A Phenomenological Investigation of African American Male Veterans’ Experience of Social Connection

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE VETERANS’ EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTION

By

Brian L. Coleman

Approved May 4, 2020

Eva-Maria Simms, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
(Committee Chair)

Jessie Goicoechea, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

Derek Hook, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
Chair, Department of Psychology

Kristine Blair, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE VETERANS’ EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTION

By

Brian L. Coleman

August 2020

Dissertation supervised by Eva-Maria Simms, Ph.D.

This research project examines the experience of African American male veterans’ social connections with other veterans. Social connection has been found to be a key factor in promoting positive health outcomes and overall well-being. In addition, social connection involves not only a sense of being connected to others but can also include feelings of exclusion. Given the increasing health disparities of between African American and White men, and of our nation’s veteran population, greater attention to factors that promote well-being are essential. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of social connection of African American male veterans from the post-9/11 era. The study included in-depth interviews with four African American male veterans. In keeping with hermeneutic phenomenology, the study sought to explore the experience and meaning of African American male social connections, both during their time when enlisted in the military, and subsequently as
veterans. While other studies have looked at social connection among family units, this study addressed social connections between veterans. To date no research has examined post-9/11 African American or Black men’s experience of social connection. Through the analysis six themes were identified: Racial Tension and Support, Striving against a Racialized Black Body, Hopeful Future through Possible Change, Security in Social Connection, Masculinity, and Power dynamics in the military and as veterans.
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Introduction

This study is an exploration of the experience of social connectedness that African American male veterans feel with other veterans. African American males have long served in the military forces of this country. African American soldiers have participated in all American wars and did so in segregated units largely through World War II (WWII). The social connections that African American soldiers felt at that time, such as belonging to a military unit or the military itself, emotional closeness to other members, and perceived social support in the military and as veterans, were undoubtedly mediated by their segregated service. The thoughts and feelings of contemporary African American veterans regarding war and their post-deployment lives are a relatively unstudied phenomenon. Increasingly veterans in the United States (US) are a result of service in an all-volunteer force. The military conflicts following September 11, 2001 (9/11) represent the first large scale deployment of military personnel in the era of an all-volunteer force. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (2018) the “post-9/11 cohort of Veterans” is “younger” and “more racially diverse” than any previous cohort of veterans in US military history. Very little research has been done to examine a key area of the post-deployment lives of post-9/11 veterans, namely their sense of connectedness to a social support network.

The experience of connection between human beings is now thought of as a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Buss, 1990). Through connection people are able to depend on one another to have their needs met, they gain confidence to explore their world, and are provided with a sense of safety and security. Social connections have been positively associated with a number of physical and psychological
health conditions (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Pressman et al., 2005). Scholars have used a variety of terms to refer to connections and relationships between people: friendship, brotherhood, attachment, connectedness and bonding. In this study the social connection represents feelings of belonging to a group, emotional closeness to members of that group, perceived social support and the inverse of these aspects including feeling unsupported, degrees of disconnection, and a lack of belonging (Lee and Lee, 2001).

The social connections of veterans have been acknowledged as an important mediator of health outcomes, and as a factor that impacts the experience of veterans’ following deployment and during readjustment in their home communities (Hinjosa & Hinjosa, 2011). Supportive social relationships help veterans reintegrate into their communities with greater ease; relationships filled with tension or that demonstrate a lack of willingness to understand what veterans have been through tend to lead to greater distress. Often veterans have sought the company of other veterans following deployment as a means to connect with others that understand what they have been through. Hinjosa and Hinjosa (2011) stated that “emotional and experiential ties that bind military members…could be used strategically to create a supportive transition from Active Duty to civilian society” (p. 1146.) However, Hinjosa and Hinjosa (2011) did not consider race. This study represents a beginning to understanding how African American male veterans experience connection, or brotherhood, with other veterans, which is a key aspect of their social connectedness network.

My interest in this project

Understanding the experience of marginalized populations has long been an interest of mine. Throughout my life I have sought to better understand the ways in which
African Americans, men in particular, have sought to live lives of meaning, dignity, and respect even in the face of racism, structural barriers, and social marginalization. During my time in graduate school I was fortunate enough to conduct psychotherapy in a community clinic that provided free services in an African American neighborhood. Around the same time, I also had the opportunity to engage in psychotherapy with an African American male veteran that came to the Duquesne University Psychology Clinic for the free mental health services offered to all veterans there. I increasingly worked with Black male veterans in the nearby African American community and in the department’s clinic. This work began to show me the deep impact that military service had on the lives of these men. It also showed me that they still, in their own ways, were dealing with aspects of their lives connected to their military service. I was struck by learning the stories of these men and how the military, like it has for so many, served as a pathway to a brighter future. The initial men I worked with came from neighborhoods where residents generally had few opportunities for education and economic advancement.

The social world of these men, somewhat surprising to me at that time, did not involve a lot of contact with their fellow veterans. This was surprising given how apparent to me it was that their service held great importance for them. This work led me to take advantage of other opportunities to work with African American veterans that later presented itself. In the summer of 2017 I conducted two pilot interviews with African American male veterans. It was through these interviews that I became further intrigued by the rich stories of these men and of other African American male veterans. These men talked about aspects of their military career that they were not happy about.
They noted that their perceptions about their military service, and about the government sending them abroad to fight changed over time. They also talked about the pride they felt from serving, despite their complex feelings about that service. At times there was almost a sense of reverence at points when they talked about their military service and how they felt it had changed them for the better. As they talked about serving their country and being prepared to make sacrifices I sensed their pride. But when they talked about their connection to other veterans their stories became a lot less clear. They spoke of avoiding other veterans in part for the memories that such contact might bring up. They noted being unsure of how to navigate establishing a connection with another male veteran. Here they were referring to how to initiate a friendship that went beyond a one-time conversation. I was reminded of the difficulty that many men in the US have with initiating any form of intimacy with another male. These interviews suggested that military service added another layer to those already socialized norms of avoiding intimacy. I also learned that some of their feelings about connection with other veterans involved racial differences. These men talked about their experiences feeling unwelcome at the local predominantly White Veterans of Foreign Wars (V.F.W.) hall. I was curious about these social connections, these feelings of brotherhood or the lack thereof, and I wondered how these men’s experiences were related to being Black men.

This proposed study is a phenomenological investigation of the lived experience of African American male veterans of the post-9/11 era. Specifically, this research project will address the research question: how do African American male post-9/11 veterans experience connection with other male veterans? This study will fill a gap and address shortcomings in the literature regarding African American male veterans’ experiences.
Literature Review

There is relatively little scholarly literature that examines the experiences of African American male veterans. I start with a review of literature related to understanding the phenomenon under consideration, that of social connection. I then discuss literature related to connection among men generally, in the military, and as veterans. In what follows I review key literature related to aspects of identity that should be considered in this study of African American male veterans. The discussion of these elements provides a frame of reference for understanding the experience of connection among African American male veterans. To that end I consider literature on masculinity, as the bonds of brotherhood are rooted in part in shared understandings of masculinity. I then discuss what is known about African American military involvement, brotherhood, friendship ties, and connections between veterans.

Social connectedness

Shilling and Brown (2016) note the importance of social living as a survival strategy for human beings. Human beings are fundamentally social beings and need social contact to live healthy lives. Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller (2007) noted that “the desire for positive social relationships is one of the most fundamental and universal of human needs” (p. 42). Chida, and Steptoe (2008) having posited that social relationships are associated with greater physical health and longevity. Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton (2010) found that social integration had a positive impact on reducing mortality to the same extent as other known detrimental factors like obesity, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption. Perceptions of positive social support have been linked to reduced likelihood of susceptibility to cancer (Welin, Larsson, Svardsudd,
Loneliness has been shown to be associated with increased risk for cardiovascular disease (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Kok et al. (2013) found that perceived positive social supports were a key mechanism that drove positive health outcomes. Walson, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) showed that people are more likely to express positive interest in topics that others hold as important if they have some source of connection with that individual. People feeling that they have some shared interest increases their likelihood of internalizing the goals and motivations of others. The authors note that “a mere sense of social connectedness, even with unfamiliar others” can influence someone’s behavior when they are alone (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer, 2012, p. 513). Social connectedness then influences the private interests of individuals and can motivate behavior in ways that shape identity. How a person then perceives themselves is at least in part impacted by individuals to whom they feel socially connected. Having shared interests with others and pursuing similar goals are ways of strengthening the bonds between individuals. Engaging in activities that demonstrate these shared goals or beliefs to others is a public performance that signifies that one belongs. This shared sense of interests may then enhance a person’s sense of their own worth (Leary, 2004). Cohen (2003) noted that a person’s political views can also be shaped by their connections to others. He noted that through belonging to groups one holds as highly valued, a person’s private political beliefs and subsequent support for public policy are shaped. Cohen and Spencer (2012) suggest that it is the need to belong that drives individuals to not only form but engage in behavior to maintain social relationships. Behavior that is in line with that of other members of a social group will receive positive reinforcement, and thus
individuals that express such beliefs are more likely to be held as valuable members of the social grouping and less likely to be subject to social ostracization and potential dejection at not having this need met.

We know that not having this fundamental need to belong met can lead to negative outcomes (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Williams, Cheung, & Choi (2000) reported that ostracization was associated with significant emotional distress. Social exclusion has been identified as a major factor contributing to anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). Baumeister, Nuss, and Twenge (2002) reported that social exclusion impairs cognitive functioning. The authors argued that cognitive impairment was a mediator to many negative outcomes associated with social exclusion and they specially found that exclusion resulted in poor recall on difficult tasks, decreased ability to reason well, and a reduction in cognitive effort put into tasks. Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller (2007) found that individuals that have been excluded by others do not desire to reconnect with those that excluded them. Aydin, Agthe, Pfundmair, Frey and DeWall (2017) found that individuals regularly engage in antisocial behavior following social exclusion. Some individuals that have felt social exclusion may hold contempt for those that excluded them (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Among those that are generally fearful of negative evaluation by others there is a tendency to avoiding attempting to create new social conventions in novel situations (Heimberg, Lebowitz, Hope, & Schneier, 1995). Individuals in this situation may be more likely to generalize from these incidents to future attempts at forging social connections and may thus further withdraw from potential connection and experience greater social isolation (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller 2007). A sense of social connectedness is certainly important while serving
in the military. In fact, the positive connections between service members and the sense of brotherhood they share is a key aspect of military morale and one of the ideas associated with military service that everyday Americans are most familiar with.

**Brotherhood in the Military**

One socially acceptable arena in which men can form close emotional bonds is in the military. Many individuals in society at large may feel that the military is a great “band of brothers,” where all service members are part of a large fraternity. Certainly popular culture has pushed this idea and the products of popular culture, such as movies, have served as an impetus for some young men to enlist in military service.

These bonds of brotherhood are often portrayed as positive connections between members where they protect one another, provide emotional support, and demonstrate an unflinching duty to maintain the integrity of the unit and the well-being of all members. While representations of this brotherhood may include some differences or even strife between members, the overwhelming portrayal is unity and harmony. Recruiters often portray a brighter picture of military service than what it really is. Parnell (2012) showed us that while there are bonds in the military, the idealized brotherhood does not extend to all service members in equal manner. The close familial bonds exist among a soldier’s squadron, the smallest cluster of 8 to 10 soldiers. The squadron functions as a unit throughout their service. In part the bonds of brotherhood are created and maintained through the ongoing interactions of the squadron members. These individuals depend upon one another for their survival, and the feeling of “having your back” is strongest among the squadron members. Similarly, Shay (2002) noted that the experience of making it through a dangerous situation together increases cohesion in units. Beyond the
squadron is the *platoon*, which consist of 40 or so individuals. Here a solider will be familiar with all others members but the bonds are not as close as those of squadron members. One is familiar with platoon members but the familial bond is not there. Larger than the platoon is the *company*, which could have between 60 to 200 members. Given that the platoons which make up a company are often in different physical locations, the bonds of brotherhood, or intimacy, are greatly reduced between members. There are lager categorizations of military forces (battalion, brigade, division, corps) and individual members are increasingly less familiar with other members as the number of soldiers increase (Congressional Budget Office, 2016).

Parnell (2012) tells us that before even entering battle the men in his unit were being divided by notions of who “could handle anything” versus those thought not to measure up. Among the men that endured battle together Parnell described an intense bond. In the combat zone the fissures of brotherhood can only widen. Parnell noted that after combat the division between combat soldiers and non-combat soldiers, which they called POGs (Personnel Other than Grunts), widened tremendously. According to Parnell in the confusion of war some combat soldiers lost their lives and others were badly wounded; Parnell noted a stark contrast between the expectations of these soldiers and those who knew they would be safe in the base carrying out their duty. Parnell only mentioned “our half-African-American, half-German” solider in his book so we are left to assume that this individual was the only member of African American descent in Parnell’s unit (2012, p. 62). Sessum (2012) also noted a distinction between POG’s and others in his personal blog about his combat experience in Afghanistan; however, he added that “with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) there were no more front lines. With
soldiers of all jobs in the Army coming in contact with the enemy it really became about the grunt v. POG mentality” (para. 3). Sessum (2012) stated this difference in mentality starts in basic training.

Mann (2014) discussed basic training and the process of breaking down individuals and building them up into soldiers in the context of gender. She particularly referred to how shame is used to break down the individuals before they are built up again as soldiers. Referring to the movie, *Full Metal Jacket* Mann noted that the drill sergeant Hartmann on the last day of training stated:

Today you people are no longer maggots. Today you are Marines. You’re part of a brotherhood . . . From now on, until the day you die, wherever you are, every Marine is your brother. Most of you will go to Vietnam. Some of you will not come back. But always remember this: Marines die, that’s what we’re here for! But the Marine Corps lives forever. And that means you live forever!” At the culmination of the shame-to-power conversion, the soldier is offered a place in the collective, fraternal agency of his military unit. (p. 110)

This is the promise of brotherhood. Through the conversion that occurred in basic training, men not only faced the obstacles designed to be part of the training, but also had to navigate the social dimensions of interactions with other men in close proximity. This involved understanding the prescribed and proscribed norms of masculinity in the US. Finkel (2013) noted the positive connections between men that can occur during military service, but also the lack of it that can follow; he stated “because while the truth of war is that it’s always about loving the guy next to you, the truth of the after-war is that you’re on your own (2013, p. 133). In the service of understanding how difficult emotional
terrain might be navigated by soldiers (and later in their lives as veterans), and how they might clash with or support one another through the bonding of brotherhood, it is important to consider the social scientific literature on men, masculinity, and emotional connections broadly.

**Friendship and Intimacy**

Among men, friendships that are formed tend to be, to use a term created by Geoffrey Greif, “shoulder-to-shoulder” friendships. In these friendships the focus of men’s attention is toward the “external” world, not what is going on in their own “inner” lives (Greif, 2009). In fact, intimacy between men then seems to be built upon doing shared activities and engaging in stereotypical behavior; in this bonding process some might view these activities as crude. Jokes, or making fun of one another, then become steps toward building intimacy. Socialized to avoid the feminine and adopt aggression, insulting one another becomes an acceptable means through which men can engage one another on an affective level. This exchange of jokes may be accompanied by touching. It could be a playful punch in the arm, pat on the back, or even a hand on a shoulder. Touch here is an intimate act and for many men it appears that the addition of “crude” language makes it acceptable (Benwell, 2001). Additionally, given the restrictions of acceptable forms of intimate contact with each other it should come as no surprise that men do not tend to have extensive friendship networks (Garfield, 2015). Even less is known about friendship networks among African American males.

Franklin (1992) noted that in African American male friendship networks a...relatively large proportion of Black male same-sex violence ... may be related to violations of friendship expectations. Such violation may include being
perceived as disloyal, untrustworthy, unhelpful, lying, and cheating, to mention a few (p. 208).

Franklin noted that bonds of friendship seemed to be stronger among working-class African American men. He found that upwardly mobile African American men increasingly adopted stereotypical ways of being, including “competitiveness” and “stoicism.”

The scant literature that has examined friendship connections in the military shows these connections to be of great importance to soldiers. In their interviews with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Hinjosa and Hinjosa (2011) found that “another type of friendship interaction is sharing emotional intimacies” (p. 1150). The authors also noted that the veterans talked about other men who they could share their fears and concerns with. Many veterans indicate they miss the type of comradery and connections they experienced in the military, in part because of shared experience and language used in the military.

Mann (2014) noted that in the military language meant to shame and police others’ behavior is frequently used; closeness and acceptance is often dependent upon one’s ability to perform activities that those not in the military may consider crude. These performances often included jokes involving violence or that were degrading those deemed “other”; frequently this involved jokes at women’s expense and were not uncommonly of a sexual nature. Other shared activities have been identified where social acceptance or closeness was dependent upon seemingly willing participation in hazing behaviors (ex. ‘blood pinning’ during which awarded medals or pins are punched into the chest of recipients drawing blood; promotion gauntlets involving soldiers lining up in two
columns and the one being promoted walking down the middle being beaten; and other acts that can humiliate soldiers, often involving a sexual dimension). Engaging in these activities acts to reify boundaries of acceptability that exist within a broader culture in which soldiers recognize that they are putting their lives on the line, that they are there in part to protect one another, and that the needs of the military unit as a whole is more important than individual desire (Bourke, 2018; Finkel, 2002). This sense of purpose, integrity, and solidarity also supports intimacy in that in this context soldiers can engage in many types of behavior not readily accepted in the civilian world because the culture indicates that these soldiers will not be rejected. Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) noted that among soldiers of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars men were able to form connection with “one or two” other men in which they felt they could safely and privately share their fears. It is not known whether African American male veterans had such connections and maintained them following discharge from the military.

