant scrutiny, and gossip and rumors," targeted at military women and difficult to investigate because of its non-sexual and indirect characteristics (p. 409).

In the research of Dutra and colleagues (2010), more than half of the sample of active duty deployed military women endorsed military sexual harassment. Although the findings from this present study represent women Marines in a non-deployed context, experiences of military sexual harassment were described by more than half of the women sampled. These experiences included detailed accounts of unwanted touching, sexist comments, verbal sexual advances, and inappropriately calling attention to a woman's anatomy in the workplace enacted by men who were in leadership positions or senior to the women Marines involved. The women participants shared how these experiences negatively impacted them emotionally, physically, and socially. Many of the women participants were left feeling more isolated and conflicted about what to do to stop it from happening. This study's findings appear to be consistent with previous research and help us understand how the military context can negatively affect the unique stresses and challenges associated with sexual harassment (Bell & Reardon, 2011; Street et al., 2009).

The military work environment differs from a civilian workplace and can involve an atmosphere where a victimized military person may be unprotected, isolated, and afraid of

reprisal. Often military members live and work together, train and go into the field together, and often must rely on the chain of command to inform top leaders of harassing behaviors. Given the potential for negative performance evaluations, coercion by some in the chain of command, and the psychological conflict of not feeling supported, believed, or protected because of the lack of representation and negative stereotypes military women contend with, many women struggle first with the impact of the harassment and then struggle with maintaining cohesive relationships and positive work performances. Many of the women participants expressed these potential consequences to be unique challenges with negative implications after experiencing harassment in the Marine Corps.

According to Bell & Reardon (2011), the military culture places strong emphasis on values such as teamwork and unit cohesion. Sexual and gender harassment can increase the distress of its active duty victims because it may become psychologically incomprehensible how victimization can occur at all in an environment that emphasizes that everyone is part of a team focused on the same military mission. Several of the women participants expressed their psychological conflict about reporting harassment incidents. This can lead to underreporting, isolation of victims, and difficulty for the organization to prosecute the perpetrators (Williams & Bernstein, 2011).

**Theme 3: Women Marines recognized gender issues that they attributed to stressful experiences adapting to constant change; these issues contributed to role uncertainty, lack of opportunities, and challenges to manage multiple roles to be a Marine.**

Theme 3 related to the central research question and sub-questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 with descriptions of stressors and challenges the participants experienced because they were women Marines. These experiences were shown to be affected by a sense of inferiority attributed to

women Marines based on entrenched gender issues. The women participants experienced this as being the constant variable for change, the exception, that contributed to their overall sense of role uncertainty, lack of opportunities to share their voices or be positioned in specific billets of their choosing, and increased challenges to manage multiple roles to be active duty Marines.

Research conducted by Miller (2000) reported that military men interpreted physical training as a measure of strength, and men believed military women's requirements to be easier; men also commonly held resentment towards pregnant military women because of their limited physical abilities. This scholar concluded that these kinds of situations rendered military women targets for harassment and increased the potential to degrade military women's potential and effort because they are not viewed as contributing equally to work responsibilities or equally taking risks. Many of the women participants of this study expressed increased stress in the work environment when pregnant or specifically related to their physical abilities.

Further, the women participants articulated confusion and difficulty trying to fit into changing standards for physical fitness (pull-ups), uniform changes they perceived to be neutralizing attributes of their sense of womanhood rather than emphasizing it, and voiced their perspectives about how they did not want to be in combat-designated billets. The women participants shared how being the variable of change felt unfair and unequal because it was perceived to not take into account unique differences attributed to being women. The women participants further explained inequity as it related to a lack of recognition and appreciation for what is different about women and unequal because many of the changes are focused on women and not men in the Marines.

Autlette & Wittner (2012) argued that issues related to gender inequality are reinforced in the military language used, attire, and interpersonal behaviors that are in alignment with the

traditional male-dominated military culture. Several women participants in this study confirmed that interpersonal behaviors, such as intimidation and exclusion of military women from conversations occurred regularly, but they articulated that attire needs to be gender specific. Several participants stated that the gear necessary to protect the body from harm during training and deployments was improperly fitted, given their female anatomy. If women Marines are to be integrated successfully into combat-designated billets and expected to perform well given changed physical training standards, the gear (e.g. helmets, LB packs, and flak jackets) must be fitted properly to allow for adequate protection and mobility to perform the required functions (e.g. CFT and MCMAP training). DACOWITS study concluded with a similar recommendation (Norris, 2011). On the other hand, the women participants in this study articulated their desire to maintain sex designation in personnel uniforms. The women participants asserted that by changing the uniforms to be more universal, a sense of their womanhood or woman-ness is lost. Some women participants articulated that they, as women Marines, are the “fewer and the prouder” and the uniform reifies and celebrates the uniquely different attributes that women Marines contribute in their service to the USMC mission. According to many of the women participants, changing the personnel uniforms to be more universal takes away a distinguished attribute and thus diminishes their pride in being women in the Marines.

These changing standards of uniforms, billets, and physical training requirements were articulated by the women participants as issues that increased their level of stress about whether they fit in the USMC. Further, the participants were confused as to why they were not included or polled about their perspectives, and consequently wondered if the Marine Corps wanted women to be a part of it at all. Cromptvoets (2011) asserted that military women’s sense of belonging and fit in the military environment can impact their well-being and sense of identity.

The women participants expressed how they were uniquely challenged to manage multiple roles and felt a sense of uncertainty about how to merge or connect their identities as women and Marines. These challenges impacted their ability to seek sources of support and cope in effective ways. Weatherhill et al. (2011) asserted that issues about gender inequality can be problematic in the USMC and argued these issues must be addressed by supporting military women's belief in themselves and their abilities.

**Theme 4: Women Marines employed various strategies to cope with challenges and stressors they experienced to serve in an active duty capacity in the Marines.**

Theme 4 related to the central research question and sub-questions 3 and 4 as the women participants recalled and articulated positive and negative coping strategies to navigate through various stressors and unique challenges as women in the Marines. Military women are understood to experience increased interpersonal stress because of chronic gender and sexual harassment, lack of support from peers in their unit, and inaccurate perceptions about military women's identity (Street et al., 2009). These unique, interpersonal stressors were described by the women participants in this study and may explain the various coping strategies, positive and negative, they utilized to navigate and manage stress.

Many of the women participants shared ways they coped by relying on their own strengths (e.g. exercise, setting boundaries, humor, intuition, and positive attitudes) and perceived these strategies to be helpful. This finding may have important implications because on one hand the military culture places emphasis on being self-reliant, self-sufficient, and taking initiative and on the other hand military women may feel less understood, unrecognized, or not valued for what is different about them from the men they serve alongside (Coll et al., 2011; Street et al., 2009).

The women participants described several coping strategies consistent with Moos and Schaefer's (1993) model of coping, which included behavioral and cognitive avoidance coping strategies (e.g., disordered eating behaviors, over-exercise, and isolation) and behavioral approach coping strategies (e.g., use of exercise to overcome negative emotions, reaching out for sources of support from friends, family, and counseling resources). Many of the women participants shared strategies that helped them to negotiate the unique stressors associated with being women and Marines. Men and women have been found to cope differently with stress, express distress differently, and seek sources of support differently (Bell & Reardon, 2011). Because military women are underrepresented, their experiences may be overshadowed by men's experiences or judged based on men's responses or perspectives about what is helpful to alleviate stress (Mattocks et al., 2012). The findings from this study emphasize the importance of gender and context when assessing coping strategies used by military women to better understand how they are used and whether or not these tactics are helpful for them. Military women are best supported when gender-specific forms of coping are understood. Further, as women Marines are integrated into combat-designated roles, leaders must recognize how they cope so as to effectively mentor and support them in this transition (Norris, 2011).

**Theme 5: Women Marines identified qualities of supportive leadership and expressed the need for mentoring from senior women Marines to improve their well-being in the Marine Corps environment.**

Theme 5 related to the central research question and sub-question 4 that described supportive experiences with command leaders and those characteristics and qualities that the women participants found to be helpful. Further, several women participants expressed the need for senior, same-gender role models and mentors as sources of support and to improve women

Marines' overall well-being on active duty. Help may be perceived as less available to military women and could inhibit help-seeking behaviors if they are victimized or experience unique stressors (Bell & Reardon, 2011). Military women participants perceived interactions with leaders and mentors to be supportive and helpful when the contact involved the leader sharing their understanding about the unique challenges women Marines face, and sought to create and maintain a safe work environment. This finding appears to indicate that informal sources of support were preferred and more readily accessible over formal ones when the woman Marine has an overall sense of feeling valued. Weatherhill et al. (2011) concluded that a military environment that is based on gender egalitarian interactions decreased the potential for sexual harassment, and reduced problems with performance stress and unit cohesion for women in the Marines.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Culturally competent practice with military women includes an increased awareness and knowledge base about the specific branch of military service to be studied in order to best understand how the environment imposes unique stressors and potential barriers for help seeking. Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al. (2011) asserted that the culturally competent practitioner in the military context must include a focus on gender differences for assessment, intervention, and advocacy practices to be effective. Practice efforts can then focus on confronting and transforming issues related to the unique challenges faced by military women, and examining women's experiences and how they are impacted by situations in the context of the military organization.

Culturally competent social workers who are positioned to serve women Marines are best suited to help when they combine practice wisdom (Klein & Bloom, 1995) and program theories



to specify ways in which interventions can target problems faced by those served (Fraser et al., 2009). It is important to conceptualize gender-relevant opportunities for military women to emphasize and acknowledge their strengths and help them feel supported in order to decrease barriers to access care, improve their sense of belonging, and mitigate the potential for increased demands and stress to be associated with negative implications.