**Veteran Social Connections**

There is very little scholarly literature about the experience of African American male veterans connecting to other veterans. It appears that newer veterans may be forming connections with one another in ways that differ from older veterans. Some more recent veterans may be forging or maintaining social connections through engaging local veteran service organizations. Men are able to connect with one another through involvement in these organizations as they pursue goals relevant to their own lives. Steinhauer (2019) noted that newer veteran organizations are focused on issues like education and employment compared to the focus on “brick-and-mortar meeting spaces for veterans to gather or on resources spent lobbying in Washington [D.C.]” (para. 4).
Male veterans that seek out service organizations for aid with employment or pursuing further education could also be presented with the opportunity to develop connections with other male veterans. Steinhauer (2019) further noted that some physical structures, like Veterans of Foreign Wars (V.F.W.) halls, are closing across the country as the overall veteran population shrinks and older veteran die. It may be that veterans are then increasingly forming connections with other men while pursuing the shared activities that the newer veteran organizations have helped to facilitate. For example, after getting aid from a service organization a veteran may meet other veterans as they pursue additional education, or attend work training program. Of course, VFW halls do still exist and social connections between veterans are certainly impacted by their interactions in these spaces. Some veterans seek out these spaces in order to form connections. The space, or mechanism, through which veterans connect is less important than the fact that many veterans seek connections with other veterans once they return home because of the unique bonds they share (Hinojosa and Hinojosa, 2011).

When soldiers are discharged from the military and return to their communities of origin they often seek to pick up their lives where they left off. One pathway through which veterans attempt to meet their need for social connection is to connect with their family members. Some have difficulty readjusting and this includes difficulty connecting with family members as they did prior to their service. These veterans feel that it is difficult to get their need for social connection met. Finkel (2013) noted the loneliness that veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan can experience after returning to their hometowns following their discharge from the military. His work demonstrated the great difficulty that many soldier have had adjusting to their home environments, and to
continue developing social connections that were established before the veteran’s military service.

One of the reasons for the importance of brotherhood, post military involvement, is the emotional support individuals receive from one another. Not only are veterans able to understand the military experience of fellow veterans in unique ways through having had the shared experience of participation in the unique subculture of the military, but they are available to each other for processing what may be a difficult transition from active duty service to new identities in the civilian world. Veterans sometimes feel they can talk to other veterans in a manner that they cannot do with family. With family and friends veteran at times have had difficulty connecting because they feel ashamed to share what they have done abroad. At times they have difficulty processing their own response to what they have done abroad even without discussing this with someone (Finkel, 2013). These feelings that many veterans have can also be part of Post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD).

The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) indicates four categories of symptoms and other factors that must be considered in order to diagnose someone with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While not including all of the elements, briefly these four category of symptoms include:

“Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,”

“Presence of one (or more) …intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s)…,” “Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), and “Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s)... (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271)
Generally, this condition is thought of in negative terms in the sense that as a psychiatric diagnosis, it is an impairment, and in contrast to health. This condition, like other psychiatric conditions, carries a stigma. As a result of their efforts at avoidance, veterans with this condition often feel disconnected from others around them. They feel that they have lost their social connections and their support network.

The National Center for PTSD noted that the “overall finding seems to be that most ethnic minority Veteran groups have a higher rate of PTSD than White Veterans” (Loo, 2016, para. 2). African Americans, and other racial/ethnic minorities, have also been less likely to seek treatment for PTSD compared to Whites (Roberts, Gilman, Breslau, Breslau, & Koenen, 2011). The avoidance, disconnection, and isolation associated with this condition then might be greater among African American than Whites following military service. While this study is not focusing on PTSD, the higher rates of PTSD among African Americans suggest that they may experience more isolation and avoidance, it also suggest that the current study’s focus on social connections among African American men is well warranted. Another key aspect of identity, that of being a man, also deserves some consideration.

**Masculinity**

When examining the experiences of African American male veterans and their experience of connection to other veterans it is important to consider aspects of their identity that likely influence how they approach forming relationships. How men generally live and experience their male identity will impact their experience of forming connections with other men. I believe it is important to consider masculinity and consider how it might impact the creation of new relationships among veterans.
The military has a long history of being strongly linked with ideas of masculinity (Agostino, 1998; Barrett, 2001; Connell, 1995). What Higate (2003) called “military masculinities” still predominates military culture; he noted these as “cluster[ing] around violence, aggression, rationality, and a sense of invulnerability, and…coolness under pressure” (p. 29). We see an opposition to what is generally deemed feminine across branches of the military. Morgan (2007) noted that training at the United States Military Academy valued “mainly…masculine qualities while feminine qualities are downplayed and even discouraged” (p.118). In the Marine Corps, boot camp serves to “expunge” the “feminine” (Zimmerman, 1999). A key feature of stereotypical feminine representations involves an openness and eagerness to engage in dialogue about emotional difficulties, often in an effort to forge platonic intimate relationships with others. The stereotypical openness of femininity is in direct contrast to stereotypical representations of the stoicism of masculinity. A willingness to directly form new relationships with others and risk being vulnerable in the process is part of a style of forming connections that has stereotypically been associated with women. In contrast, men forming new relationships are not typically represented as approaching these new relationships from a place of emotional vulnerability. In fact, if men were to present as vulnerable while attempting to form new relationships with other men they would likely be perceived as less desirable male friends, and of lower status.

Higate (2003) and O’Brien, Keight, and Shoemaker (2015) argued that many men in the military who may perceive themselves as having low status, be it by occupation (e.g., clerk) or social positioning (e.g., those that have suffered military sexual trauma), often engage in efforts to buttress their standing by engaging in “masculine” activities
such as excessive weight lifting; they argued that for these men there is a strong connection between the identity of a “warrior” and masculinity and their efforts are an attempt to gain status through demonstrating what they believe male warrior culture expects of men. This includes not attempting to form connections with other men in any manner that might be constructed as feminine. Attempting to uphold a “warrior” identity on the part of these soldiers seems to then require that aggression be part of how they move in the world, be it in the process of forming new connection with other men or not. Certainty in the process of attempting to forge new connections with men, aggression becomes important as performance. These performances are signals to other men, and they are attempts to buttress one’s status and perceived place within the community of men in the military.

Nagel and Feitz (2007) noted connections between “militarism, nationalism, and patriotism, with male codes of honor, with warrior ideologies, with hierarchical military organization, with officially sanctioned and unofficially enacted aggression in conflicts (e.g., rape, torture, other rituals of manliness)” (p. 38). The performance of masculinity in the military has been pervasive, regardless of other identities held by men in the military. Certainly for African American male soldiers, the performance of masculinity across conflicts has been linked with efforts to promote freedom not only in the context of the defined military mission, but for themselves, and for the larger African American community. In the context of the performance of masculinity for African American soldiers, their actions serve as signifiers to other men that they are safe to form connections with. These performances identify them as men who believe in common notions of masculinity in the US and are therefore not deemed as dangerous to connect
with, in that they will not engage in any actions that are likely to call into question the masculine status of the men they interact with. These actions are a type of conformity to social norms that prevent rejection or ostracization. In the effort to form connection with other men one must first avoid rejection. The social monitoring of men by other men is a form of policing that allows men to avoid connection with and rejection by those that do not conform in their actions to broader stereotypical norms of masculinity. Those that conform can be thought of as good men, worthy of forming connections with.

Neal (2013) argued that Black masculinity can be seen in the bifurcated perspectives of “good” and “bad.” The idea of good is in line with Higginbotham’s (1993) use of the phrase “the politics of respectability” to refer to the monitoring and adaptation of the behaviors of Black Americans in the early twentieth century to be consistent with White middle-class values. She argued that this practice was one way that Black Americans attempted to garner the respect of White people in their efforts to address White supremacy and racial oppression. An example is Elijah Anderson’s (1999) categorization of urban Black families as being either “street” or “decent.” Anderson’s description of “decent” families are those that believe in hard work, desire to create a “good life,…and…tend to accept mainstream values” (p. 38). These may seem like simplistic ways of viewing African Americans and Black men, but they are in line with efforts used by military recruiters to attract Black men by arguing that military service is a pathway to being “good” or “decent” (Favara, 2018). At the same time, advertisements and recruitment material produced to this end seek to use “narratives of racial equality [which] frame the military as a colorblind institution” (Favara, 2018, p. 18).
The US government has made efforts to address problems related to racial inequality in the military for more than half a century, starting with desegregating units that confined Black soldiers to secondary support roles deemed subservient to roles occupied by white soldiers in WWII. In 1948 a presidential executive order was issued to desegregate the branches of the US military, but despite these longstanding attempts at integration -- relative to other legislative acts addressing racial inequality in US society-- problems involving race in the military have persisted. For example, Christensen and Tsilker (2017) noted the disproportionate odds of Black service members being convicted of offenses requiring punishment relative to their membership percentage in various branches of the military. They found that for all offenses

Depending on the service and type of disciplinary or justice action, Black service members were at least 1.29 times and as much as 2.61 times more likely than White service members to have an action taken against them in an average year. (Christen & Tsilker, 2017, p.4)

The authors also provided a perspective across time and noted that from 2006 to 2015 they found a great range of difference between the branches of the military: from a 32% increased chance of having a guilty court-marshal or non-judicial punishment proceeding for African Americans in the Marine Corps to a 71% increased chance of Black service members facing a face court-marshal or non-judicial punishment than White servicemen during a year in the Air Force (Christensen & Tsilker, 2017). Race is undoubtedly a factor in these disparate outcomes of judicial action and impacts not only the experience of individuals in the military, but pervades the rest of their lives, including their veteran status.
In adaptation of Anderson’s (1999) ideas it seems likely that notions of “good” and “decent” likely factor into how African American veterans form and experience connections with other veterans. Perceptions of themselves as “decent” or “good” lead to performing honorable roles, and “decent” individuals are more likely to forge connections with others based upon their self-perception. Individuals that identify as “street” or “bad” are likely to foreclose possibilities of connections, especially with those that do not identify in a similar manner. They are more likely to be distrustful of others and less likely to desire maintaining relationships. If African American male veterans view themselves as “good” they could thus be open to forming and maintaining connections with other male veterans.

**Construction of Race and Military Involvement**

In the following section I examine the literature on race, and the intersection of race and military involvement to better garner an understanding of how these two important factors might impact the experience of military involvement of African American males and their subsequent lives as veterans. While the content of this historical review may appear to be removed from the core phenomenon of this study, i.e. social connection among African American male veterans, it serves as important background information of how race has meaning in the US.

In contemporary understandings, race, like gender, is understood to be socially constructed and no longer an inherent, biological quality of people (Omi and Winant 1986; Smedley 1999). Within its socially constructed framework, race is taken up by individuals in society in ways that profoundly impact both individual and communal experiences.
Structural racism is the macro-level phenomenon that supports a variety of practices, polices, and ideologies that disproportionately grants access to power and valuable resources to White people at the expense of people of color (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). Many White people choose to look at only individual actions as indicators of racism, ignoring the structural racial dynamics of the US. The resistance and difficulty of White people acknowledging the pervasive influence of racism in the country has been called White fragility, which represents:

- location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged. To say that Whiteness is a location of structural advantage is to recognize that to be White is to be in a privileged position within society and its institutions. (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 42)

The ideology of individualism and objectivity are important parts of maintaining the existing power structure in society in that they allow people to disconnect themselves from the larger social groups to which they belong. The American myth is one where people rise or fall according to their merit and hard work. The myth insinuates that all people have an equal chance of succeeding and that the playing field is level (DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility does not tolerate deviance from this, and can also be considered:

- a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress in the habitus becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, reinstate White racial equilibrium. (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 108)
Efforts to restore equilibrium under these conditions can include denying that any racial problem exist. Claims to the contrary can be taken as an assault on oneself and the idea that a person has arrived at a privileged position in life due to merit and their hard work alone. Internalization of this ideology means that when someone is not deemed successful in an arena they can be dismissed as lazy, having not worked hard enough, or not taking the right approach; the fault is with them. This ideology is pervasive and all that live in the US are exposed to it and are socialized into it, irrespective of racial identification or class. It holds out the possibility of success for the person struggling to secure the minimum resources needed to sustain them, while simultaneously justifying the privileged position of those that hold power. Those in power often tell those not in power to work harder, and many without power in return believe on some level the message they hear; that with harder work they too can achieve any level of success (DiAngelo, 2018). While it is possible to be successful, this fact belies the extreme challenge, and low likelihood of dramatic upward mobility for large numbers of people structurally disadvantaged.

Structural advantage for White people came from the oppression of Black people, and gained significant social meaning in the context of slavery. Racial constructs and racial practices are part of the historical development of the US that led the country becoming a global superpower and having the largest economy in the world. The cultural and economic influence of slavery was widespread and not just limited to the southern states of the US. Slavery existed officially in the northern US until the early 1800s. The North continued to benefit from slavery through the intricate financial connections between northern and southern economies. The racial hierarchy in the US where
Whiteness occupied the highest status and Blackness the lowest is a direct result of the slave economy. The origins of this started with the first large-scale introduction of slaves to the US (Baptist, 2014).

Slavery became an institution where the experience of Africans forcefully brought to the US included some period of adjustment to prepare them for slavery. While the experience of slavery was not monolithic and varied by slaves across regions and over time, the process of “civilizing” Black slaves in the US often started in the Caribbean with what was known as “seasoning.” This included using brute force to get slaves to accept their bondage and acquiesce to the demands of White slave owners. Slave owners attempted to do this through breaking the will of Black slaves not only through using brute force, but also through efforts to strip the slaves of markers of their identities and create new ones based on European culture. This included giving the slaves new names, discouraging former religious or spiritual practices, encouraging Christianity, and destabilizing connections with other known slaves through separation of family units, among other practices. Not all slaves experienced seasoning in the Caribbean, but all went through a similar process if they were brought to the US directly from Africa. Practices were also introduced to ensure a large labor force, this included stripping slaves of all right, laws indicating that the children of slaves were slaves, and that those with any discernable African ancestry would be classified as Black (Franklin and Higginbotham, 2011).

To assuage any guilt, ideas about slavery as a beneficent institution were circulated. To support the system of Black slavery in the US White slave owners used the narrative of beneficence. Through slavery, slave owners argued, they were helping the
“uncivilized” to become “civilized.” Civilized in this context meant following the commands of White slave owners willingly and without argument, as well as accepting a Eurocentric worldview. Ideas of science and popular culture were used to “justify not only the institution of slavery but also the routine debasement of free Blacks” (Franklin and Higginbotham, 2011, p. 163). The institution of science was used to support this social system through claims of intellectual deficiency of people of African descent and superiority of those of European descent. This science bolstered the race-based hierarchy in the US that supported slavery and is directly connected to the current social and structural organization of the US. The key points here relevant to this research project are the historical structuring of society that concentrated wealth and economic advance among Whites, and the ongoing simultaneous social elevation and desirability of Whiteness and devaluation of Blackness.

In the early twentieth century DuBois (1903/1989) called the ontological position in which a Black person was aware of the meaning of their Blackness while living under the hegemony of Eurocentric values “double consciousness.” DuBois (1903/1989) eloquently stated that under this condition there is a:

…sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder…The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife… (p.5)
DuBois addressed the lived reality of the social construction of race, where racial identity is socially imbued with the power of the prevailing racial and economic hierarchy of society. The military is a reflection of society and is not exempted from the politics of identity, power, and social values present in the broader society. DuBois (1903/1989) also spoke to the feeling of asked and unasked questions from White people regarding the social positioning and exploitation of Black bodies in the US:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903/1989, p.7)

Du Boise (1903/1989) here suggests that it is the presence and exploitation of Black bodies that has historically necessitated a social division between Black and White people in the US. He also suggests that there is a general awareness that these conditions are problematic in that they cannot be spoken about directly, for that would necessitate addressing legitimate claims of barbarity and dehumanization that those in power rather not address. In the US hierarchical power structure, discussing racial problems is looked down upon.
Yancy (2005) noted that the Black body offers a critique of Whiteness. Though attention may be ostensibly oriented towards Black bodies as the “problem,” Yancy noted that the Black body cannot exist without a conceptual juxtaposition to a White body. This White body goes unquestioned. Its presence, its power, its positon to serve as normative for all has historically remained hidden. Yancy (2005) argued that through the focus on Black bodies White Americans engaged in a project of “erasure” that allowed them to remain unseen and yet hold power. This process was one of “self-construction” that supported the maintenance of White power. A few limited opportunities have been offered to African American men as potential pathways to gain relief from overt subjugation. Military service is perhaps the oldest of these.

African American males have long served in the military forces of this country. A 1792 law prevented African Americans from serving in the US military. President Lincoln vacillated on whether to allow Black men to join the Union army. Due to declining numbers of volunteers he relented and allowed Black men to serve. With the encouragement of abolitionist Frederick Douglass to fight for freedom, approximately 200,000 Black men served in the Union Army and Navy. These men served in a variety of roles (mostly support), but due to racism their use in combat was limited. However, there were some all Black units commanded by White officers and Black non-commissioned officers engaged in combat. Ideas of racial inferiority of Black soldiers by White members of the military were prevalent during this time period and persisted into the twentieth century (Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, 1998). African American soldiers have participated in all Americans wars and did so in segregated units largely through World War II. President Harry Truman signed an executive order to end racial
segregation in the US military in 1948. Well beyond this date, many African American Vietnam veterans reported experiences of racism within the military (Moskos, 1975; Westheider, 1999).

Regardless of how contemporary African American soldiers have taken up their military service, or their lives post-discharge, their racial and gender identity are important factors to consider in understanding their experience. Race in particular could impact the degree of closeness among veterans post-discharge; and the degree to which they felt they were members of the “brotherhood” of soldiers and veterans. The thoughts and feelings of African American veterans, regarding war and their post-deployment lives, are a relatively unstudied phenomenon.

Methodology

Research Question

This qualitative exploratory study looks at African American male veterans who served in the military and were discharged in the post-9/11 era. The study will address the following research question: What is the experience of post-9/11 African American male veterans’ social connection to other male veterans? Stated differently, how do African American male veterans experience brotherhood with fellow male veterans? To address this question I will use Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of veterans who were discharged from the military after September 11, 2001.
Method

While working with veterans and reflecting on the lives of African American male veterans, the possibility for complexity and contradiction of veterans living in the current social and political context fascinated me, and made me realize I had not heard the stories of these veterans and how they experienced social connectedness with other veterans. Research on social connectedness to date has examined social connectedness largely in the context of quantitative research. Reduced to a quantitative variable, studies have sought to understand whether social connectedness itself is the means through which other outcomes, such as acculturation or subjective well-being, are achieved (Lee, Dean, & Jung, 2008; Yoon, Hacker, Hewitt, Abrams, & Cleary, 2012), or how social connectedness itself has been associated with other outcomes of interest such as cognitive processes and anxiety (Baumeister, Nuss, & Twenge, 2002; Baumeister & Tice, 1990).