Based on the findings from this study, and the concerns that participants revealed for confidentiality should they decide to seek help, women Marines may benefit from a gender specific web-based program they can self-manage to improve ways they can acknowledge their own value and contributions and improve coping strategies to include more formal sources of support, earlier. Given the operational demands and management of multiple roles experienced by military women, the program can be designed to be self-paced, flexible, and include brief formatted modules to help women understand the systematic challenges inherent in a male-dominated organization, recognize and celebrate their differences to men, acknowledge their unique contributions, acquire assertiveness training, and develop skills to collectively network with other women Marines and encourage ways to cope in the organization. The web-access can potentially include collaboration with information technology specialists so that women may access such a program through Marine On Line (MOL) and/or MarineNet. Further, a module can include ways to connect to resources such as the MFLCs (Licensed Military and Family Life Consultants) who are assigned to each command and can be used as a confidential, non-record-keeping resource for women Marines. This web-based resource may also become (or be utilized as) a vehicle or platform to offer women Marines the opportunity to participate in surveys for future changes.

In training future social workers, formal social work educators can emphasize cultural competency and ways to network within the military context to better understand the unique aspects of military life for individuals and groups of military women, who are underrepresented in their work environment. Education can raise the consciousness of future and current social workers, whether civilian or military positioned, and develop goals to improve outreach efforts for military women to access formal sources of support. Military women may seek sources of support outside of the military context as a last resort or upon discharge from active duty service. Social work educators should create continuing education, formal course instruction, and conference lectures to increase our awareness and skill set for practice with military women.

Social workers must seek to hear women's voices and consider a strengths perspective when assessing their situation (Cromptvoets, 2011). They must challenge their own biases and gender-normed perspectives about what roles military women occupy, how they cope and their perspective about whether it is helpful or not, and what help means, given their context. This kind of an analysis would help to deconstruct terms, realize greater systematic causes to focus efforts for positive change, and better understand the implications of gender neutrality, existing language use, various military contexts, and critically examine the concept of equality and equity.

Military social workers are uniquely positioned to advocate for gender-specific programs to improve the well-being of women Marines and consider a gendered policy framework to analyze current policies to advocate for positive change. The goal of a gendered policy analysis is to explicitly analyze a policy's effects on women and its ability to empower women. A gendered policy analysis framework can initiate the process that advocates for policies and programs to support and include women Marines from their standpoint. This framework aims to

increase women's visibility in the policy, a simple but critically important intention. Further, it seeks to critically examine definitions and false dichotomies that may exist in the policy, specifies the insight and perspectives of women, and considers gendered implications that could be missed otherwise. This method for policy analysis must include large or at least equal representation of women focused on rectifying the bias in current policy and considering relevant aspects about military women for future policy.

### **Implications for United States Marine Corps Policy**

Expanding on that idea in a specific Marine Corps milieu, existing military policy must be critically analyzed using a gender policy framework to deconstruct its terms, definitions, and purpose to best determine if it benefits the overall USMC mission as well as women Marines. This process should include a balanced representation of women Marines in order to hear their perspectives about specific policies and standards, especially when women Marines are the primary variable for change or will experience the greatest impact. This kind of policy analysis can help to uncover unrecognized problems such as improperly fitted protective gear, the lack of understanding for the purpose of specific policy changes, and eliminate conflicting language and biases such as concepts about universality or the use of gender terms associated with policy focused on biological differences in sex.

Existing policy and future policy must clearly articulate what the basis for equal versus equitable performance matrices includes. For example, all Marines in a given military occupational specialty (MOS) must equally meet specific skill sets for an expectation of what constitutes a standard or baseline performance measure. These kinds of performance indicators can be measured equally regardless of the sex of the Marine. Other performance indicators, such as physical training standards for a PFT, must consider differences in sex and therefore must be

developed with a spirit of equity for all Marines and not equality. Men cannot be women and women cannot be men. Additionally, outcomes for performance must be critically examined to determine if the individual or the system must be changed. For example, men and women Marines cannot be equally measured on their performance during a 25-mile conditioning training hike with universally fitted helmets, flak jackets, and LB packs. Until the gear is properly fitted for a female Marine's anatomy, different from male Marines, then performance cannot begin to be compared equally for each sex. Many of the women participants discussed physical injuries they have sustained during training because the universally issued gear does not fit their physique properly.

Therefore, it is critical that part of an increased awareness about gender specific policy and practices should consider the use of language that refers appropriately to categories of sex and gender. Often these terms are used interchangeably or incorrectly. For example, when using terms that refer to sex, one must consider if the discussion is about biological differences. Given the frequently stated phrase "once a Marine always a Marine" as a universal affirmation of the deep sense of loyalty and pride to have earned the title "Marine," then men and women alike should equally be termed "Marines" without indication to their sex or gender when not applicable.

As leaders, it is important to consider how hazing, as explicated in Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1700.28B (2013), parallels to gender harassment behaviors articulated in this study's findings. According to this MCO that details the organization's policy on hazing, hazing is defined as "any conduct whereby a military member or members, regardless of service or rank, without proper authority causes another military member or members...to suffer or be exposed to any activity which is cruel, abusive, humiliating, oppressive, demeaning, or harmful....

[H]azing need not involve physical contact.... [I]t can be verbal or psychological in nature” (MCO 1700.28B, 2013, p. 1-1). This policy may benefit from a re-examination to determine how to include elements of gender harassment behaviors and be updated to educate all Marines. This may be one way to combat the pervasive and chronic experiences for those outnumbered, often left feeling humiliated and oppressed due to their lack of representation and preexisting stereotypes, especially those related to the gender of woman.

The women Marine participants in this study articulated their confusion about why certain regulations and standards were changed specifically for them. The participants expressed their desire to have their perspectives polled and heard about policy issues that directly impacted them as women. Women Marines must be represented equally to men in policy and practice discussion and they must be overrepresented in discussions where they are the basis for change. This may improve the effectiveness of policy and help to acknowledge the reality of women Marines’ experiences to glean important gendered implications to meet the mission of the organization.

Mentorship programs could benefit from re-examination and modification to better serve women Marines. This may include originating mentorship programs during the recruitment process, throughout boot camp, and in the fleet. Mentorship can be provided through Marine On Line or MarineNet. Senior leaders could publish a bio on the widely accessed information and administrative systems under a mentorship link to help Marines seek out mentoring with leaders in different contexts who have a range of specialized knowledge and experiences. The Marine Corps has recently focused efforts on leadership development initiatives and could consider this as one vehicle to implement gender egalitarianism and mentorship training modules and links. These kinds of modifications or initiatives could support the transition for women into combat

designated billets (Norris, 2011), further develop leaders, offer peer support and feedback to effectively support women in the USMC organization, and improve opportunities for all Marines to enjoy increased morale and unit cohesion.

The Marine Corps as an exclusive and prestigious branch of the United States military can develop initiatives to help women be more readily accepted for their uniquely different and future contributions to the overall mission. It is critical for leadership to determine various opportunities to improve the retention of women Marines for greater representation among all ranks and also to improve the potential for senior, same-gender mentoring and role modeling to younger women Marines. Programs may be re-evaluated or modified to help women Marines balance home and work life and responsibilities. Other possibilities may be to have women Marines work with their career planner or monitor to determine the best time in their career path to participate in sabbatical or duty under instruction programs to allow women opportunities to be specially trained in critical MOSs, limit non-operational duty issues required when pregnant, allow them to bond with their young children, and improve retention and contributions to the overall mission.

The USMC organization should consider reframing the ideology for the Physical Fitness Test (PFT). The PFT could become an explicit tool to test the 14 leadership traits promoted in the USMC. Marines can take a unit PFT every month and choose the best score out of every six (in a six month span), specifically for indication on performance report evaluations. This may decrease disordered eating behaviors associated with meeting the demands for height and weight standards and increase collaborations and opportunities for unit cohesion. Additionally, when physical standards are changed for one group, they should be changed for the other. For example, if female Marines are required to change their standard to include pull-ups on their PFT, male

Marines could be required to perform the flex arm hang. Or change the standard to include both pull-ups and the flex arm hang for all Marines to perform. Changes that include all Marines may increase the perception that all Marines equally experience the changing of the standards.

Further, if women are to be held to higher physical standards, segregated training options should be developed to encourage practicing the pull-ups as a collective and increase opportunities to build camaraderie.

Finally, leadership should re-evaluate post-pregnancy policy and consider extending it from six to 12 months for Marine mothers after the birth of their babies to meet requirements for full duty. Six months post-pregnancy, women Marines can begin a specifically designed physical training program that is modified to safely return to full duty status. This program can be developed with the collaboration of base gym personal trainers, nutritionists, and other key health care professionals to help women Marines return to pre-pregnancy weight and fitness standards in a healthy way. This program could potentially include child care options and group class schedules that align with unit physical training schedules.

A gendered policy framework would set the stage for important and practical changes to increase unit cohesion and mission readiness in the Marine Corps. This kind of framework will ensure that solutions are relevant and make sense. It would focus on ways to improve performance and well-being such as flak jackets and helmets that fit, equitable performance standards, gender harassment treated as seriously as hazing, improved opportunities for senior women leadership and mentoring, increased retention of women Marines, reframed and realistic PFT standards, and human-centered pregnancy and post-pregnancy options. These are some of the regulations that could benefit from the application of a gendered policy framework to

honestly address the realistic needs of today's women Marines and empower them to successfully meet the demands of today's Marine Corps mission.

**Valuing women Marines as a matter of USMC policy.** Policy is more effective when it is formed with a clear understanding of what is to be achieved. All Marines must understand the purpose of the policy and who is involved in the successful implementation of it. USMC policy initiatives and modifications can offer a platform to help all Marines understand the challenges faced by women Marines and articulate their valuable contributions to help propel the mission of the Marine Corps forward. This platform can serve to explicate why women Marines are valuable to the mission of the Marine Corps and emphasize why Marine Corps leadership should seek opportunities to recognize their value first and foremost.