In selecting a method for this study I wanted to be able to go beyond the quantitative variables in understanding veterans’ social connections. But I also wanted to transcend my own assumptions and see the experiences of African American male veterans in a new light. I wanted to record and explore their own accounts of the experience of social connectedness as they have lived it. It was this interest in their lived experiences that led me to design a qualitative study in order to systematically investigate the complexity of African American veterans’ sense of connectedness with fellow veterans.

Van Manen (1990) argued that in phenomenological research, we need to be committed to deeply thinking about phenomenon. He described it as “being-given-over to some quest.” This process involves deeply thinking about phenomenon as it was lived by participants. Van Manen noted that “lived experience implicates the totality of life”
He further noted that we cannot capture this totality, we cannot hold it for study as phenomenon is always in the past. In a phenomenological study we are trying to capture something of that experience through reflection on the experiential phenomenon in question, and we try to do this in a way that brings that experience to life and shows us what is unique about it and what separates that experience from others. The aim of this study is to gather narratives that allow for deep reflection in order to understand more fully what is unique about the experience of my study participants.

This human science project takes up the phenomenon of social connectedness and considers its meaning as not fixed in time, but rather as a structure of lived experience by participants. The goal is to strip away the everyday taken for granted-ness and view the phenomenon of social connections of African American veterans with fresh eyes. Each qualitative, phenomenological study offers the possibility to present a perspective that enriches our understanding of particular psychological phenomena and can lead to further qualitative and quantitative research.

Van Manen noted that phenomenological description can be thought of as “text description”: “if all experience is like text then we need to examine how these text are socially constructed” (1990, p. 39). The narrative accounts of the participants in this study, including their experience of the phenomenon under consideration, can be thought of as texts in need of interpretation and hermeneutic procedures.

Van Manen (1990) identified six key research activities as part of his phenomenological approach to research. Following the approach used by O’Brien (2019) I used the first four activities as guiding principles for this study: 1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; 2. Investigating
experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; 3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; and 4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

Van Manen’s (1990) approach to research helped ensure that the experience of African American male veterans in this study was explored as they described it. It was central to understanding the lived experience of study participants returning to their communities and their experience of connection to other veterans following their transition to a civilian role. Below I provide details on the specific steps taken in this research project.

Participants and Recruitment

All participants in this study were self-identified as male, 18 years old or older, self-identified as African American or Black, served in the military in the post-9/11 era, and were discharged from military duty to civilian status. Four to five participants were sought for this study. I obtained the approval of Duquesne University’s institutional review board (IRB) for this project in July of 2017.

For this project I used a snowball sampling technique, starting with individuals that I knew who served in the military. I approached them and asked them if they knew of any individuals that met the inclusion criteria for this study. Letters providing an overview of the study were given to contacts that might have known African American male veterans that might have been willing to participate in the study. My contact information was included on the letter describing the study so that any potentially interested study participants could contact me.
I was surprised by the great difficulty I encountered recruiting participants for this study. Given my connections within Pittsburgh communities I anticipated that recruitment would go smoothly. I initially called and emailed potential study participants but did not hear back from individuals. So while it was easy to identify potential participants it was challenging to get in touch with them and talk to them about my study. After making initial contact, and even after my first interview, these difficulties continued. I used my contacts in the community to facilitate introductions. Community members spoke to veterans on my behalf but the challenges making contact continued. This was perplexing to me and I was left to wonder about the nature of difficulty making connections. I wondered if it was because individuals thought that bringing up material from their military service would be painful and they wanted to avoid discussing it. I did eventually make contact with one potential participant who initially agreed to participate and then declined. He noted that after he initially agreed to participate he started having nightmares about his time in Iraq and declined to be interviewed. Another potential participant agreed to be interviewed but then never showed up at the appointed place and time. He also never returned any further phone calls. While I cannot say why I experienced difficulty recruiting individuals, I suspect that the reasons where similar to the one potential participant who was kind enough to tell me about his nightmares before declining to participate. It appears that many African American male veterans from the post-9/11 era do not welcome discussion regarding their military service. Additionally, I found two African American male veterans who were interested in participating, however they did not meet the inclusion criteria of having served in the post-9/11 military. Despite these challenges, I did eventually get in touch with four veterans willing to share their
experiences with me. Their real names have not been used and pseudonyms have been
given for all study participants.

Data Collection

This qualitative exploratory study used face-to-face interviews to gather rich data
about participants’ experiences. These interviews were semi-structured in that I used an
interview guide with a set of questions to ensure that experiences of social connection
were discussed during the interview. I asked questions primarily about African American
male veterans’ experience of connection to other veterans, such as “Tell me about a time
when you felt most disconnected from other veterans?”, “Tell me about a time when you
felt most connected to other veterans?” (see Appendix A for the full list of questions).
Participants’ responses to interview questions went beyond the prompts as they discussed
different realms of experience. Interviews lasted on average one hour and forty-five
minutes. One interview was conducted in a coffee shop, one in a public library and two
by phone. Before starting each interview I went over the main points of the consent form.
I then gave the consent form to participants so they could read it and ask any questions
that remained. For interviews conducted by phone consent forms were emailed to
participants in advance and returned to the researcher before starting the interview.

In the interviews we did not move from one question to another in a rigid manner.
These interviews were fluid and conversational in nature. My experience was that these
interviews, grounded in study participant’s experiences, proceeded organically. I returned
to the interview guide when necessary to ensure that all topics were discussed.
Confidentiality

All the information received from participants was de-identified, and their names do not appear on the interviewer’s notes, on audio recording labels, on transcripts, and will not be included in any public dissemination of findings. Participants were told that portions of de-identified descriptions may be included in presentations or publications of the research results. At the time of discussing consent I shared with participants that a pseudonym would be given to protect confidentially. The consent forms and information linking participants to the de-identified data were stored in an encrypted format on two stand-alone hard drives. Original digital audio recordings of the interviews have been stored in an encrypted format on a standalone hard drive using BitLocker Drive Encryption. This drive encryption software ensures that data will not be accessible to anyone but intended viewers. All consent forms were scanned and also stored in an encrypted format on a separate hard drive.

Role of Researcher

The position of the researcher is just as important as that of the participant when considering the outcome of any analysis. Interpretations, or thematizing, of the “text of life” are a type of interpretation of experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 90). Here a researcher’s attempt to “make sense” of a particular experience is not done in isolation. The researcher does not arrive on the scene as a blank slate. As Van Manen stated we “stand…in life” (p. 90). Each person brings her own history and positionality to a project. A “self” and an “other” are both involved in the process of thematizing. To the extent possible, whatever the researcher brings must be acknowledged when engaging in a thematic analysis. Van Manen noted that “expressing the fundamental or overall meaning
of a text is a judgement call. Different researchers might discern different fundamental meaning. And it does not make one interpretation necessarily more true than another” (1990, p. 94). As an African American male researcher interviewing African American male participants, I tried to think about how my background influenced this project.

Considering the positionality of the subject, commonality across interviews, and the positionality of the researcher are all reflective practices that Van Manen has made fundamental to his phenomenological approach. In this study both participants and the interviewer shared the same racial identification and gender. This was beneficial regarding building rapport and likely helped to facilitate successful interviews, in that participants felt at ease. I as the researcher needed to be cautious to not fall back onto language or ways of interaction that curtailed discussion and relied on assumption. To help address this possibility, I maintained a journal and reflected upon each interview following its completion. I noted down any surprising moments of the interview, noticeable reactions I had to material brought up, ways that I felt shared racial background might have been a barrier in the interview, and ideas and insights I gained into the phenomenon being discussed. The journal was also be a place for me to question how my values may have influenced the interviews. After each interview I thought about how I shaped the interview and noted down my reflections on this possible influence. I reflect on this in the Discussion section at the end of the dissertation.

**Data Analysis**

Van Manen (1990) posited the use of thematic analysis of a text as a means through which to attempt to approach the pre-reflective lived experience of a subject. He noted that while the reality of lived experience is beyond what can be captured in a
theme, the use of themes give a reader an entry point to begin to understand something of the structure of the particular experience being discussed. For this study all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

Using a thematic analysis across interviews is what helps to deepen an understanding of the “structure” of experience. One way Van Manen (1990) described this is as “mining meaning” from interviews. The commonality among individual interviews mined through thematic analysis helps elicit the “structure” or “essence” of the experience being studied, i.e. the features or qualities that they have in common.

Van Manen (1990) recommended three approaches to discovering themes in the data. The first approach is the wholistic or sententious approach. At this stage I wanted to try to understand the significance of each of my interviews as a whole. Here, I read through each interview without taking notes and reflected on the meaning of each transcript.

Next, a selecting or highlighting approach was called for. This involved reading through the transcripts multiple times and looking for phrases that seem relevant for social connectedness. It was at this stage that I made use of the software package NVIVO for the thematic identification (coding) of the interview material. NVIVO is primarily intended for the analysis of qualitative data. All transcripts were loaded into NVIVO for analysis.

Van Manen noted that anecdotes are short stories or “narrative with a point” (1990, p. 69). Through focusing in on these singular events we can begin to understand the life-world of the person. Some anecdotes can be powerful in that they show, or describe, aspects of the life world that may be hidden to others. I gave particular attention
to specific anecdotes in my coding at this stage of the analysis. My goal was to select segments of the text that seemed particularly relevant for the phenomenon of social connection. These segments of text were coded again and in depth in NIVO as themes from individual interviews in the next step.

Van Manen’s (1990) third recommendation for identifying themes involved a detailed or line-by-line approach. Here I read through each line of each interview as I asked myself what the line revealed to me about the experience of social connection for African American male veterans. This third stage ensured that I thought about every aspect of the data and how it might be relevant for social connection. If it became apparent that additional material was relevant to the phenomenon it was coded at this time.

In this research project the reading of the research interviews was done with an attunement in which I tried to not only understand the narrative as presented, but also the things left unsaid. Van Manen (1990) talked about the importance of silence, and the importance of silence to understand phenomenon. In reading the interviews I attempted to focus on form and function, on style and content. Each interview contained unique themes, which some might call sub-themes. These themes are italicized when included in the text of this document, they can also be found in tables presenting results of thematic analysis at the end of the narrative section for each participant. After identifying the sub-themes from individual interviews I focused on general themes found across study participants. Sub-themes from individual participant interviews not relevant for the study focus were discarded. It is through examining shared themes across interviews that the structure of pre-reflective experience emerged. To assist with the process of thinking
through the lived experiences of study participants, I followed Van Manen’s suggestion to consider the usefulness of what he calls “existentials,” which are spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality. These four existential themes are thought to be relevant to the lifeworld experiences of people regardless of history, culture, and life circumstances (Van Manen, 1990). Anecdotes will be used in the following section to present the findings in a coherent manner.

Van Manen argued that “to do human science research is to be involved in the crafting of a text” (1990, p. 78). Text is an organized narrative and is a way to capture experience that subjects it to scrutiny. The “textual labor” that Van Manen discussed involves the practice of writing. For him, research and writing are intricately connected and reading what one has written is part of the reflective process; reading what we previously wrote is a type of dialogue in which what we previously wrote about our understanding of the phenomenon now “stares back” and allows us to question if we have made lived experience understandable. This reflective process was part of my work in that it involved writing and re-writing to help show the lived experience of social connection for my participants.

**Participant Narratives**

**Paul**

Paul is a 55-year-old, married, African American male who served in the US Army for 30 years. He was an infantry solider, served three tours in Iraq and two in Afghanistan, and achieved the rank of Command Sergeant Major at the battalion level. This is the highest rank that an enlisted soldier can obtain in the army other than the Sergeant Major of the Army, a position held by only one person in the US Army. As
Command Sergeant Major he was responsible for approximately 1500 soldiers. Given his rank in the military Paul was able to offer a perspective less commonly encountered. He retired from the military in 2018.

Paul grew up in a rural area of South Carolina. His father worked as a carpenter and painter for a local White contractor. He grew up with five brothers, three of whom served in the military. Paul’s father had served in the military during WWII in a segregated unit. Growing up, Paul and his brothers would often help their father with the construction of homes in a nearby wealthy area.

Paul noted he was “quite the athlete” growing up and was offered a scholarship to play football at a local university. Growing up in a rural area he enjoyed hunting, fishing, swimming, and spending time in the woods. He noted seeing a commercial as a teenager encouraging men to join the military. This commercial showed a man jumping out of an airplane with an M16 rifle, running through the woods, walking through a swamp, and he noted being intrigued by the camouflage on his face. He thought, “I love running in the woods, and that just seemed to be cool. I loved hunting. That’s how I related to that, these are things I already like to do.”

Paul said he grew up poor. After reflecting on this he said, “Oh, ain’t no kind of struggle! We were struggling, but…I didn’t know that they were struggling because, I mean, I was happy because, some of our meals consisted of corn bread and buttermilk. And that was to me like the greatest thing you know.” He talked about looking forward to Sunday as a child because he knew that after church his family would have a big meal that involved chicken or some other type of meat. He was 17 when he joined the Army.
In discussing Paul’s experience of relationships with his fellow soldiers and veterans, he noted early in his life an experience of disrespect “blew me away.” When I asked Paul if he thought race impacted his social connection with other people while in the military, and as a veteran, he responded:

Well, in order for you to fully understand that, you got to understand that I was a real old country boy from South Carolina. I had never been out of state, never been out of the county, and most of my dealings with White people, especially adult White people, they were not positive….. One thing I vividly remember, my grandfather was a sharecropper. And he was an artist at his craft. He knew how to grow stuff. The sweetest tomatoes I ever tasted in my life. He took pride just working. He would not sell anything that didn't meet his standard, and he had a high standard. I remember, I was probably 10 years old maybe, around the mid-1970s, going with him to the farmers market to sell produce. So, I remember pulling up with him in his truck, and we had this wagon, that was loaded down with watermelons and the truck was loaded down with bushels, baskets of tomatoes, and we got in the line. And as you go up to this little dock thing, to negotiate whatever you negotiate. This young White boy, he couldn't have been no more than, I would imagine, maybe 20. And my granddad at that time, I guess he was probably well into his 70s. And this White boy pulled up in front of him, because it was his turn next, and like blocked his truck. So my granddaddy got out, and basically was saying something to the guy, I don’t know what he was saying, but I imagine he was saying “hey, it’s my turn.” I remember rolling down the window in the truck and sticking my head out. Just being nosy as a 10 or 11
year old kid would be, and I remember the guy at the farmers market told my granddaddy. “Hey, look boy. Either you wait until I tell you to come on up, or you can just take all of yo shit, and go back the way you came from.” I mean, this boy was no more than about 20. And that kind of blew me away because I wasn’t used to seeing young people being disrespectful to no elder. And I thought my granddaddy was going to say something, or do something, but he didn’t. He just got back in his truck and basically backed it up and let the guy go in front of him. So I tell you that story because. That kind of shaped, that along with other experiences, kind of shaped my opinion of White people. Cause I didn’t really deal with nobody else but Black people and White people.

This key moment was experienced as jarring and deeply troubling, and Paul’s understanding and experience of relating to White men fundamentally changed from then on. He noted this experience as pivotal to understanding his relationship to White people and racism. During his time in the military the behaviors of White people were evaluated against this touchstone to determine how he felt about it.

Paul described interacting with drill instructors at Ranger school while in the army and noted the racism of the Ranger instructors and commanding officers, which became apparent in their attitudes and behaviors towards him as a Black soldier. Rangers are an elite combat unit and he talked about the phases of the training (Darby, Mountain, Dessert, and Florida/swamp). It is unusual for a candidate to go straight through Ranger school, and he noted the various infractions and conditions under which a candidate could have to repeat a phase. He stated:
At that time I had breezed through Darby, Desert, and the Mountains phase. I got all the way to the Florida phase, as a Black guy. There was only 3 African Americans when I started. By the time I got to Florida phase they was throwing everything at me, and I was negotiating it with ease. They tried to make me quit, they tried everything. But no matter what they was doing, I was very successful.

Paul indicated that when near the end of training he did make a minor mistake, he was given a severe punishment of being required to go back to almost the beginning of ranger school and repeat all the phases to finish the program. He said:

So I said I wanted to appeal my case to the commandant, which was the sergeant major. Sergeant Major …, I’ll never forget him. They was like, okay, no problem. You can appeal it, it’s your right. So I go in his office back in Ft. Benning, GA. And he’s sitting behind his desk, he had these papers on his desk. I reported like I was supposed to with my ROI. I’m like, Sergeant Major, Ranger Candidate…reporting as ordered. And I’m standing there reporting to him, and he’s looking down at his desk at some papers, and he never acknowledged me. Cause normally they would like acknowledge you, and say at ease, or something. No, he kept me there for at least like 5 minutes. And he finally acknowledged me, and looked up from what he was looking at. And he looks at me and says “What do you want, boy?!” that was his exact words to me. And I said “Sergeant Major, I’m here to appeal the decision” and after he said “what do you want boy” he dropped his head back down with those glasses on, and was reading those papers, or whatever he was doing at that desk! And I’m explaining myself, and he looks up again over those glasses and was like “I don’t even know why you here, boy.
Because whatever my ROI tells me, I’m going to support my ROI. So you might as well get your Black ass back to where they told you to go, or you could drop right here, right now. And he didn’t even hear me out.

Paul described that in these relationships, and in these types of instances, he resisted confronting people’s racist actions out of concern that this would strengthen their racist narratives. He was determined to overcome other’s racist characterizations of him through exemplary actions. He briefly considered dropping out, but ultimately repeated the phases of training and completed Ranger school without further incident.

In the relational field, his connection with White soldiers at this stage in his career was one of tension. He shared another story of his realization that a cadence they sang had a racist origin. He explained these feelings in the following:

Like I say a lot of things that you was told to do. You learned later that they were really… They had another motive behind it, and you know, they was racist. But again, I didn't know at that time and I didn't really care to think too much about it.