Many of the women participants repeatedly expressed that the Marine Corps needs to recognize and value them for their unique differences to men Marines. The woman participants further expressed that these unique differences are not readily known or acknowledged, which contributed to the women's lack of understanding for their purpose in the Marines. The purpose for women Marines can be illuminated in the policies that govern the changes they are required to make. In 2010, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates proclaimed that women in the military are critical to the war effort, having saved countless lives during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Further, women Marines have contributed to the Marine Corps' ability to search women in a culturally sensitive environment, and developed trusting and enduring relationships with Muslim, Iraqi, and Afghan women throughout the current war, functions men were not permitted to perform.

Despite these contributions, women Marines, as shown in this study, rarely get their due. Women Marines must be recognized and valued in the USMC. They:



- volunteer because they are patriotic;
- desire to help defend our country;
- serve in the elite and demanding military branch because they want to be part of committed team that boasts a proud *esprit de corps*;
- dedicate their lives, sacrifice selflessly, and continuously train focused on the mission;
- put others before themselves;
- bring a new perspective and solution-focused thought process to the traditional male-dominated USMC culture;
- appreciate the emotional side of being human, which increases the likelihood they will be viewed as more approachable by junior Marines.

These humanistic qualities enhance women Marines' abilities to be effective senior members in the Marine Corps organization and must be represented in greater numbers in the ranks of senior leaders. When leaders are seen as more approachable, they are more likely to be accessed and can open opportunities to provide more encouragement, mentoring, and support. This kind of military leadership can effectively enhance unit cohesion and increase morale. Unit cohesion and morale are important ingredients for *esprit de corps*, a characteristic noted only for the United States Marine Corps and no other branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, and is that which propels Marines to focus more clearly on effectively meeting the mission.

Further, many men in the Marines do not always have the opportunity to serve with women Marines, especially during recruit training and early in their military career. The Marines Corps can benefit from positioning women Marines in leadership assignments to help men Marines gain first hand experience of being led by and training with them. As a matter of policy,

having more women Marines in leadership roles may improve the likelihood for men Marines to respect and value their contributions and decrease harassment and assault incidents.

Kaplan and Kaiser (2006) proposed some important qualities a multi-versatile leader must possess: the capacity to listen and understand, empower, enable, teach by example, and demonstrate self-awareness and humility. Additionally, Charles Darwin (as cited in Kaplan and Kaiser, 2006, p. 173) posed, “The survivors of any species are not necessarily the strongest.... They are those who are most responsive to change.” Women Marines have demonstrated their ability to endure many changes over the years and their ability to adapt. This kind of unwavering dedication and commitment, exercised in an environment where they are outnumbered by men, imposes strong character development, traits required of effective military leaders.

The Marine Corps benefits from having women in its ranks because diversity improves the strength of the entire team. The Marine Corps benefits from women Marines’ response to nurture, care for, and communicate with others, usually at an incredible cost to themselves. Taylor (2002) asserts that nurturing is an essential ingredient in society.

Women Marines should be valued by Marine Corps leadership and Marines because they:

- serve to advance, change, and shape the environment with their unique ability to offer unquestionable emotional support;
- willingly care for others before themselves;
- articulate a unique perspective about human nature and how others’ actions affect each other;
- constantly look ahead and think about the welfare of those around them;
- use their intuition and awareness of self to help their peers.

Belenky et al. (1986) purported that women were more inclined to be rooted “in a sense of connection” and “cultivate their capacities for listening,” which encourages others to speak more (p. 45). These qualities improve military leaders’ ability to learn more about those they lead and increases opportunities for prevention and early intervention of problems occurring within the team.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This qualitative study emphasized the inductive process of research originating from a central research question. The research question lead to the development of a project grounded in philosophical and theoretical assumptions and utilized an interpretive lens to deeply explore the meaning of lived service experiences described by a select group of women Marines. Although the methodology for this study did not aim to generate knowledge that was generalizable, much can be gleaned from the findings to consider ways to further enhance socially just practices and humanize experiences for all in the Marine Corps environment.

Future research can improve the development of knowledge towards this end and offer more detailed insights about ways to improve the well-being and optimal functioning for women Marines in the rapidly changing landscape of today’s active duty Marine Corps. Qualitative research often leads to more questions than answers (Creswell, 2013) and therefore warrants the need for future inquiry. This study opens the door to consider many possibilities about ways to transfer the findings for practice and policy, and could prove useful in other diversified contexts across the Marine Corps organization. Specific questions asked by future researchers will further guide the development of knowledge and produce findings that continue to contribute to the process of theory generation and eventually lead to theory testing (Fawcett and Downs, 1992). Future research can construct knowledge from the development of research designs seeking to

explore, describe, explain, and predict future policy and practices that are relevant to the topic of women Marines on active duty, and can be applied to various Marine Corps' environments and missions. Specific questions may be:

- What are the specific gender harassment experiences and how often do they occur for women Marines on active duty in the United States Marine Corps?
- For what reasons are women Marines separating (discharging) from active duty Marine Corps service?
- What are the experiences of active duty women Marines as they are integrated into specific combat-designated billets, and how do those experiences affect their coping behaviors?
- What is the relationship between risk associated with gender-specific stressors and help-seeking behaviors and types of support sought for active duty women Marines?