Not that I didn't care about it being racist, but I couldn’t let it cause me tension. He described the surprise and bemusement he experienced through seeing a pattern and learning that certain assignments were not given randomly, but were based on racist attitudes towards him and others.

There were some soldiers with whom he felt tension, good ole boys, that he felt were a big part of overt racism in the military. He shared:

We used to go do training in the field for 45 days at a time, and we used to have these little porta-pottys, they were like makeshift latrines they were like built houses that people could go in and crap and piss in. But, but, from earlier times,
from when I joined, … you had to burn the poop and piss, that was a detail they
gave to the Black guys or Hispanic guys. And when I joined they used to, not that
White guys didn’t do it, but mostly minorities did it. And the White guys that did
do it, were the White guys that didn’t, I didn’t realize it at the time, the White
guys that didn’t subscribe to racist ideologies got stuck on those details too. I later
learned that they were classified as N..lovers too, [chuckles] or something to that
effect. … I learned later that those guys that were thrown on those details too.
Cause there were certain guys that never got it, but they were good old boys and
they would never get those details.

When I asked Paul if he had talked to other soldiers about his experiences or
talked, or thought about talking, to someone in leadership about any of these experiences
he shared that the leadership was often a “good ole boys” club that held racist beliefs.
Implicitly tying these good ole boy soldiers to normalized racism within the military he
stated “But racism was normal. It was, it was, it was accepted in the environment. I mean
some of the things that they would say and do, it was normal.” This suggested the
presence of good ole boys, and these types of occurrences, were so routine as to not
warrant any special recognition. Paul experienced these things as part of the “normal” in
the military.

As Paul’s career progressed he noted feeling that his relationships with others in
the military changed. While he indicated that the military took steps to try to address the
racial climate in the military, he could not recall what those actions were or why they
took them. Reflecting on this he stated:
I don't know really what happened. I could tell you that my experience was, in my experiences, the military started becoming racially aware. Stuff that was acceptable, like my first four years in the military, people was getting reprimanded for certain behaviors that used to be normal. But, like I said, I didn't know why. That's what I noticed. I noticed there was an obvious shift, it was an effort to be racially aware if you want to call it that.

Paul noted that in the latter part of his career he did not experience any racism. He noted having some racist employees work under him, but had no actions directed at him. What struck me about this is the possibility that the changes in Paul’s experience of racism may have been due to his promotion to higher ranks, and the deference that comes from subordinates as part of military culture. There appeared to be less critical examination of his experiences related to the decrease in racism directed toward him. At the same time, Paul noted that most instances of racism directed at him came from superiors and not from soldiers at the same rank he held. Among these same rank soldiers he experienced “brotherhood.” When he joined the military, he felt like he met White people for the first time in his life that did not appear to be racist. Many of them “took time to get to know you” and “seemed genuine.”

Paul is not only unique in the rank he was able to achieve in the military, he is also among a smaller group of individuals who left the military with an honorable discharge and then later decided to reenlist to complete a career. Paul was in the military for 10 years and then was discharged and lived as a civilian for 7 years. He noted that he went back to school and earned a master’s degree in International Relations and Conflict Resolution. Paul then reenlisted for another 20 years. When he was first a veteran his
primary experience was that “as a Black veteran, at that time I felt like nobody really cared. Nobody cares!” When I asked Paul more about this he wondered if maybe people did care and he simply did not notice them because “I was just focused on what I was trying to achieve.”

After Paul was discharged in 2018 his primary experience was feeling disconnected from everyone. When he has interacted with Black veterans he usually felt admired and respected. He noted:

In most cases, other Black people admired you more, as a soldier. Because you were doing what they considered to be the tougher MOS. The MOS where you kind of most sit on an island. You being successful in the MOS as a Black man. And it’s not many of you. It’s admired and respected for the most part.

While he experienced recognition, respect, and admiration when interacting with other African American veterans, he also expressed feeling prejudged, particularly by those who held different military occupations. He shared:

You know I see a lot of Black veterans in the pentagon and Black veterans in service MOSs they are very close-knit. And I see that be so prevalent in the pentagon because you got like a lot of Black veterans that were, that were logistics and there are a lot of logistics jobs in the Pentagon. And it’s a tight-knit group. Wherein, although I’m a Black veteran. I’m infantry. And most of my associations has like been dealing with White people. So a lot of times, Black veterans or Black soldiers, they kind of put a “oh, now you infantry.” They kind of have a preconceived idea about you before they get to know you, you know?
Paul’s sense of being prejudged caused him to feel left out, in that among those in military support specialties there is a closeness that he is not a part of.

Paul described experiences using his body to address tension in relationships due to racism when he did experience it in the military. He described striving to be the best to address negative (racist) actions directed at him.

He stated:

Back then you pretty much just did what you were told. But, like I said a lot of things that you were told to do…you learned later that they were really, they had another motive behind it… they was racist. But again, I didn't know at that time and I didn't really care. Not that I didn't care about it being racist, because I was driven. I'm like, I'm gonna do what I have to do. But at the same time I got my eye on the prize. And I wanted to excel. I knew that whatever I did I had to be the best like my daddy used to tell me. When it came to physical fitness, I had to do the best, when it came to marksmanship, I had to do the best, when it came to a drill ceremony, I had to be the best. When it came as a warrior task and drill, I had to be the best. And that's what I did. And so, because I was driven. I'm like, no one is gonna outdo me and if anybody did, they got to know they were in a fight. And that was my perspective. That was what drove me.

Paul described pushing himself to be the best at every task he took up while in the military. He took pride in a job well done, but also indicated hoping that striving to be the best would prevent anyone from racist dehumanization because his positive qualities, as the best, would be obvious.
As a veteran Paul indicated that something about his bodily way of being in the world reveals his veteran status to others. He thinks this is due to the mannerisms he acquired in the military, and stated:

I think when you are been associated with something as long as I have been and as, I just think that, I mean that now, I have a beard. But, even with me trying to, like, blend in with civilians. People still know that I’m a veteran for the most part. And I just think it’s the way I carry myself. I really don’t know. I mean, I’m not clean shaved. I got a beard, and I don’t wear no hats or anything. Probably about the only indicator would be, because I often when I go out to eat or something, I ask if they have a veteran’s discount. Maybe it’s overheard. I don’t know. But I can tell you that being out over the last year, people know, or people identify me as being a veteran, and I don’t really know how they know that, because I don’t wear anything that would indicated that, but it would my mannerism I guess.

Paul stated he is not sure how people know he is a veteran but feels that his status is revealed through his bodily movement, at least in part. It was clear that whatever the quality is of his movement that allows him to be recognized as a veteran is very meaningful to Paul.

Spatial elements of the experience of being connected to others while in the military are associated with being in structured physical spaces that bring a sense of familiarity and comfort. Part of this structure allowed for the proximity of fellow soldiers. Paul indicated that while he was in the military and home on leave, military spaces were actually the most familiar environments to him:
You don’t really realize how much the military life afforded you the opportunity in between taking leave and doing your duty, just knowing you going back to duty kind of allowed you to manage, or tolerate, if you want to call it that. I don’t know what the word is, just personal family relationships…. because eventually I’m going to go back to the environment I’m most familiar with.

Paul described being able to “tolerate” these moments of potentially challenging family dynamics due to the fact that he knew his times of leave were brief. He felt disconnected and out of place in the presence of family and friends. Paul suggested that his home environment and his family did not help him feel the sense of ease many others feel at home. Thoughts of returning to a military base or combat zone seemed to help him feel better and suggested that these spaces allowed for a type of comfort and openness for him not possible in his family home at that time in his life. During the first 10 years of his military career he spent very little time at home in the US. The ease of being in the structured environments of military life came from the comfort gained from being in such environments for many years. For Paul being in such an environment with others following the same schedule and engaging in the same activities and supported by those spaces has promoted connection through engagement in shared routines. In that sense for Paul the spatial aspect of connection is not lived in a military base or in a combat zone but in any structured space that facilitates connection through promoting or requiring engagement in shared activities directed towards a common goal.

As a veteran Paul noted his challenge in dealing with the loss of the familiar. He stated that once you leave the military and are a veteran, “you don’t have that, there is no returning back to the military, because you’re done. Your service is over. It was an eye
opener for me, it really was.” He shared his frustration attempting to look for jobs and people not understanding his skill set, or what he accomplished in the military, nor seeming to care. He said he worked briefly at the US State Department and felt that the employees there “took three days to do what they could do in one” and were not interested in becoming more efficient. Paul stated that he feels “fortunate” to have recently gotten a job working at the Pentagon. This space has radically changed his experience as a veteran in that it returned him to a structured environment, where the people that work there are either current or former members of the military. He noted feeling connected to the veterans that work there because they share similar beliefs and values (e.g. efficiency, respect, honor), which came from military culture. When not at work Paul keeps to himself and feels isolated, but during working hours he experiences a familiar sense of connection.

For Paul the temporal components of feeling connected to other veterans is related to both a sense of hopefulness because they share a temporal horizon based on similar experiences in the past, and a fear of being misunderstood. He stated:

When you go through stuff and solve complex problems. Or when you are enduring a dangerous combat situation and you have to make split second decisions and they turn out well and you don’t, well, sometimes they don’t turn out well. But the fact that you go through that with other people, and when it’s over. When the dust settles, you know what just happened. Whether it was an amazing achievement, or epic failure. How do you explain this to someone? How does somebody identify with that, unless they were part of that? You just can’t. So you build this connection with others. They may have experienced something
you have not experience, but you may have encountered a complex problem. … Through being a part of that team or being with that other veteran, they are already thinking the same way you are thinking even without verbally communicating. Because there are some similarities of things you have gone through. You are presented with a problem and they are already solving it before hands are even placed on the task. That is a perfect thing. It’s a perfect thing to be connected with somebody…. I want to use as an example. … We have a common task but we are achieving that task on two separate ends on the building. Then when we come together we realize that what I was working with in Building A and you was working on in Building D culminates together for the overall outcomes and we never verbally communicated.

Paul’s experience of social connection with other veterans is then based not only on similar experiences in the past but on a hopefulness that he can have positive experiences working with veterans again in the future. Not only did Paul describe having this shared temporal horizon as “a perfect thing,” but suggested that his lived experience working and connecting with veterans at the Pentagon has opened up the possibility of a future where he again can engage in sustained meaningful work.

Paul noted that outside of the world of employment, he does not interact with many people. His experience of social connectedness with other veterans has thus far been limited to his place of employment. He indicated:

I'm still kind of a recluse. I mean. I'm just. How can I say this? I just stay to myself, you know. I’m not. I just stay to myself. Because I’m afraid of being misunderstood like I was at that job at the State Department.
In Paul’s world of social connection he noted feeling distant from others as a result of being misunderstood. He noted some involvement with veterans at the State Department but very few. He worked with men at the State Department, but felt they held different expectations about how men should carry out their duties and meet their responsibilities. This may be related to differences in how Paul and his colleagues had experienced masculinity in their lives.

Paul shared that throughout his life he has experienced a division between White and Black men. Masculinity has involved practices aimed at establishing hierarchy. While sharing the story about being a child and hearing a young White man call his 70-something-year-old Black grandfather “boy,” he identified feeling shocked and thought his grandfather would do something against this transgression. That feeling of indignation he felt as a child continued through his experience in the military, were White men continued to address him, an adult Black man, as boy. This was an early life example where Paul came to understand how such practices could be used to create a hierarchy with White men ascribed more value, honor, and power than Black men.

The devaluing of Black men can also be seen in Paul’s story about being assigned to clean the porta potties. Not only were Black men given this task but also others that were either sympathetic to the impact of racism in the military, or at least resistant to engaging in acts that further disparaged Black soldiers. The story shared by Paul pointed to the social division between Black and White soldiers in a very overt way. Paul shared another example of more overt behavior as well:

I mean I definitely experienced racism. But racism, in even basic training. But racism was normal. It was, it was, it was accepted in the environment. I mean
some of the things that they would say and do, it was normal. You know, in that environment I mean, there used to be a cadence that we used to sing when I was in basic training. And that cadence was “Coon skin and alligator hide, makes a pair of jump boots just the right [inaudible].” But I did not know, when they were talking about coon they were talking about Black men’s hide makes a good pair of boots. [Paul laughs] That was just one example.

Here Paul makes several connections between racism, everyday practices used in the military such as singing, and the dehumanization of Black men. Paul pointed out his realization the cadence that he and others sang in the military disparagingly referenced Black men and normalized violence against them. Paul recognized that he used this cadence without understanding the meaning of the song. Upon realizing this cadence used racist ideas Paul reflected that in the military some of the things that have racist origins are “very subtle,” meaning difficult to detect. Paul did not talk to others after he started to realize these subtler aspects of racism in the military. He suggested that through the use of practices that objectify Black men as a target of violence, barriers were erected that diminished social connection between Black and White soldiers. These realizations that impacted connection continued to influence Paul as veteran.

Paul’s sense of masculinity informed his experience of connection with other veterans. **Fulfilling obligations and responsibilities** were a central component of masculinity for Paul:

> Being a man to me is fulfilling your responsibilities and obligations. And I think that as a veteran it’s even, it’s even more imperative because those are the rudimentary values on which, are inculcated into you as a service member, you
know what I mean. Fulfilling obligations, handling responsibilities. So handling responsibility, I think it's paramount. I think it’s paramount to manhood. And I think when a grown man is not fulfilling his responsibilities, he is not fulfilling what I think, he is not fulfilling his responsibility as a man. When I say responsibility I mean pay your bills. Take care of your family, your kids or spouses, and being a positive influence in your community. Mentoring other young people, you know. Using your experiences to shape other people. To me that is what being a man is about.

Taking care of one’s responsibilities in part means fulfilling a *commitment to family*. Paul noted that men need to ensure that the basic needs of one’s family have been met (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, etc.). Masculinity guides Paul in defining the types of duties he should fulfill. Being a man means meeting those duties and obligations through his actions irrespective of how he feels. These duties are in line with his values and his sense of manhood is in part based upon the degree to which he can manifest these values in his life. It is clear that these values include *providing and protecting* not only family members, but also others in his broader community. Manhood means being a positive influence in a person’s community. Manhood for Paul is not limited to his internal feelings, or actions supporting his family’s welfare, but very much includes how, and why, he interacts with others. Intentionality is important for Paul, for his sense of manhood involves a desire to promote a greater good. He indicated that this is done through shaping the experiences of others. This sense of manhood described by Paul is not static, but something to be worked towards. Men that are then able to work towards
the type of manhood Paul described must desire to take responsibility and positively influence others’ lives.
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Darius

Darius is a 42-year-old, single, Black male. Darius was born in the Bahamas and during his adolescence moved to Miami Florida, where he completed high school. He was raised by a single mother and was an only child. While growing up his family had limited financial resources, and his decision to join the Navy was in part to earn money for college. He also liked having additional time to figure out what he wanted to do with his life, and liked the idea of being able to travel while in the military.

Darius joined the Navy when he was 17 years old and served for 6 years as a radio technician. He had one deployment off the coast of Iraq. His military occupational specialty (MOS) was as a radar technician, which he noted is a specialty within the military dominated by White soldiers. He was honorably discharged from the Navy in 2005 and attempted to settle down in a city in Virginia, which is also the site of a naval base. Darius said it was difficult for him to find employment after getting out of the Navy, and noted that for a long time he felt financially unstable. Darius eventually decided to use his GI Bill benefits to attend a local community college.

Darius talked about his experience of connecting with others while in the military. He often felt a sense of disconnect from the White sailors he served with. He explained his feelings that the culture of the Navy contributed to this through a veiled racism. He noted:

In the military world, people of different classes engage with one another as military personnel, as sailors, even though racism still existed, and even though the classism existed. I think these were veiled more under the label and status of being a soldier, being a sailor in the, in the military. In the civilian world, um,
things are way more slippery. I think in the civilian world, class is very, very strong and class also always maps on to race as well. They are different, but race and class go together. So, it took me a long time to really understand.

For Darius, racism and classism were hidden under the identity of “sailor” in a way that made it difficult to talk about. Darius described working in a “predominately White” environment where he felt that nobody was looking out for him or supported him in the way that occurred for White sailors. Power dynamics in the military often manifested through the presence of good ole boys, whose actions resulted in him feeling disconnect. He stated:

I would say that there's definitely, um, a good old boy club in those situations and in those work centers and divisions. So basically you have, Whites who come from similar regions of the country. Oftentimes, with similar socioeconomic statuses [and they] tend to look out for one another, just protect one another, groom each other for leadership, provide support for their careers. Um, and at the same time, the few Black people who are in those divisions tend to miss out on resources and grooming for leadership and for promotion because of that. So yeah, there's a disconnect.

In this example, Darius felt left out of meaningful support from White sailors while in the military. He noted these differences in treatment from other sailors he served with and indicated he felt they were part of his lived experience of exclusion in the Navy. Through these practices, we see aspects of systemic racism acted out in differential support offered to Black and White sailors.
Darius indicated that his experience of not connecting with White sailors in the Navy mirrored his experience as a veteran as well. He explained that it is difficult for those who are discharged from the military at a lower enlisted rank to make meaningful connections with other veterans that could lead to employment. He added, “And if you're lower enlisted and Black, it makes it even more difficult to break in because nobody's batting for you.” It is the lack of someone “batting for you” that seemed to be part of his felt sense of exclusion from other veterans.

Reflecting back on feeling disconnected from other veterans immediately after leaving the military, he found that White veterans were not interested in engaging in meaningful interactions with him, but did do so with other White veterans. He stated:

That was when I felt the most disconnected because, I guess, I'd been used to a certain level of connection in the military. …You know, it's one thing to meet veterans socially, very lightly, in a town, but it's another to actually feel as if you're reciprocally [connected]…to encourage in one another professionally. So that's what I felt.

Though Darius was able to meet and spend time with other veterans following his service, he described feeling a lack of meaningful connections in which veterans supported one another in any substantive way.

Speaking to his experience of connecting with African American veterans, he shared that he did have a couple of friendships with Black men living in that area of Virginia. They were still in the Navy and “they were very busy going out to sea, and with their own families. I was just trying to get on my feet.” Overall, Darius described feeling disconnected from everyone initially after being discharged from the military. He stated
that it took him some time to realize this, and in the end it was the wife of a friend who pointed this out to him. He stated that until that moment “I hadn't even thought about it [chuckled].” Darius described feeling supported as a veteran by an African American veteran and his wife that he met. He likened this support and connection to a second family. He shared:

I did connect with one family, …but they were older than me. They were in a different place professionally…A Black family, so they were a second family for me and I think they helped to bridge that connection.

He reflected further on his general experience of feeling emotionally disconnected and said he believed it had to do with his socialization in the military and in particular it’s risk taking culture. He commented:

In the military, especially in the lower enlisted ranks, people played pranks. I think there's a lot of challenge to break certain rules and not get caught. People find ways of breaking rules and uh, it's a bit of a risk taking culture. I think that because there's so much structure and regulations both in terms of civilian law and regulations and military law, lower enlisted people tend to enjoy finding ways of breaking rules and rebelling in their own ways. I wasn't even the highest on the scale in terms of things, breaking rules in the civilian world and in the military, but I still broke certain rules. … sometimes I was just impulsive. I didn't think about the effect of my actions on other people. I think that's a part of it. I think that in many ways the military life, especially when you're younger, I think it makes you disconnect from thinking about those things sometimes because, I mean, part of the job is to make people somewhat insensitive to prepare them to
go to war. And so that's the goal of the military. I think that also plays out too with people being more insensitive overall, even in their interpersonal relationships after serving. But they may not realize that veterans … as a veteran, you may not even realize it.

In hindsight he wondered if his experience of feeling emotionally disconnected was related to his service in the military. He suggested that the training given to soldiers can produce risk taking, insensitivity, or emotional disconnectedness, as a natural and even intentional outcome. He implied that this not only impacts connections between veterans and civilians but also between veterans themselves.

Darius talked about his experience of connection with a couple of White veterans in Virginia, where he was living after being discharged from the Navy. These connections illustrated both his felt experience of the region’s power differentials between Black and White people and his felt tension resulting from the White veterans’ ignorance of such differences. His experience of the region, and his social connections to veterans in it, produced a feeling of a lack of security. He described his realization of how these power differentials were lived by Black and White veterans:

What I didn't understand was that a lot of times these connections have as much to do with class and, also family background and… you know, regional background as they do race…. you're dealing with our sense of power imbalance that you may not even recognize. Um, you're dealing with, you're dealing with, you know, issues of race and class in the South that people generally don't want to talk about. These power differentials were not presented in easily discernable ways, they certainly were not talked about within Darius’ social circles. Due to this, Darius indicated that it
took him some time to realize that continuing to stay in the area would mean ongoing lack of opportunity.

Darius recalled his early experiences as a veteran in Virginia while reflecting on his realization of the power differentials present in the region. In this recollection he talked about coming to an understanding of power differentials through juxtaposing his own experience against that of a White sailor he knew in the Navy:

You could be intelligent, you can be teachable, but if you are Black and don't have a degree, you're going to be less likely to be chosen for mentorship opportunities, um, even in comparison to your counterpart who is White, your White counterpart, your White friend or colleague. They're smart, you're smart. But it's generally easier for them to be selected for mentorship opportunities, offered better professional opportunities because they’re White, and it took me awhile to see that, you know, if you're both equal and you're both smart and neither of you have a degree, chances are your White friend is probably going to get the position. They're probably going to get the mentorship. They're probably going to get the foot in the door. They're probably gonna get the nudge. They're probably gonna get the referral and recommendation. And I saw it, it happened between me and some friends. I realized that my transition was way more rocky than his. And it wasn't just because I think of, you know, feeling emotionally detached, etc. I think I just ended up realizing that the Whites that he met, you met people in the town, they….you know, he had good social skills in terms of being, you know, he was a good talker. He was friendly overall, but so was I. But I realized that he was being positioned. He was being taken care of by White
people in those particular settings. Whereas I was more or less to just kind of figure it out.

Darius realized that White people in this area took care of the White veteran in a way that he was not taken care of. He increasingly felt that the area itself was problematic and produced in him a felt sense of insecurity. Darius realized that he would not be given the type of opportunities that would allow him to develop a future in line with his hopes and expectations.

Feeling frustrated with the differential treatment in the area and lack of opportunity Darius considered leaving the town to pursue a college education elsewhere. He talked to a White veteran that he supervised in the Navy, who was thriving in the area, about his decision to move away. Darius noted the confusion of this veteran regarding his decision to leave. In this conversation the White veteran stated:

I adapted quickly and realized what would be in my best interest and left and for him, I also remember him saying to me, you know, I don't understand why you're even going to university [in another town]. He's like, you know, what does, what does it make a difference? You know, why go to that university. You're in [this town], you know some people here, why not just stay here?

This White veteran and others, were blind to the preferential treatment (power differentials) and the privileged position they held in the area. Darius’ decision to leave was an attempt to find a place that afforded more opportunities for Black men to obtain jobs, education, and mentorship in pursuit of a more prosperous future. Another way in which we can note these power differentials is how they impacted lived respect in interactions between veterans.
Darius took a trip to another town in Virginia with a White veteran who went to his church. The White veteran was interested in attending a university there, and Darius decided to also check out this university as he did not think staying in the same area was good for him long term. He shared a story about a plan to move into an apartment with a White veteran.

One of the reasons I was moving was that we agreed we'd be roommates. He was going to law school there as an officer to be trained as a JAG. And I said, well, I have my GI bill. I've got the college fund…. I had done enough calculations to know that that's enough for at least a roommate situation…. So that was the agreement, and at the last minute, he basically ditched out on me. One day I went to his apartment, he was sharing an apartment with a roommate, his brother was also there that day, and I was like, ‘Hey, you know, where Mark is?’ His roommate said ‘Oh, Mark’s started moving to [the new town].’ I was like, ‘really!? Well, I thought we going to be roommates together, blah, blah, blah.’ And his brother had this kind of awkward look on his face, and then I knew. At that moment I was like, Oh, the guy literally ditched me. What I realize is that he and I, had different ideas about what friendship meant. What friendship meant to me was that you respected each other as equals, even if you weren't in equal positions, socially. That's what I felt… I think friendship to him meant giving somebody advice. Like I got good advice at times, you know, because he, having been an officer, he knew [different things]… I think friendship for him meant giving advice. I think friendship for him too was also more of convenience. Truthfully I think it's more situational and convenience, um, where
it's like, okay, if this, if we're in the same place at the same time, and we like each other enough…Friendship is like, you know, let me come over and have a drink, and come over to the party, etc. But I don't think it was the same level of commitment. Um, I think that was more key to me, in my thinking of it. I think it just became, it was very much about him. I think he realized like, look, you know I'm in a different league than this guy just guy's about to go to community college…a White guy who comes from this kind of upper class background to room with the guy, who's going to community, the Black guy from community college, who was enlisted…So it means it's, it looks, it's very different to be a student at [a prestigious university] compared to a student at the community college around the corner. You might both be students, but you're, different. One is insider and one is outsider, you know, in terms of the culture. And to be Black as well, makes you more of an outsider. So those are all the things I had to kind of understand about transitioning, especially in Virginia and in that particular area.

Here Darius suggested that the area, the region, in which they lived that made it hard for him to be seen, this included others understanding the difficulty he felt navigating both the racial divisions of the area and developing meaningful social connections. Here power differentials between Black and White veterans manifested through their 
\textit{disconnection in understanding friendships}. In this phenomenological moment of disconnect, Darius felt surprise, disappointment, anger, and \textit{sense of betrayal} upon realizing he had been dismissed, or as he stated ditched, by the White officer with seemingly no consideration. Darius, being on the less powerful side of the power differential felt a betrayal of his sense of connection. He also felt the callousness of the
White soldier as a betrayal of his expectation of mutual respect in brotherhood. His connection he realized was tenuous at best.

He shared another story about his interactions with a White veteran that suggested a blindness to the implications of race on the part of that veteran.

He was in the Navy. We left at the same rank. As a matter of fact, I was a supervisor, we were in the same division. I learned very quickly by looking at his path that he didn't have the same challenge breaking into the civil service. The other thing I also learned, realized, is that even though he didn't have these challenges, he also wasn't someone who introduced me to his network either…He didn't have to think about what it means to be Black in a place with lesser resources because he had a network of White who showed him the ropes very quickly, showed him what he needs to thrive. So, you know, it's one thing to be friends with other veterans, even other White veterans. But I realized that what friendship, what I thought friendship meant may not be what they thought it meant, especially when class implications came into play, or if it didn't seem convenient, or if it something seemed uncomfortable, then that would be an issue.

Darius’ stories shared above suggest a lack of understanding on the part of White military personnel, and veterans, on the significance of race and class as mitigating factors in preferential treatment and friendship in the area in which they lived. For Darius, this blindness impacted his sense of connection with both of these men in that the expectations of friendship were not met. In these instances there was a lack of commitment, courtesy, and generosity; all of which were key elements of social connection for Darius.
He noted there is a sense of connectedness between sailors while in the Navy, and stated that these relationships reveal *strong bonds* and are simultaneously a *paradox*. He noted:

I would say it's a paradox. And the reason is that on one hand you understand that a lot of friendships are military friendships, a lot of friendships you have with people, you know, they're strengthened by the fact that you, sometimes you have to work with people who are, you know, different backgrounds, etc. and sometimes work with them for long hours. You get to know them, you become, and you know, so sometimes they start, that doesn't stop. That does establish a strong sense of brotherhood. That strong sense of brotherhood though doesn't mean that when you are not stationed with them, when you're no longer stationed with them, it doesn't mean that you'll be keeping up with them every month or every year or years later. It means though that if maybe five, 10 years from now, you hear from them, you know, or you know, you find out that somebody is in trouble and one brother says that somebody says, Hey, you know what, such and such is in a bad place right now. You know, um, you know, they lost a job, etc., etc., etc. There may be more impetus to say, you know, maybe, create a Go Fund Me or something like that.

These connections entail getting to know one’s fellow soldiers and feeling a sense of connection, at times a strong sense of brotherhood while enlisted. However, for Darius these connections appear to be limited to the time spent serving together. These connections are very present centered, and are not anticipated in the future. His sense of feeling connected has been impacted by his past experiences of betrayal and are lived as
reminders to protect himself from disappointment in connection with veterans in the future. In noting that his experience demonstrated that these connections were transient despite how much time sailors spent together, he shared:

So, so yeah, I mean, but there are people who I served with at different times in the military. We would hang out together, we'd have dinner, we party all this other stuff. Um, but when they left that command, we were like, alright, deuces!! And we never saw them again. You never heard from them again. And some of these people was, you know, sometimes these were people you were stationed, lived for two years, three years, you know.

In this example, Darius described military friendships as normally being limited to the time during which soldiers serve together. Darius stated that despite this, there could be a connection that allows soldiers to provide distant support for one another long after their military careers end. Darius indicated that in his experience as a veteran he learned that he and some of the White veterans he interacted with had different ideas about what friendship and social connection meant. He suggested feeling disappointment at this realization. How he saw his present and understood his past changed when he was confronted by his fellow veteran friend’s lack of commitment. These lessons live with him as warnings to protect himself against future disappointment.

For Darius factors that led to disappointment were in part related to his race. He noted that what happens to Black men during their service can impact their feeling of connectedness to fellow soldiers and later as veterans. As a sailor in the Navy, he felt a sense of insignificance in the eyes of his White superiors. He noted feeling that Black
men tend to be *criminalized*. He shared a story in which he felt they *sacrificed* his prospects for promotion for the welfare of a White sailor:

I was a supervisor of a division where I was, they highly praised my work. I got good evaluations. When it was time to give letters of commendation, things that really stood out for promotion, they gave it to a White guy in my department who was on a verge of retiring, who did almost absolutely nothing in his department. He basically sat there and knitted all day, and I’m actually serious. He knitted all day. He's like, I did my time. I'm here. I'm transitioning out. They gave him the letters of commendation for doing absolutely nothing, but they did it so he could possibly make the next rank chief so he can get a higher retirement and so I'm the one working, I'm the one supervising. I get nothing to build my career. There's also the channels to speak about these things are very narrow because part of the challenge too is that, military evaluations are… all qualitative assessments based on your supervisor's perspective of your work. So if you speak up, you could experience the backlash through your evaluations, which may mean that your chances of getting promoted are even lower. There is already a tendency in society to look at Black men, the assumption is that African American men are criminals. There is a tendency to criminalize Black men. White supervisors will stick together and they'll say, and they'll just very quickly say, to themselves and the division, “Oh, that person's a screw up” or “they're a troublemaker.” In the military they say ‘there's no Black sailor, there's no White sailor, there’s all sailors.’ But unfortunately I think that kind of colorblind way in which veterans [and sailors] are perceived by, um, by the military as an organization can prevent,
or closes discussions, about systematic racism and systematic inequality, institutional racism, and the different needs that different demographics of people have if you're not part of the majority.

Darius identified a lack of consideration for his well-being or future career prospects. He noted the tendency to see Black men as criminals suggesting that as a result of their implicit bias towards Black men, White supervisors ignored how their actions impacted Darius. The significance of the above story for Darius is not only did he not get a letter of commendation, but a system existed that would not allow him to question these actions without facing negative ramifications. This example of preferential treatment, likely based on race, directly undermines a sense of brotherhood, connection, looking out for each other’s well-being, and equality between soldiers.

While Darius felt excluded and overlooked by his White supervisors, he was able to do some work to help ensure that Black veterans felt seen and supported after their transition out of the military. After completing his university degree he found work with the Virginia Wounded Warrior program. He noted that it was during this period of service that he experienced his strongest sense of connectedness with other veterans. He stated:

I was able to help veterans reintegrate back into the civilian sector. I had already gotten my degree. I helped to create a friends and family support group for vets returning and helped to connect veterans to healthcare, education, benefits, housing, that kind of thing…. So even then I wasn't quite connected. It wasn't until after college that I really felt connected.
After obtaining his undergraduate degree, Darius gained employment in the field of social services. By the time he applied for the Wounded Warrior position he had worked in that field for two years. For Darius, using his body in the service of others promoted a greater sense of connectedness. Service to others for Darius, was also integral to his sense of himself as a man.

Darius described masculinity as involving *taking care of one’s responsibilities, being assertive rather than passive, caring for self and community, and not showing emotion.* The starting point for masculinity is responsibility:

Being a man to me means taking care of one's responsibilities. You know, being dutiful in terms of working, and serving others. Using my sense, using the education privileges, any sense of professional accomplishment that I have to try to make the world better, to make the institutions of workplaces better, and to support female colleagues who are equally supportive, as well in doing the same.

Here Darius described manhood as meeting one’s responsibilities. This included going to work, but also accomplishing all the tasks of sustaining one’s life. Using one’s background, experience, and current position to better the lives of others were key to manhood. According to Darius, using what one has, be it education or any position of privilege, to help improve the world is what makes a man.

Darius elaborates by further connecting manhood to *assertiveness rather than passivity* and to a *commitment to family* as well as a broader community:

It means also being assertive rather than being passive, taking action, um, but also being wise enough to reflect on one's actions in order to grow personally and professionally. Um, I think it means being true to who you are, um, which is
always an evolving process. Um, but, um, living life on your terms but also realizing that your life affects other people. And so, um, having a sense of responsibility for yourself and for the community, for the community, for your family and the communities that you're serving.

Assertiveness in contrast to passivity denotes engagement with others and the world in a proactive manner. Manhood for Darius then demands engaging and pursuing one’s goal through one’s own initiative. Action towards personal growth means that manhood is concerned with achieving an optimal state of being that allows for the most efficient functioning in the world. This is not done in isolation, but with an understanding of existence within a framework of mutual influence. Manhood from this perspective is communal, not only in terms of serving the community but also knowing that people’s actions impact one another. This approach to manhood is much more egalitarian in that the awareness of the pursuit of growth, efficiency, and personal goals exist in relation to (and sometimes at the expense) of others. For Darius, this appears to be manifested through authentically, and repeatedly, making efforts to better his community and the broader world. This approach assumes that providing for family members and protecting others are valued elements of manhood and not simply duties to be accomplished.

Men in their everyday individual lives should not show emotion. According to Darius, how men regulate their emotions is a key part of the masculinity that Darius described. He stated:

Masculinity in terms of being a veteran, oftentimes I think it means, um, it means not showing emotion. Uh, it means ….whether or not you want to do something or not realize, you know, preparing yourself emotionally and intellectually to do
things you may not want to do and to do them when they need to be done, and with precision. I think often masculinity means…the desire to fight for what you want, the willingness to fight for what you want certainly is very much a part of what masculinity means to me in the military.

Negation of emotions is necessarily part of a masculine identity for Darius. This happens in at least two ways. First, men should not show their individual emotions. Here being vulnerable is not allowed. One can show joy or anger, but any perceived insecurity or weakness is to be hidden. Masculinity is thus defined by men not showing what they perceive to be vulnerabilities. Second, men should be prepared to do things they may not want to do. In other words, masculinity includes sacrificing or subsuming one’s own desires for the larger goal, and doing it with detachment. For Darius, one has to put one’s own feelings aside when they conflict with obligations to family or community. From this perspective, masculinity demands communal orientation over individual.

*Strength, or fighting for what you want* is also important. Encountering obstacles is expected in life, and how one responds defines one’s masculinity. Ability to persevere and continue fighting towards one’s objective in the face of obstacles is manly. Lack of an ability, or willingness, to fight jeopardizes one’s sense of manhood in the broader community of men. Among soldiers in or who support combat, the absence of the spirit to fight is not only derisive but dangerous. Within the context of the military fighting can mean survival. Soldiers depend upon one another to fight to ensure their collective survival. For Darius, the spirit of a willingness to fight for something is a pervasive and positive expression of masculinity in the military and as a veteran. Darius also indicated negative aspects to consider.
Characteristics that do not lead to the betterment of individual soldiers, veterans, or community might be thought of as negative expressions of manhood. Darius described these characteristics of masculinity:

I do think there are negative aspects of masculinity … sometimes the masculinity in the military could mean being reckless. It could mean, you know, real. Um, it can, uh, it can mean relying on, relying on the command to cushion your fall, believing that you're somewhat invincible can lead one into a lot of trouble…

those are sort of toxic masculinity things that are really important.