This study did not seek to explore issues that affect the retention of women Marines. Several women participants, however, mentioned the challenges they faced to manage multiple roles and continue to perform at increasingly difficult and demanding duties as a Marine. Future research may help to inform USMC policy by seeking to discover the reasons why women Marines choose to separate from active duty service. A study designed to survey women Marines about this phenomena may help to reveal findings that can inform policy and practice to improve women's opportunity to earn higher rank and become mentors to junior women. Further, this kind of knowledge can shed light on whether or not women are leaving active duty service to bear children or for some other reason.

As the sample developed in this study showed, very few women Marines had deployment experiences. Much of the existing literature has focused on stressors experienced by military women in relation to deployments (Dutra et al., 2010; Mattocks et al., 2012; Pryce et al., 2012; Vogt et al., 2011). A future study could be designed, similar to this study's methodology, focused on understanding women Marines' experiences in specific training or deployment environments. This kind of study may generate knowledge about stressors, challenges, and coping mechanisms for comparison with women Marines' experiences in this study, and also consider different stressors related to varied Marine Corps contexts.

As the data were analyzed from this study and the common meaning emerged to describe the experience of being a woman Marine as an oxymoron juxtaposed in the male-dominated USMC environment, a future research project may focus more specifically on the tensions and struggles these participants articulated so as to gain a clearer understanding of informal and formal sources of support that women Marines rely on or would consider desirable. This kind of project may improve understanding of what specific types of support are accessible, as well as the potential barriers servicewomen perceive that prevent them from considering help. Additionally, it could clarify who the facilitators for these sources of support could be and develop ways to reach out and open up opportunities for women Marines to more readily access them.

Finally, the findings from this study can be used to begin conceptualizing a gender specific measurement tool. Researchers can survey a representative group of women Marines about their daily stress experiences and ways they cope in order to determine correlations and eventually test those factors Marine Corps-wide to develop a measure of gender specific stress and coping for active duty women. All of the projects above can assist helping professionals and

military leadership to further enhance their understanding of the interface between understanding gender implications of active duty service, identifying and assessing gender specific risk, and how these risks and challenges translate into coping and help seeking in the active duty Marine Corps context.

### **Conclusion and Contribution to Body of Knowledge**

This study afforded the opportunity for various collaborations with USMC leadership and research analysts, women Marines had an opportunity to share their standpoints and voices, and the USMC demonstrated interest in hearing perspectives of women Marines by approving the research and by wanting to understand the findings for future considerations. Virtually no existing literature existed about active duty women Marines that offered relevant and current accounts about their military service experiences. This study produced findings that add to the body of knowledge for this under-represented and under-researched population.

Women Marines must be included with a spirit of acceptance in the United States Marine Corps. The women Marines must define this perspective as a group. Those in power have a responsibility as leaders to create a cultural climate that values and recognizes women Marines for their contributions because of what *is* different about them compared to men. Part of this responsibility needs the military leadership to create opportunities for women Marines to identify and acknowledge these attributes within themselves, and encourage their peers and other Marines to recognize and sustain it in the command environment.

### **Coda**

The Women Marines Association describes on its web site<sup>13</sup> a commissioned bronze statue erected in 1943 in New Orleans called *Molly Marine*. It is a symbol for *esprit de corps* for

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<sup>13</sup> [www.womenmarines.wordpress.com](http://www.womenmarines.wordpress.com)

women Marines. This statue is a representation of the unique contributions women have made and still make to the Corps and situates women Marines deep in the rich tradition that the United States Marine Corps highly regards. The *Molly Marine*, a servicewoman who stands tall in her Marine Corps uniform, is a symbol of endurance and serves to remind all Marines of women Marines' place in USMC history. The *Molly Marine* looks confidently ahead into her future while facing all that comes her way in a steadfast manner, a symbol of resilience. The women serving in the Marine Corps, as the fewer and the prouder, deserve to be recognized and valued first for their unique and different contributions to the Marine Corps mission. The Marine Corps is stronger because dedicated women, such as those who shared their voices in this study, are a part of it.

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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

### **RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE: The Experiences of Military Women and Perspectives about Seeking Help and Support**

**IRB number: HM15234**

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the military service experiences of women Marines to develop an understanding about their challenges and coping and offer perspectives related to seeking help and support while on active duty.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a woman serving in the United States Marine Corps.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to consent to participate after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you. Up to 15 women Marines will be invited to participate in this study.

In this study you will be asked to attend an interview. The interview will last approximately 2 hours. In the meeting, you will be asked to answer questions related to your military service experience...for example: Do you have any specific military service experiences that may have affected you as a woman? The interview will be digitally recorded so we are sure to get your ideas, but no names will be recorded on the recorder.

#### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Sometimes talking about these subjects causes people to become upset. Several questions will ask about things that may remind you of military service experiences that may have been unpleasant. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the interview at any time. If you become upset, the researcher will give you names of counselors to contact so you can get help in dealing with these issues, or you can speak with the Chaplain.