In relying on others to cushion one’s fall the individual is not prepared to stand on one’s own. Mutual dependence should not mean relying on others when one fails. Darius noted that when this happens in the military it means a soldier is “not taking responsibility for [themselves] personally.” This lack of personal responsibility due to recklessness or a sense of invincibility is a negative aspect of masculinity and can be a barrier for the successful completion of military objectives. Irresponsibility and over reliance on others undermines mutual trust among soldiers. Men that are unwilling to take personal responsibility harm the team are not thought of highly and are not representative of the type of masculinity encouraged by commanders and military culture.

Masculine traits that are valued in the military may be harmful to men once discharged. Assertiveness and aggression, may be rewarded within the military but in the civilian world these same attributes can be harmful. Darius surmised these behaviors are even more dangerous for African American men. He indicated that the punishment for Black men is potentially much harsher and the stakes are much higher:
So I think that those actions, you know, while a White man may exhibit some of those actions, the consequences for them doing it may be a night in prison, the consequences for a Black person doing it, it might be them getting shot. If arrested, I think that they're more likely to end up serving longer prison sentences or being in prison … so I think that's unfortunately part of the destructive cycle, uh, that African American male veterans particularly with dealt with PTSD have had to deal with.

Socialization of aggression can have drastically different negative outcomes for Black veterans. Darius suggested that if African American soldiers have PTSD the problems are compounded by stereotypes of criminality ascribed to African American men in general. According to Darius, the negative ramifications of socialization into the military’s masculine culture have not been fully appreciated for Black men.

For Darius, masculinity contained positive and negative characteristics. Positive aspects include manhood as a bond veterans connect over, manhood as duty to provide for family and community, and desire to contribute to society. Negative aspects of masculinity contribute to emotional withdrawal and isolation, socially inappropriate displays of aggression, and impulsivity and recklessness. Masculinity as a bridge to form or strengthen social connections between veterans could be dependent upon the aspects of masculinity that veterans’ identities coalesce around, and the degree to which they engage in shared actions towards the betterment of community and society.
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Eric

Eric is a 41-year-old, married, African American male who served in the US Army. He served as a diesel mechanic, as squad leader for nine soldiers, and was deployed to Iraq for one year. He returned in 2005.

Eric grew up in a neighborhood near Washington DC where most residents were Black and White. Since Eric’s childhood the area has changed and is now a predominantly African American community. He noted that growing up there were not many legal economic opportunities in his area. Eric talked about street violence in his neighborhood when he was a child, and noted “some people would call it the hood.”

Eric shared he did not grow up with his biological parents, but was adopted. When he was one week old, “I was awarded through the court to my mom as a guardian.” Eric noted when he talks about his parents he means the man and woman that raised him. He stated his father was “the town drunk” and that it was hard for him to hold down a steady job due to his alcohol abuse. His father was a jack of all trades and could do anything. Eric described his father as hardworking when he was able to get short-term work. He recalled his father was a devoted husband and a “great dude” who died in the early 2000s. His mother was a cook in the local school system, and she also owned a beauty salon.

Eric’s parents had other children, but Eric was not close to them. Most of them were significantly older, were involved in illegal activities and were “in and out of jail.” He noted he was never attracted to illegal activity due to seeing what happened to his siblings. Visiting them in jail with his mother had an impact on him. He stated, “That’s nothing I wanted. I enjoyed my freedom.” Eric joined the military at 19 after completing
high school, his highest level of education. He shared that he joined the military to “take me out of my neighborhood, and give me a new experience.”

Eric talked about his ability to get along well with everyone in the military. He enjoyed serving in the Army and felt that while serving abroad his experience of connectedness with his fellow soldiers in that space produced a sense of security. He noted:

I told people when I was deployed, I felt more comfortable being deployed than I did being in the States. And a lot of people can't comprehend that because they've never served. The folks has never served, they can't understand that concept. Like when I was in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina had happened. I was like, man, all these folks are going through all these disasters and here I am here, and I feel comfortable. Like I go to the mall, like they had a shooting at the mall, and I tell kids and people like right now, if somebody is shooting at the mall who gonna take care of you right now? Nobody. I said when I'm in Iraq or soldiers in Afghanistan, if the person blinks wrong, the person to my left and right gonna clean out that whole area cause we want to get home.

Eric brought up that potential danger exists everywhere. He said while serving abroad he felt less concerned about potential danger than he does in the US. He noted the environment (sense of connectedness born of trust and shared objectives amongst soldiers) allowed him to eliminate unknown dangers from his mind. The environment (serving together, sharing space) also allowed for, even called for awareness of “the person to my left and right.” The dangers abroad were known and felt very real but the
environment (the physical and perceived arrangement of soldiers’ bodies) produced an experience of security.

Eric noted that as a veteran back in the US, being in one’s neighborhood or city without a uniform on produces a feeling of noticeable *absence*:

For instance, when you're in uniform, people will give you praises all day. Soon as you take your uniform off, then you’re just another African American walking down the street. So, as I ask people all the time, are your gestures genuine? Some things are genuine and some things are just artificial. …when you take that uniform off, it's tough for a lot of folks. Because folks are used to people saying “thank you for your service, thank you for your service.” You could walk in the house, take your uniform off, and go to the store and people would never say anything to you again.

After being discharged from the military, a presence is lost with the removal of the uniform. Moving through space as a veteran without a uniform feels disconcerting. For Eric this is experienced as an absence of not only recognition for his service, but also a loss of being seen at all. Racial identity and the removal of the uniform coalesce to form an experience of *invisibility*. This experience made Eric question what people saw before, and whether their actions in the past were genuine:

You see it blatantly …. A prime example, I was at an event with the police department and everybody talked to me when I was in uniform. A week or two later I seen the same police officers in the gas station. Didn't say a word to me. Both the police officers were White, was at the event. Didn’t say a word. Just
watched me, but didn't say a word….It’s kind of hard to not recognize me, I’m just being honest.

The invisibility Eric described is an experience of being an anonymous Black body. He felt unseen; as an anonymous Black body he felt depersonalized and flattened. Here he believed if people even saw him, they saw a body only, completely stripped of the personality or individuality that make him unique. Eric’s experiences of invisibility and anonymity engendered feelings of frustration, disappointment, and hurt. This pain was likely heightened in contrast to Eric’s positive experiences in the past. Black men serving in the military are given a type of respect they may not be accustomed to receiving from White people particularly White authority figures such as police officers. The contrast between being in uniform (respected, praised, valued) and out of uniform (ignored, invisible, anonymous) was not only distressing to Eric, but caused him to question the nature and meaning (authenticity) of previously positive interactions. Now he felt intentional decisions were made to not acknowledge him, erase who he was as a person, and instead render him anonymous or worse, a stereotype.

Eric’s awareness of others’ stereotyping affected his initial interactions with fellow soldiers. While in the military, when he would first encounter soldiers that were not Black, Eric’s experience was one of mindfulness and caution. Eric shared that when people see him they think he’s mean. Being a larger Black man he noted how he regulates his own body in these moments of connection. He stated:

I'm a tall Black dude. They don't know how to gauge me. Once I interact, then people know, that I'm not one of those hood type person, cause that's not my
mentality. I'm not going to sit there and just be mean for no reason. That's not my demeanor.

Eric indicated that his size and color caused some people to think he is mean or dangerous. Eric acknowledged there are people who have hard demeanors (what he describes as “hood” and “mean for no reason”), but that is not who he is. He is also aware of people’s stereotypes, particularly White soldiers’ notions of the “dangerous” read criminal, Black man. Given this, Eric acknowledged that being an African American in the military impacted his experience of connecting with other soldiers:

People don’t know how to engage you. You got people who come from different walks of life. There are some folks who came from walks of life where they never dealt with Black people. You got folks that come from different parts of the country and with different background but they never dealt with Black people in their life, so when you get them together you got to be mindful and see how they act.

Eric suggested others receive him as an unfamiliar presence, a Black man, which could cause them to act in potentially harmful ways. For Eric these interactions are a call be mindful, and watchful. He noted he also does not usually approach people and start conversations. He likes to watch people for a while to get a sense of who they are before deciding if he wants to interact with them or not. In those moments when he is first meeting someone he is aware that his body can evoke images of danger for others. These moments of silence, when he is watching and waiting, are a bodily stance of protection, a reminded that his safety depends on people’s ability to see him as more than “the other”.
Eric shared these moments do not end with one’s military service. As a veteran his body, and color in particular, still garners attention from White veterans in a way that makes him mindful:

Like we just did a presentation with another organization. It was one honoring the last African American veterans from D-Day. So regardless of how successful you are, or no matter how you do it, people still look at you for your color. It doesn't change though, no matter if you're in uniform or out of uniform.

It was clear to Eric that his veteran status did not preclude him from being seen for his color, his race. For Eric, these moments of caution do not last indefinitely; once White soldiers or veterans have the chance to get to know him they realize he is someone they can talk to and develop a relationship with. He indicated developing good relationships with those he served with in Iraq.

Eric reflected on experiencing a feeling of protectiveness toward his fellow soldiers while in Iraq:

So whatever time they needed off, whatever time they needed to go, do some R&R, rest and relaxation. Like we had different times when we left from Iraq, where folks can go down to, uh, Kuwait where they had little outings, so they go down for a week or two. I never, put myself on any of those because I had nine soldiers. So I would always send my soldiers first, and let them get their time, and they unwind and they come back, because my motto is if I take care of my soldiers, then my soldiers would take care of me.

He noted a sense of connection through caring for his soldiers. He described not taking the opportunity for relaxation and instead ensuring soldiers that served under him had the
time they needed. In effect, sacrificing his own time was his means of forging connections with those soldiers, instilling loyalty, subsequently his soldiers “would take care of me.”

Eric stated that while serving abroad he did not experience any racial tensions. Eric noted he was taught in the military that race was not important, that all soldiers were the same. However he drew a distinction between being a personal target of racism and the military as an organization that enacted institutional or systemic racial bias:

Actually I didn’t have a problem, because once you deploy, and you are working with folks from everywhere, and you experiencing the same stuff at that point, you got. As we look in the military, or as we say, I can't say everybody, but as I was taught. “You got your light green soldiers, you got your dark green soldiers.” But you know what, we all green. That was it. That's when we used to do our old BDUs and stuff like that. Cause we there, we’re brothers and sisters in arms.

Eric stated his experience was consistent with the military motto that soldiers are all green. This suggests that a soldier identity ideally transcends individual identities be they racial, ethnic, regional, etc. However, Eric goes on to discuss the ways in which the soldier identity was not the great equalizer.

Eric acknowledged that while he did not experience overt racism, he was still very aware of racial bias within the military. He indicated the military is a hierarchical organization in which White people hold the majority of positions of power and benefit most from their systems, in contrast to Black soldiers who hold least power and autonomy. Eric had clear suggestions on how to navigate these racial power dynamics that appeared unchangeable to him:
Regardless of a veteran, or being active duty, or being reserves, you just gotta understand that, the organization is predominantly, Caucasian people, White people. It just is. And you knowing that. And I’d tell folks when you come in, just come in and get what you need to get. Don't get wrapped around all the political stuff. Don't. Just get what you need to get out of here, try to learn. No matter if you in the military, or if you’re a veteran, you're always going to be looked at by the color of your skin, and it's not something you can change. So I try to tell folks, that get caught up, or in a situation, I tried to tell them, folks are just, people being ignorant, you can't change that. There’s nothing that you can do.

Eric indicated he has taken the position to ignore, and _endure_, racial problems and tensions because there are limits to changing the military and perceptions of Black people in it. Although he has not experienced direct racial conflict, he is resigned to the reality that some military personnel discriminate against other soldiers because of the color of their skin. Taken what Eric said in the above two statements together, he expressed an experience of relating to others, in the military, and as a veteran, as one of general ease. He encouraged African American soldiers to ignore prejudiced people as a way to endure and in order to sustain a military career. Endurance requires self-awareness and at times self-censorship and watchfulness. I asked Eric about his suggestion to ignore racism and he stated:

>You have to be mindful of how you say things. It teaches you how to be cautious. I don’t know if that's good or bad, but it teaches those things. Cause being in the military you have folks with ranks and structures. Some folks are cool, some people trip off of their positions because maybe they never had power before. But
then when you put power with people upbringings, now you have conflicts because there's only so many limitations you can do, especially when you're trying to maintain your position or you're trying to maintain your job. So you have to be mindful of, sometimes you have to bite your tongue, sometimes some people just don't care.

Eric described his experience in the military as a Black man as needing to act with caution. He understood the military as a White power structure best navigated by avoiding calling attention to discriminatory practices. His approach was to be mindful, or watchful, of those around him. He brought that attunement to his interactions and potential connections with other soldiers. He noted being mindful until he could make a discernment about the other person realizing that any inopportune comment regarding racial bias or discrimination could derail his career in the military. Ultimately, his experience was that race did matter, discrimination was real, and endurance and caution were necessary to one’s survival in the military.

There was a tension or discomfort in how Eric described his experience of race in the military. On the one hand he served in an institution whose motto was that race did not matter, on the other hand racial bias and discrimination, being looked at through the lens of race, were evident and any actions addressing this could be seen as problematic. As a result Eric experienced tension in connection to White soldiers. When pressed further about connections with other veterans Eric talked about divisions across service specialties versus divisions of race.

Eric noted that when he encounters a combat veteran he can relate to them as a fellow veteran, although he never experienced the stress they felt. Eric indicated that as a
veteran he experiences some division across MOS. He suggested that infantry veterans carry the wounds of war differently than he does:

I can't say a time that I've been disconnected with veterans, you know, the only time that I can say that, maybe, now that I’m thinking about it, is if I were talking to a combat soldier, like an infantry soldier. Then, I can't relate to their stress of what they're going through, because they are the folks who's actually going straight towards the battle. So when I'm talking to my combat guys and girls, there’s a little disconnect because I can't really relate to what they went through. I understand being in a combat zone, I understand setting up perimeters and stuff like that, but actual being in that firefight that they be in. I can't relate. So I can't say I'm disconnected. I just can't relate to those things.

Eric indicated feeling there is an experience of disconnect between veterans that held different military occupational specialties.

Eric spoke positively of his interactions with African American veterans. He noted that when encountering an African American veteran:

You give your handshakes and you give a little, you give a little more of a warm embrace type thing or like DAP or something like that. And then you talk about, you know, you talk about your experience because it's different. We know it's different, no matter how much rank you get, you're still looked at because of your color. It's always like that. We talk about that stuff.

These moments of connection with other African American veterans offer Eric the opportunity to speak specifically about racial experiences in the military. He noted a
warmth and an appreciation for having the space these encounters create to talk about shared experiences.

Eric recalled when he and fellow soldiers returned from Iraq as a meaningful time for them. He and the soldiers of his company have a special connection as a result of this time. Those moments were lived as *gratitude*. He shared:

Well since when we came back from Iraq in 2005, the folks that I went over with, it was about 200 of us. I’d say about a good group of, I’d say a group of 15 to 20 that I still stay connected to on a regular basis. And pretty much just about every anniversary or so, we reflect back on that time that, you know, we all made it back home, we didn't lose anybody, and I constantly talk to them on a regular basis. You know, cause, we're losing folks now. People are dying of natural causes and stuff now.

This return was defining and Eric continues to celebrate it in connection with his fellow soldiers. Eric’s reflection on this time impacts his perception of the present. He talked about the surreal, or *dream-like*, way in which time seems to have passed since he was in Iraq:

We just kind of, cause we just think about… wow, we was over there. You know, at first it was, you know, it was a year ago, and there it was you know,… it was five years ago, then it was okay. It has been 10 years ago now. It was like, cause we did something, we have met at the 10 year mark. So it's just as time goes we're like, wow… you know, now that it reminds me, you know, it's the fact that we went there, it’s just to reflect that, you know.
In recalling, reflecting on and celebrating that return from Iraq, Eric’s sense of connection to those he served with was strengthened. The practice itself of gathering together periodically to reflect also strengthens these connections because he can envision and anticipate gathering together years in the future. The experience of connection in the present is not limited to the present but is indicative of past and imagined future as well.

Eric did have memories of interactions with “ignorant” soldiers in the military. It was these experiences which led him to engage in the protective act of encouraging other African American men to ignore these individuals in order to have a successful military career. These are the aspects of his past military service that live in the current time as negative memories of things he could not change. He carries this desire for protectiveness with him also into his present lived experience of connection of things not changeable. Encounters with veterans that bring forth memories of the “ignorant” close down the possibility of connection at that time. The idea of protectiveness for Eric appears to be attached to his sense of self as a man connecting with other men.

Men were seen as protectors and providers in Eric’s eyes. In assuming these roles, men were to ensure that the material needs of their families were met. Eric’s ideas about manhood have shifted over his life:

I mean, from upbringing, being a man is the guy that protects and provides. First off, just take care of the household. That was my upbringing, my learning and my being open. It’s just really learning how to love people unconditionally now. It’s not about the money, it’s not about all those finer things in life. It's about time spent. It's about really loving people with no conditions, and no pre-notions, no
nothing set, it’s a difference. And that’s through trial and error. …. That’s just through life in general, just how I see things from a different spectrum, because that upbringing was good for then, but it's not good for now and the current generation.

Eric shared that his understanding of being a man evolved from provider and protector, to loving unconditionally. Eric alluded to a time when he believed manhood and manliness were measured by material possessions. Currently he rejects evaluating manhood by materialism. His ideas of masculinity have evolved to defining manhood in terms of love, an ability to go into situations and encounters with an open mind, and spending quality time with others.

Eric described the importance of once believing in traditional ideas of masculinity because this provided the grounds to understand others who ascribe to this type of masculinity. Eric’s conception of masculinity became a vehicle for growth and connection with others. Eric recalled the demise of his first marriage and remarriage to his current wife as significantly impacting his sense of himself as a man. When Eric was deployed to Iraq his first marriage was near dissolution, however he and his wife agreed to wait for his return to decide how to proceed. Eric recalled his effort at reintegration into the family:

I can say when I came back home [from Iraq] I was definitely isolated from my family… I didn't know how to reconnect, and I felt that I wasn't really needed when I came back. Cause you have to understand at that time my [now] ex-wife was doing everything for the kids. Not only that, but her mom was there too as well. So my re-integration period coming back, I felt that I wasn't needed. I’m
thinking, daddy's home, business as usual. Psychologically I wasn’t prepared for that. No, mommy this, grandma that, mommy this, daddy wasn't in that mix.

Eric felt that he was not respected as a man, as a father, nor as a husband. He could not find a welcomed role within this new family arrangement. He described feeling out of place. Eric resented how his now ex-wife prevented them coming together as a couple to make decisions about their family, and instead continued to rely on her mother subsequently marginalizing Eric. He divorced and later remarried.

Eric shared his current marriage exemplifies mutual respect. He feels his wife challenges him and encourages him to be a better man. For example, his current wife helped him understand how corporal punishment of their children was harmful. Eric disciplined how he had been disciplined as a child. Being physical with his children was normal, and not something he questioned; he did what his father had done before him.

Eric described a conversation he had with his wife one day:

So she's really helping me open up and seeing things because growing up I was there. If you're a boy and you messing up, bust you in your chest. That was it. Get right. My wife asked me one day, she said, when you was growing up, did you like getting punched? I said no, but that's how I was raised. She said, no, that wasn’t my question. Did you like get punched? I said, no. She said, so you think your sons like that? And it hit me like a ton of bricks. Don’t hit them no more, we talk.

Violence was a normal part of Eric’s experience with adult authority figures during his childhood. This process of changing how Eric disciplined his children not only impacted how he fathered, but influenced how he saw himself as a man.
Eric described the ideas he learned in childhood about what being a man meant. One prominent idea was men do not show emotions. His ideas of manhood have evolved from *emotional concealment* to *vulnerability*:

We were taught as being a man, we’ll I can't say we. I was taught that being a man was to be hard, to provide, not to be vulnerable and to show emotions. It's no good, because if people don't know how you feel, and people don't see you vulnerable, they can't gauge you, people can't come to you because they don't think that you’re relatable. They don’t think that you’re open. So they'd come to you. They don't, they can't see that from like a child, to your significant other. In today's time, that just doesn’t work.

Here Eric described how being vulnerable is an asset in that it facilitates connections: others see you as approachable and share their genuine problems. Being relatable in this sense helps to forge stronger relationships be they between a father and child, or between men.

Eric noted demonstrating masculinity that includes vulnerability has transformed his relationships with his children. He talked about how this type of masculine presence can be expressed through communication:

Conversations are so intense that you see them cry, because things that are being spoken are things that are near and dear to their heart. Showing that you're listening, showing that you care, showing that you understand that you can relate. It's communication. You can show the children that it does not take an act of violence to get people's attention, or to correct a situation. The power in that is so much bigger than the traditional way.
Power exists in this style of being and communication. Eric noted the transformative nature of being a man able to openly communicate with others. He described how with his children he has seen them respond by sharing their deepest desires and expressing their own openness and vulnerability through crying.

Eric’s emerging sense of masculinity involved strength through being vulnerable. This also influenced how he interacted with other men, including veterans:

And what I learned helped me as a veteran because the old me would be more hostile and not more receptive of trying to understand what other people are coming from. Because when you talk to another man, the old me automatically would be “suck it up, make it happen. You’re a man, who cares about your feelings.” With the current information that I apply in my daily life from now, if you relate that to another veteran and you let he or she knows, then that gives them an idea. And you know what, what I’ve learned all this life. I can make a change with that. And as I make changes, then my life can change. So, I'm thankful for the old me, because without the old me, there could not be a new me. So with that knowledge, now, I can give it to other people. I can't apply for them, but I can share with them and hopefully those will apply for themselves, you know?

Eric’s declaration without his prior experience of being emotionally detached and unexpressive, he could not have become the man he is today. Manhood for Eric has been a process of transformation, arriving at a destination that involved openhearted awareness and engagement of others, including veterans. With veterans he has the opportunity to give his knowledge. This sharing of knowledge and experience is a type of service that is
central to Eric’s current idea of masculinity. In particular service to veterans means showing vulnerability in his effort to connect with them and model his own transformation in an effort to impart lessons of change.
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Marcus

Marcus is a 32-year-old, single, African American male that grew up in the Pittsburgh area. He served in an infantry unit of the Marine Corp for four years. Marcus grew up in a predominately African American working class neighborhood. He was adopted at 3 months old. He was raised by his mother and father and had one brother. He described having a challenging childhood. He stated that he graduated from high school but “just barely.” His mother passed away shortly after his high school graduation. He did not know what to do with this life and got a job working at a shoe store near his neighborhood after his high school graduation. He also sold drugs to help support himself. He noted at one point feeling that life was pretty good. He had bought a car, rented a nice apartment, had a girlfriend, nice clothing and felt that he was making “easy money.” At that time in his life he “was partying every night, getting super drunk, and trying to meet every girl I could.” One night he was robbed which set off a series of events that resulted in him being homeless and struggling to survive. He described how a romantic relationship and his sense of masculinity influenced his decision to join the military:

So it's just really hard for me to say, and I don't think I've ever said it to any other man, but I was in an abusive relationship with this girl. Uh, she would just like, I remember one time she like beat me with an iron. Uh, one time, like she, she stabbed me one time…she'd smashed all the dishes and it was just the most insane thing. That period in my life was challenging to my sense of masculinity. And I had this thought like I, I was coming from a period of my life where like I was selling drugs, I had a lot of money, I had a nice car, I was, you know, I probably
had 12 girls, I could call it any given time...so I coming from really feeling like I was the man to a point where I felt, like, much less than, like,...that point was very challenging to my sense of masculinity and that way I, that's personally why it was important for me to distance myself from that and go to something like the Marines where I could feel like the ultimate man.

He felt emasculated and carried a lot of shame regarding his experience in the abusive relationship. Reflecting on everything that was going on in his life he said “I just decided that if I wanted to get my life back to where it should be I needed to hit the reset button in a big way.” He encountered a military recruiter shortly after that and decided to enlist.

Marcus completed boot camp, then infantry school, and joined his unit in the Fleet (Fleet Marine Force). Marcus reflected on few key memories from his time that he believes influenced his experience in the military and as a veteran. He noted tension in the relationship with his fist roommate. He stated “my roommate was a White supremacist…super homophobic”. They had physical and verbal fights daily. He recalled:

I mean because he called me a n[word] a lot. You know what I mean. I mean, every other word out of his mouth was n[word], spook, darkie, spick, some slurs for Asian people. Half of them were stuff that I had never even heard before that I didn’t even necessarily know that I was supposed to be offended by.

He talked about how difficult this experience was for him, how it brought him to a place of despair. He talked about being Christian and frequently praying for his relationship with his roommate. Due to a conflict his roommate got into with another White Marine, other Marines would often break into their room at night and beat them both up. He noted
through his struggle with his roommate they developed an affectionate bond, or positive relationship:

You know, so I was just thinking like one night, like “Man, I’m fighting this dude every day. I’m fighting these dudes that are breaking into our room every night. They’re fighting us, we got to fight them together even though we hate each other”. And he was a year younger than me. So I was 22, he might have been, or 2 years younger, so he might have been 21 at this time. So I just bought us a case of beer, and tossed him one and I was like “Look man, we got to talk this out. Cause I can’t fight you and fight them every night”. You know, and uh…we talked about it. And I was like “why do you feel this way about Black people?” And he was candid with me. He was 100% candid with me, and I appreciate that so much to this day. He told me, he was like “Look man, to be honest with you I started feeling this way when my dad left my mom and I was a little kid. My mom was on heroin. She has been since I was a kid till this day. My [dad] left us when I was like 10. He said it was because affirmative action gave all the jobs to the Mexicans and African Americans.” So he was like “yeah I grew up having a specific issue with affirmative action”. And his whole life he grew up in San Bernardino, CA. He lived in, he and his mom lived in some people’s garage you know. And he was in and out of the system. And I was like “Yeah, I’d probably be angry too, but the crazy thing is I know Black people going though that same thing right now. You know, and we probably have a lot more in common than them. And we do, a lot of other people that look like you”. You know, and we had
a, probably several day, what felt like several day conversation about that. And to this day that’s one of my best friends in the world.

Marcus marveled at the arc of their friendship. Even now as veterans, Marcus and his former roommate still have a good relationship. In fact his connection is stronger with this veteran than most others he served with. Marcus took the step to build the connection, but it is important to note the role of their initial struggle and conflict, in facilitating their eventual closeness.

Masculinity also played a role in the connection Marcus experienced with his roommate. Despite the racism he felt from his roommate, there were things Marcus respected about him. His roommate was married and with two kids and he would often try to call them even when phone use was disallowed. His commitment to his family was a value Marcus identified with and admired. Marcus felt that his own father was very dedicated to family and despite tension in their relationship as an adolescent, he respected his father being there for him and his mother. Marcus shared that his boss at the shoe store was “an asshole” and involved in various questionable business practices, but admired that he was “so close with his kids.” For him this was a key component of manhood.

Being strong was also a value Marcus ascribed to masculinity. He reflected “I just feel like that relationship parallels my journey with masculinity because for a lot of times in military, and even after, I felt like my masculinity was wrapped in my ability to be strong.”, both physically and mentally. In his relationship with his roommate he had to be strong in order to fight him and fight with him against more senior Marines that would attack them at night. Other junior Marines would not fight back when attacked and
Marcus appreciated that at least his roommate would fight back. Over time through facing a shared opposition, and ongoing conversations about their personal lives he formed a connection with his White roommate that remains strong today.

Marcus noted his ideas about masculinity were learned from his father, the men he served with in the military, and the people from his neighborhood before and after military service. *Providing* and *protecting* are key pillars of masculinity for Marcus. He shared a story of an encounter before he enlisted in the military that greatly influenced him:

This is one of the most illest moments ever happening, and it's going to sound really minor. But a guy who I met, he was a big time drug dealer. He ended up dying, rest in peace, but, uh, whenever I was in that relationship with the girl and I had to walk three miles to and from work, he ended up… I was walking back and I had to walk up this giant hill to get to my apartment and uh, he ended up pulling up next to me in this like tricked out like Chrysler 300 on like 24 inch rims and he had like a bunch of like guys in the car, and he was like “what’s going on man, you alright?” and was like “I’m alright” but he could see that I really wasn’t alright. And he made all of his friends get in the back of the car and was driving me home. And he didn't ask me for anything. He just asked me if I was okay, drop me off at the house, and kind of went about his business. And that is like an attitude that I've carried with me ever since… Like that to me, is a man.

This attitude of looking out for those in one’s environment became a part of Marcus’ definition of manhood. He talked about the “biblical core” of masculinity involving
“providing, protecting, stuff like that.” Regarding these daily acts, Marcus stated “I feel like that is manly.”

Being a man as standing in tough situations was a lesson Marcus learned after his mother died. Despite the tension in his relationship with his father, they bonded through their shared experience of conflict and resolution:

When my mom passed away, my dad just brought me and my brother together and just said like, you know, we just really need to repair this. And he was just very like transparent about it. Like that's one thing that I took with me, being a man is, you just really need to be able to stand in those tough situation and say what needs to be said and uh, you know, be the peacemaker. And I would say that is something that I try to practice in my everyday life.

While in the military and out at sea Marcus saw men get into fights frequently over small things, like someone stepping on their shoe. Marcus stated “I tried to be a peacemaker” and he at times would ask himself what his father would do if he were in that situation. Resolving conflict, even in the midst of tragedy, was a valuable lesson learned through his father.

Marcus encountered expressions of manhood in the military that were both inspiring and limiting. Hiding vulnerability was an aspect of masculinity Marcus grappled with in the military. He described how one’s uniform could be used to hide insecurity:

A lot of the guys in the military, it was very obvious that, you know, that their manhood was covered, their Manliness was very wrapped in the uniform they wore, and that was covering up a lot of other insecurities.
Soldiers could use their uniforms to cloak their vulnerabilities. A lot of men he encountered in the military were not good communicators and insecurities were masked by displays of masculinity such as joking and intentional insults. Physical and verbal fighting were socially acceptable forms of engaging and managing emotions. These performances of masculinity were meant to conceal and hide. The shared understanding that insecurity equals weakness and should not be expressed hindered deep connections between soldiers.

Marcus did encounter examples of men connecting in ways that he found admirable. He recalled an incident that occurred early in his tenure in the Marines:

Whenever I first got in, I lost my wallet and it had my military ID. And like one of the biggest no no’s is losing stuff because they trust you with equipment worth thousands of dollars….so if you lose something, you get in big trouble for that. So I lost my wallet and it had my military ID in it. I’m going through it, I’m really stressed out, and I don’t have any money. And one of the leaders came up to me, and he just handed me a hundred bucks. And I was just like, “you don’t have to give me that” and he was like “No, I do. That’s what leaders are supposed to do”. I didn’t even know how he knew. I was scared to tell the other guys. I thought I was going to get in trouble. He was just like, here. He’s just like that’s the expectation you should have of a leader. And ever since that, whenever I saw that other situation with a leader behaving in what I believe to be unfairly, oh, it just made me mad, you know.

Here providing, protecting, looking out for others, perhaps recognizing Marcus’ fear and responding to it without drawing attention, facilitated a connection between a leader and
Marcus. This particular connection turned out to be defining, and subsequent leaders were measured against this. Marcus developed strong feelings of aversion to leaders and fellow marines, who engaged in performances of masculinity to hide rather than to protect.

Marcus has felt *division across MOS* created barriers to connecting with other veterans, and particularly with other Black veterans, to involve. He explained:

So one of the tougher things for me is that I was an infantry man. The infantry has a much smaller percentage of Black veterans, of Black service member. So it's really hard for me to connect with a guy who was a truck driver whenever, like my job is like, or an administrative guy or whatever. My job was really like to break my back every day, you know what I mean? Like I went to the community college, I was at the community college and this pissed me off so bad. …I'm in the cafeteria at the community college and hear this guy talking to this girl about these Marine Corps stories and stuff and I'm just like, ah, I want to talk to this guy. So after she gets up and she moves, I was like, “Hey bro, how are you? Uh, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you saying something about the Marine Corps.” And he was just like, “yeah,” I'm just like, “what'd you do?” He's like, “Oh, I was in a band.” I'm just like, “I don't want to talk to this mother f***.” I'm just like, like I really used to sweat and bleed every fucking day. Like, you know what I mean? Like, I respect it, but I'm really not that interested in talking to you or hearing anything. And I'm not interested in hearing your stories about how you had to carry X, Y, Z that was heavy for how many miles. That was hard
for me. You know, I wanted to talk to people who had been through what I've been through.

This veteran was a White male. Marcus explained that the smaller number of Black infantry veterans made it less likely that he would be able to even find veterans to connect with. He shared that he has not really tried to connect with other veterans since his discharge from the military:

Since I've been out of the military, I've been very intentional about how I develop relationships with people. Um, and that being said, like I've been very intentional with like, I need to go seek out these type, these types of people, develop relationships with, and those people have not necessarily been veterans.

Marcus talked about a Latino veteran who served as his squad leader. Reflecting on their relationship in the military he said “I loved that guy.” He recalled how one time this solider just showed up with a new pair of boots that Marcus desperately needed. This soldier was from a small town in Arizona and Marcus liked what he knew about him. After being discharged from the military he found out this solider supported a conservative politician Marcus believed to be racist. This veteran also started to openly share his homophobic ideas. Despite liking this veteran when they were in the service Marcus now “felt like…those ties had to be cut.” He has largely encountered non-veterans working in the community and has felt a greater sense of connection to them than with those he served with in the military.

While Marcus did not put a lot of effort into connecting with Black veterans he shared that he has received *unplanned positive support* from other Black veterans. He
shared an encounter that happened during the “dark days” shortly after being discharged from the military:

I was just so far behind on my finances. I was just deep in depression at this point and we ended up going to Disney World. …The amount of money that I had in the bank was at like $30. …. I knew it was a terrible idea, but literally by the time we got to Disney world, I was dead broke….We just got in the hotel and my girlfriend brought up money again and I just instantly snapped and we started arguing. And, uh, I just snapped and I threw my phone and my shattered my phone instantly and I punched the wall in the hotel. And you know, punching walls is terrible, but I punched the wall, put a big hole in the wall of the hotel. So I'm just like, “I gotta take a walk and go cool off.” So at this point I go take a walk… I'm just like, you know, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm really stressed out. I'm leaving. That’s just my thinking. Like, I don't even want to be here anymore. I'm leaving. So I make it about a half mile away from the hotel and I'm just like, no, that's a really bad idea. And at that point I was just like, “what would my dad do in this situation?” and I walk my ass back to the hotel room and the police were there at that point. Cause one of the neighbors had called the police because we were arguing so loud and I was punching shit and uh, the police were just like, …what happened? And I told them exactly what happened and they were just like, alright, you kept it honest with us. That's the same story your girlfriend told us. I'm just like, you know, honestly, I'm just really going through some stuff, I just got out of the military. My money situation,…how can I make up for it? I honestly don't have any money. And they were just like, alright, well,
… because you came back… we're not going to take you to jail but you gotta get the hell out of our property. And I'm like, alright, that's cool.

Marcus said one of the police officers was Black and this officer said “you know, I get it, I'm a veteran too. I've been through some things. I get it, but you know, this is going to put you in jail if you keep acting like this.” Marcus talked about how much he appreciated that this officer took over an hour of his time, sat with Marcus, and continued talking to him. These are the types of unexpected positive connections Marcus could recall involving Black veterans.