## **BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information we learn from people in this study may help us develop a deeper understanding for military women to inform future support, practices, policy, and research.

## **COSTS**

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview and answering questions asked by the researcher.

## **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

There is no payment for your voluntary participation.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The interview sessions will be digitally audio recorded, but no names will be recorded. At the beginning of the session, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym only so that no real or legal names are recorded. The digital recording transcriptions and the notes will be stored in a locked cabinet. After the information from the recording is typed up, the digital recording will be destroyed (deleted from the recorder).

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of interview and consultative notes and recordings, digital audio recordings of interviews. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your data will be identified by the chosen pseudonyms, not real or legal names, and stored separately from any other records in a locked research area. All personal identifying information will be kept in password-protected files and these files will be deleted within six months upon completion of this study and all digital audio recordings will be deleted from the digital recorder after transcriptions are determined to be free from error. After the study ends all information will be destroyed, with exception to transcribed data with no identifiable information associated with it, which will be kept indefinitely. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel.

We will not share your responses with anyone, including military superiors. However, due to military mandated reporting instructions, confidentiality cannot be provided for statements that pose a threat to self or others or involve criminal activity. Information from the study and the consent form may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes by Virginia Commonwealth University.

What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

A waiver of documentation to sign this consent form was requested for this study. This allows you to fully participate in the informed consent process and choose to verbally consent to participate and waive documentation of your signature on this consent form. This option may provide you greater protection against any potential risk from a violation in confidentiality. A violation in confidentiality could potentially occur by linking your name on the signed consent form with any data collected from you in the study process. If you choose to waive signing your name to consent to participation in this study you will be asked to verbally consent before

proceeding. A copy of the informed consent form will be provided to you regardless of your choice. Participation will begin when you consent to participate.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the researcher without your consent. The reasons might include:

- the researcher thinks it necessary for your health or safety;
- you have not followed study instructions; or
- administrative reasons require your withdrawal.

### **QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Dr. Joseph F. Walsh  
Telephone: 1(804)828-8208  
Email: jwalsh@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Telephone: 804-827-2157

*You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.*

### **CONSENT**

*I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered.*

*My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. If I waived signing this form, I will indicate my wish to 'verbal consent' in place of my printed name and signature. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.*

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Participant name printed	Participant signature	Date
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Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion / Witness (Printed)
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Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion / Witness	Date
--	------

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Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)	Date
--	------

**Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer**

**Needed for Participation in Dissertation Research Project:**

**\*Women in the U.S. Marine Corps\***

***Help by Sharing your Military Service Experiences!***

The purpose of this research is to explore the military service experiences specific to women Marines. The main goal for this research is to develop a current understanding of the perspectives of women Marines to identify relevant ways to improve their well-being.

**Voluntary Participation Involves:** One **confidential** interview (lasting about 2 hours) in a discreet location of your choice, scheduled at your convenience, anytime through March 2014. Beth-ann Vealey, LCSW and doctoral student researcher at Virginia Commonwealth University, will conduct the interview.

**\*\*Please contact Beth-ann Vealey for more information on how to  
volunteer and participate by sharing your voice at:**

**1(951) 852-4801 or email: [vealeyba@vcu.edu](mailto:vealeyba@vcu.edu)**

## **Appendix C: Demographics Form**

The Experiences of Military Women and Perspectives about Seeking Help and Support

### **Demographic Information for Research Participants**

Participant Pseudonym:

(this is provided instead of actual name for interpretation purposes only)

Age in years:

Length of military service:

Race/Ethnicity identification:

Marital/Partnership Status:

# of Children:

Number of combat-related deployments:

Length of each deployment:

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

### **The Experiences of Military Women and Perspectives about Seeking Help and Support**

The research is centered on the question: How does the United States woman Marine on active duty recall and articulate her military service-related experiences and respond to the effects resulting from these experiences?

There are four interview questions and seven prompts designed to guide the interview process and elicit responses relative to the central research topic.

1. Tell me about any specific military service related experiences that may have affected you as a woman?
2. Define your military service experiences since you have been on active duty as related to being a woman in the military.
  - a. Tell me about any stressful or challenging experiences that you perceive may be attributed to your gender.
  - b. Tell me about any challenging experiences that you perceived as positive.
  - c. Tell me about any challenging experiences that you perceived as negative.
3. Tell me about times you may have had recollections of experiences related to your military service?
  - a. Tell me about how you have coped with any positive recollections.
  - b. Tell me about how you have coped with any negative recollections.
4. In what ways have your military experiences impacted you as a woman (emotionally, socially, physically, spiritually, or financially)?
  - a. Tell me about how you perceive social support in your life now and throughout your military service.
  - b. Tell me about how you perceive accessing help in your life now and in the past.

These questions are designed for women Marines to articulate their experiences and perceptions related to their military service.

Version 1 created on 5/1/13

## Appendix E: Audit Criteria Table

<b>I.</b>	<b>Confirmability – addressed how conclusions emerge from inquiry</b>
1.	Explicit and detailed description of methods and procedures of study
2.	Ability to follow sequence of data collection and data analysis
3.	Conclusions explicitly linked with exhibits of condensed data
4.	Availability of detailed record of methods and procedures for auditing
5.	Evidence of researcher awareness of personal assumptions, values, etc.
<b>II.</b>	<b>Dependability – addressed consistency and traceability of study procedures</b>
1.	Congruence of research question(s) with study design
2.	Explicit description of researcher's role and status
3.	Findings exhibit reasonable parallelism across data sources (informants)
4.	Specification of basic paradigm and approach appropriate to design and methods
5.	Data collection appropriate to settings, respondents, etc. based on research design
<b>III.</b>	<b>Credibility – addressed logical truth value of study findings; degree of fit between participant views and researcher descriptions and interpretations</b>
1.	Evidence of context-rich and meaningful descriptions
2.	Logical and convincing description
3.	Codes and concepts linked to participants' narratives
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Transferability – addressed <u>potential</u> for larger impact of research beyond specific context of study</b>
1.	Adequate description of original sample of persons, settings, processes to permit comparison with other contexts
2.	Adequate "thick description" to allow assessment of potential transferability
3.	Potential for findings to be considered as usable knowledge offered and for future research (i.e. consciousness raising, insight, corrective recommendations)



## **Appendix F: External Auditor Report**

### Purpose of Audit:

At the request of Beth-ann Vealey, Ph. D. candidate in the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University, a full assessment of her dissertation research final report was conducted during the period 30 Jan 2014 – 1 Feb 2014.

### Scope of Audit:

The undersigned acting as auditor examined chapters 1, 3 and 4 of Ms. Vealey's final dissertation report, as well as other research documentation including IRB approved research synopsis with interview guide, participant interviews transcripts, detailed documentation of data analysis procedures, general notes, and self- reflexive journal. In addition, the undersigned discussed at length via telephone various processes and procedures used in designing and executing the research.

The audit was conducted based on generally accepted procedures and criteria based from the literature concerning the evaluation of qualitative research, with specific focus on a phenomenological approach. The undersigned auditor reviewed recommendations for conducting an audit found in works by Padgett (2008 and 2012), Creswell (2013), and Moustakas (1994). The audit procedures used in this audit were tailored to fit the unique nature of the research in question, an exploratory phenomenological study situated in the interpretive paradigm. The specific evaluation criteria considered by this auditor to be most appropriate for this type of research was recommended by the above listed authors. See the attached summary of audit criteria with points for consideration that were used in conducting this audit.

### Audit Findings:

In the opinion of this auditor, the final dissertation report by Beth-ann Vealey provides a fair, reliable and accurate account of the perspectives and experiences shared by research participants as well as the impact of the environmental context on them. Ms. Vealey's dissertation report and supporting documentation provided explicit and detailed information concerning the research design, data collection process and data analysis procedures that could be consistently followed from raw interview data to coding of significant statements, analysis process, and findings. Notes and reflexive journaling documented her awareness of personal assumptions, values, and biases. The use of debriefing by dissertation chair and other colleagues throughout the research process supported the authenticity and dependability of the research process. Credibility was evidenced by attention to systematic connection of codes and concepts in the data analysis process and notes, and in the context-rich, thick descriptions of information provided by study participants in the report's chapter on study findings (Chapter 4). Finally, the potential for transferability beyond the specific context of the study was provided by the detailed description of the purpose,

process, and procedures of the study, the attention to the literature based sample selection criteria, and detailed discussion of study sample recruitment and demographics.

References:

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Padgett, D. K. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

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Respectfully submitted by,

Elizabeth S. Birch, DBA  
LtCol, USMC (Ret)  
2 Feb 2014

## **Appendix G: Vita**

Beth-ann Vealey was born in Stoughton, Massachusetts, and is an American citizen. Upon honorable discharge from four years of active duty service in the United States Marine Corps, Beth-ann earned a Bachelor in Social Work in 1995 and a Masters in Social Work in 1996 from Virginia Commonwealth University. Upon graduation, she served military families for the United States Marine Corps as a contractor to prevent domestic violence, improve family dynamics, and promote early childhood growth and development. In 2000, she became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in California and soon after accepted a commission as a social work officer in the United States Navy. In 2003, she further earned a national credential for specialized clinical training, the Board Certified Diplomat (BCD) in clinical social work. As an active duty Navy Social Work Officer, she has held positions as Director of Counseling and Advocacy Programs, Assistant Branch Manager for Counseling Services, Executive Assistant to the Commander Navy Region Hawaii, and direct clinical practitioner while forward deployed in Iraq serving soldiers, in California serving Marines, and in Hawaii serving Marines, sailors, and their families.

Since joining the Navy, Beth-ann has been trained in various modalities to treat combat-related emotional trauma, assisted in advocacy efforts for policy change to support victims of rape and domestic abuse, and actively advocated for ways to reduce stigma and improve the quality of behavioral health services for the military community. Throughout her active duty

service, she developed a strong interest in the implications of combat and operational military service on military personnel and service delivery issues.