Marcus shared that throughout his time in the service he felt like his body served as a visible marker, he felt like an object being singled out simply because of skin color. He described the following situation that occurred in the service:

So my company had like 150 people in in. My battalion had like 1200 people. There were five Black Marines in my entire battalion…. So everybody got off for Martin Luther King Day. For holidays you’ll get what’s called a 72 or 92. A 72 means that you might get a Saturday, Sunday, and a Monday off, or a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off. A 96 means that you’ll get a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and a Monday off. Like a 4 day weekend, 96 hours. So for this 96, that we got for Martin Luther King Day, they let everybody go home. You know, as they generally do for any holiday. But, per rules there has to be like 6 people left behind. You know, just in case any emergencies happen. You can imagine a million things that might happen, go wrong on military base. Well, somehow out of the 1200 people, they managed to pick all five Black people to have to work on Martin Luther Day.
For Marcus, this was more than a coincidence. It represented his felt sense of the “anti-Blackness of the culture” in the military:

The military is super patriarchal. Guys who are in the military, you’re getting high levels of patriotism or indoctrination. …. So, and then you have a bunch of guys that are super adrenaline junkies that are super turned up all the time, and they, and basically devolves into jingoism, which is you know the most extreme form of patriotism…A lot them have extremely conservative beliefs about immigrants, about people of color, you know, …A lot of these people come from rural America. You know, a lot of dudes told me I was the first Black person they’ve ever had a conversation with…. a lot of Black people living in these groups start to think like, you know what? These are my brothers now, those people out there are different from me. So they start to, even Black people will start to speak about them differently. … I talked to, I had a guy in my platoon who was half Mexican half White, but at this point in his life he just, like, he won’t even claim the Mexican part of it. He just thinks that all Mexicans should be deported. His parents are illegal immigrants. You know what I mean, but it’s like a cognitive dissonance that you get from being immersed in a culture that is 98% White. And that preaches…violence towards foreign cultures.

Marcus noted feeling that the culture of the Marines caused him, and other people of color, to adopt a stance of anti-Blackness. This served to open one up to feelings of hatred or negativity towards one’s racial identity and ethnic heritage. He shared his own realization of how he was impacted by the culture of the Marines and came to recognize his adoption of an anti-Black stance that he was uncomfortable with, and experienced
cognitive dissonance resulting from holding this position. I have framed this experience as *internalized racism*. How White men respond, be it positively or negatively, to Black men regarding representations of identity are a *policing* of Black men and a manifestation of power. He shared that Black men that held strong views of their racial identity and resisted enculturation of White normative ways of being were seen in a negative light:

> It seems like African American culture isn’t allowed to live or thrive well. And the guys who do embrace it, like there were a couple of guys who did seems to embrace African American culture more, and I feel like I’m speaking about it in a very crude way. But uh, but like a lot of those guys seem to be shunned, you know what I mean….like they were viewed as the like the bad Marines. You know, the Marines with attitudes and stuff like that. Now that I think about it I’m just like you know, a lot of those guys aren’t different from my friends that I deal with on a daily basis. But, was it because I’m more articulate and I speak a different way, you know what I mean, that these White guys are more willing to allow me entrance into their conversations but not willing to allow that same latitude to these other Black dudes, you know what I mean?

Marcus noted that those Black Marines that publicly showed they held positive ideas about African American culture were labeled as problematic. In Marcus’ view these Black soldiers were less likely to be able to form positive bonds of brotherhood with White soldiers due to demonstrating an ideology that conflicted with a White cultural expectation.

> You know what I mean, but I feel because of that a lot of the Black guys had a different relationship. I don’t even, and there was another Black guy who may
have had a, he was, lets just say he wasn’t considered as smart as some of the other guys. Like a lot of the guys viewed him as being dumb…He was a good Marine. he was strong as an ox, he did was he was told, he was where he was supposed to be, he did everything right. But in our private free time, a lot of guys, including myself at the time, I’m not going to vindicate myself of anything, treated him like he wasn’t that smart, you know what I mean. Treated him like he was dumb, essentially. And I really didn’t even become aware of this until later on, on the deployment. You know, but I was thinking like, ‘am I cosigning these White guys mistreating this Black dude?’ Treating him like he’s a [N-word] essentially. Like that’s how I felt like they were treating him. When I took a step back, I felt like you know, ‘am I enabling that by not calling that out?’ because I believe in calling everything out. In my private life, that’s why I do what I do now because I believe in not letting anything slide, standing up.

In this moment of questioning “am I cosigning these White guys” Marcus experienced a phenomenological moment of slippage and questioned who he was and what he was doing. In this moment he started to have the dawning of a new realization, that he was in the positon of having unquestioningly internalized racist practices and was participating in the degradation of another Black solider. He noted that his connection with this Marine was harmed through his own actions influenced by anti-Black culture, and his internalization of that culture. Marcus came to recognize this as an experience of internalized racism. He described how it led him to adopt a practice of “cosigning” the practices of the White majority at his base. He noted that this moment of realizing what
he himself was doing was jarring. In part due to this experience, in his life as a veteran he has taken the stance of standing up to racism when he recognizes it.

Marcus reported that dead baby jokes are the most common type of jokes in the Marine Corps. He provided an example: “how many babies does it take to paint a room? As many as you can fit in the blender.” He noted that the use of violence and racism in jokes was common. This style of humor is meant to be. He shared that one day a White Marine told a joke he found racially offensive. He challenged the other Marine:

“You know what bruh, I don’t like when you say stuff like that” and they’re just like “Naw, man it’s cool. You can say it back to me. It’s okay”. And you know, some Black people will think like “Alright, he said I can say it back to him, it’s cool” not realizing that there’s not a 400 year precedent that says that you know, White people shouldn’t be able to you know, levy that type of racial language at you. You know what I mean?

For Marcus, part of his experience of connecting with others while in the military involved making connections in a culture where the ontological weight of the significance of one’s racial being in the world was not known, respected, or discussed. Marcus himself indicated he had a much easier time discussing issues of race once he left the military.

Marcus stated he had a hard time readjusting to living in his old neighborhood after being discharged from the Marines. Part of this stemmed from his feeling of contrast between the lack of structure in his neighborhood compared to military spaces that embodied structure and facilitated connection so that soldiers could carry out their duties. Reflecting on this absence of structure Marcus shared that “I needed that structure. All I
was doing was I was literally getting drunk every night run on the street. I needed to find something else to do.” This absence of structure caused Marcus to feel unproductive and a loss of meaning in his social pursuits after returning home.

Speaking to how the structured environments in the military facilitated connection Marcus stated, “you wake up next to these guys every day. Now that you're out in the world, where are you? I don't know.” Being back home and not knowing where those soldiers that he served with were, was a type of *spatial-existential disorientation* that caused a sense of loneliness and missing particular social connections. For Marcus, these were key:

I don't necessarily have a desire to connect with every veteran. I don't know. I don't know those guys. I have a desire to connect with the guys who I've really been through something with. Those are the guys who I miss and who I really love to death.

Speaking of missing specific individuals he served with, Marcus revealed the spatial-existential disorientation he felt in his neighborhood was related to his inability to locate those he served with in space. This inability to locate culminates in a loss of connection. Here Marcus talked about the felt-sense of connection that people have in different spaces even though those they feel connected to, or disconnected from, may not be physically present. The actual knowledge of where they are, or one’s imagined sense of where they are, can provide the same security that comes from social connection.

His primary difficulty after being discharged from the military was economic survival. He indicated that being in his old neighborhood was not conducive to him
connecting with other Black veterans or to finding good employment. He noted feeling unprepared for discharge and *neglected* in his neighborhood. He noted:

Even being a cook in the Marines is a more professional job that being in the infantry. When you get out all you know how to do is shoot guns and do stuff that scares other people to talk about.

He did not feel he had any particular transferable skills from his military service, nor a college degree, that he could use to obtain a good paying job. He noted feeling *isolated* in his neighborhood. Things got to a point where “all I could think of was ‘I’m really not trying to sell drugs again.’” He experienced a period of homelessness following his service, and had difficulty ensuring he could “put food on the table.” He noted this was a low point in his life: he experienced depression and very low self-esteem. Regarding contact with other veterans in Pittsburgh he stated:

Well, I would say that me being an African American veteran coming home, I had no connection with other veterans. You know, because it seemed like the population of Black veterans was so small it didn’t seem like, you know. To be honest I can probably count the number of Marines that I know in Pittsburgh right now on one hand.

Being a Black veteran meant that Marcus was unlikely to form connections with the mostly White veterans in his city. He also suggested he experienced a lack of connection due to a dearth of Black veterans in his community, and if more Black veterans were identifiable and accessible he would be able to form connections with them. He noted feeling his city lacks structures that could promote connection among Black veterans. He also expressed hope that this could change.
Marcus implied that a connection with Black veterans would be welcome. When asked if there were places where he could make such a connections he indicated feeling that structures promoting hope and security were indeed possible:

I do believe that there needs to be something hopeful, a place where veterans, veterans of color, Black veterans, Black men veterans, can come and direct their energy. You know what I mean. And direct themselves whenever they need, want to seek mental health services.

Here he noted that possibility of having “a place” of hope where Black veterans, and other veterans of color could connect. He implied that such a place would allow him to feel a sense of security. Marcus added “I won’t go to the VA” and spoke negatively about his experiences there with both personnel and the physical structure.

Marcus’ envisioning of a place where veterans of color can direct their energy also suggests a hopefulness of the possibility of experiencing deeper connectedness in the future. He acknowledged how his experiences in the past, have influenced his present experience of connectedness with veterans he served with. He indicated that he feels grateful when looking back at one connection in particular. He also noted his past experiences have helped him realize what relationships he wants to create distance from, and live with him as a protective act going forward:

Yeah, I would say that 80% of the people I knew from the military. Like that are friends on social media that I’ve deleted over the past few months….I hear horrible things about Black people about, pro Black Lives Matter protestors….Oh my god, it’s horrible. And like I told you, like I said earlier. The one racist dude that was my roommate, I don’t hear any of that type of stuff from him. But all of
the guys who used to tell him stuff like ‘Hey, bro you know that’s racist. Don’t do that’. Now they’re the ones talking about running Black Lives Matter protesters over on the highway with their trucks.”

Marcus indicated that the indelible experience he had with his roommate lives with him now, and allows for a sense of connectedness going forward even though they are not physically in the same city, or even state. Similarly, it is clear from his past what he does not want for his future, and that too lives with him now.
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Global Themes

As described above, all of the study participants came from unique backgrounds. They each followed a distinctive path into the military. They interacted with diverse groups of soldiers, often in different geographic areas, and in their respective branches of the military. Interactions with their fellow soldiers were pivotal in shaping their experience of military service, and laid the groundwork for these soldiers’ identities and experiences as veterans. This study is an exploration of the phenomenon of social connection that African American male veterans experience with other male veterans. Across their narratives significant elements emerged which were helpful for elucidating the experiences of these veterans. These key elements coalesced into the global themes of this study.

The process by which themes emerged involved a hermeneutic approach that allowed for interpretation in that participants’ experiences spoke to an underlying unity of lived experience. The phenomenological hermeneutic, or interpretative, engagement with participant narratives facilitated unearthing the structure of experience as represented by themes, whether the wording of the theme was used by participants or not. These interpretative moves at times involved incorporating an understanding of concepts from other bodies of literature (ex. African American studies, critical race theory, sociology) to help make intelligible aspects of the lived experiences of veterans. In particular, this process of bridging these bodies of scholarship provided a pathway of expression for veteran’s experiences and allowed a means by which Van Manen’s phenomenology could be taken up to address the lived experiences of Black men, and potentially other people of color, that have been shaped by structural racism and to render these
This textual labor of thematic analysis through interpretation of experience to reveal meaning is at the heart of Van Manen’s phenomenology. To that end, in this section some participant narratives have been shared to facilitate understanding how interpretation was used to render participant experiences intelligible and meaningful. The veterans who participated in this study either explicitly or implicitly conveyed the importance of these ideas for understanding their experience of social connections among veterans.

Six main themes were identified throughout this study: Racial Tension and Support, Striving against Racialized Black Body, Hopeful Future through Possible Change, Security in Social Connection, Masculinity, and Power dynamics in the military and as veterans. These global themes were present in all participants and were identified to reflect different aspects of the African American male veterans’ experience of social connection. Each participant’s narrative shared elements that contributed to these theme, though they frequently used different words when attempting to convey the meaning of their experiences during the interviews. These themes are discussed below.

**Racial Tension and Support.** All participants’ descriptions demonstrated the importance of race in their experiences of social connection. Race was described as central factor impacting the interpersonal space in their interactions with other veterans.

Darius, Eric, Marcus, and Paul all experienced positive social connections with military service members and veterans of all races. They all also described the prevalence of racist ideas held by some White service members and noted that a normalized racism in the military impacted their experience of social connection with White service members. Darius also described feeling that racism was veiled in the military and not
something that could actually be discussed despite formal paths to make such complaints. He noted that White veterans in his experience did not realize how he encountered racism, and held ideas about friendship with him that prevented meaningful connection. Eric noted that many White soldiers and veterans come from similar backgrounds and did not realize that their actions were ignorant and racist. He also noted tension likely to emerge through discussing racism and encouraged other African American men in the service to ignore problems of race when possible:

Regardless of a veteran, or being active duty, or being reserves, you just gotta understand that, the organization is predominantly, Caucasian people, White people. It just is. And you knowing that. And I’d tell folks when you come in, just come in and get what you need to get. Don't get wrapped around all the political stuff. Don't. Just get what you need to get out of here, try to learn. No matter if you in the military, or if you’re a veteran, you're always going to be looked at by the color of your skin, and it's not something you can change. So I try to tell folks, that get caught up, or in a situation, I tried to tell them, folks are just, people being ignorant, you can't change that. There’s nothing that you can do.

Through his efforts to ignore racism Eric was able to maintain relationships free of overt conflict with White soldiers and veterans. Marcus encountered overt racism in his time in the military and as a veteran. He emphasized his fighting against White racist members while in the military and disconnecting from them as a veteran. Paul described racism as a normal part of military service. He noted experiencing tension in his relationship with some White members of the military early in his career. He also noted that race factored into him experiencing respect given by Black service members and
veterans. Race also served to strengthen social connection between these participants and other Black service members and veterans to varying degrees. Paul and Marcus served in infantry united and had relatively little contact with other African American soldiers.

**Striving against Racialized Black Body.** All participants noted the experience of feeling that their Black bodies were the objects of attention by White service members. Eric Stated:

> I'm a tall Black dude. They don't know how to gauge me. Once I interact, then people know, that I'm not one of those hood type person, cause that's not my mentality. I'm not going to sit there and just be mean for no reason.

Eric here noted how his physical body is taken up by White service members and how his body factors into his interactions with White men. Eric described feeling that his body causes him to be perceived by White men as dangerous or mean and that these perceptions impact his interactions and connections. All the men interviewed noted how people interacted with them, verbally and non-verbally. They noted through their interactions with White service members feeling labeled with negative stereotypical representations of Black men in society. In their own way, each participant noted how this impacted how they moved and acted in their bodies, and how they felt it detrimental to their experience of social connection with White service members. They all described some form of corporeal engagement as veterans related to addressing these types of racist ascriptions. Most notably, with the freedom of being veterans after discharge from the military, most African American veterans dramatically decreased their contact with White veterans, as they were no longer active duty soldiers and required to be open to interacting with everyone.
Darius described feeling the negative portrayal of Black men in the gaze of White veterans he interacted with. He described how it impacted decisions related to social connection (living together, upholding agreements, being removed from future plans with no discussion). He also noted that through using his body in the service of others, he was able to forge social connections through helping Black service members transition out of the military and start the process of getting adjusted to civilian live. Eric described his feeling that White soldiers perceived him as mean or dangerous due to being a large Black man, he took care to move his body cautiously as to not appear threatening or congruent with pejorative stereotypes often associated with urban Black men from neighborhoods with little opportunity for legal upward mobility. As a veteran, he felt a chasm between the degree of recognition he received from White people when he wore his uniform compared to without. In Eric’s experience he had encountered people he previously interacted with while in uniform who subsequently saw him and chose not to acknowledge him. For Eric these experiences were ones of invisibility, and of an anonymous Black body; seen in a depersonalized manner, if seen at all. Marcus described his realization of an anti-Black culture in the military and how through socializing with White service members in the military he adopted this attitude. He described how he participated in belittling and dehumanizing a fellow Black soldier. He noted that as a veteran he has sought to directly confront any ideas that belittle Blacks and has chosen to cut off contact with White service members with whom he served due to dehumanizing messages about Black Lives Matter protestor. Paul noted that he chose not to directly discuss racism when he encountered it, but rather sought to address racism through providing an exemplary example of a soldier holding up the highest standard. He
described using his body in ideal conduct to confront negative representations of Black men. As a veteran he described having mannerism and ways of being that reveal his veteran status to others, without him having to tell him. He noted finding employment where he works with other veterans. This has allowed him to continue using his skills and high work ethic to contribute to something meaningful. For him that is work at the Pentagon where he regularly has contact with veterans. He noted no difficulty interacting with veterans since his discharge from the military. He noted that outside of work he has very little contact with veterans and tends to be more of a loner.

**Hopeful Future through Possible Change.** The study participants noted feeling that their experiences interacting with soldiers in the past provide hope for future social connections. All participants had positive experiences of social connection in the military. They could see how these past experiences impacted their present lives and could imagine, to greater or lesser extents, the possibility for strong connections with veterans in the future. Participants also indicated that their experiences in the past helped them remain hopeful about the future through providing them with experiences which now help them realize what type of soldiers, and now veterans, they want to avoid. While some experiences involving race in the past may not have been pleasant, they are present as memories in veterans’ lives currently as beacons for better future paths. Darius, Eric, Marcus, and Paul all expressed some form of gratitude for the past and hopefulness for the future.

**Security in Social Connection.** Participants noted how their respective physical environments have impacted them throughout their military careers and now as veterans. They shared that the structure of military life, and the presence of soldiers around them in
it produced feelings of familiarity and security. One study participant, Eric, talked about his time in Iraq and noted the sense of security that came from being in that space:

I told people when I was deployed, I felt more comfortable being deployed than I did being in the States. And a lot of people can't comprehend that because they've never served. The folks has never served, they can't understand that concept. Like when I was in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina had happened. I was like, man, all these folks are going through all these disasters and here I am here, and I feel comfortable. Like I go to the mall, like they had a shooting at the mall, and I tell kids and people like right now, if somebody is shooting at the mall who gonna take care of you right now? Nobody. I said when I'm in Iraq or soldiers in Afghanistan, if the person blinks wrong, the person to my left and right gonna clean out that whole area cause we want to get home.

This study participant was clean in noting that danger exists in the US as well as in Iraq or Afghanistan. What was key for him was coming to an understanding through his deployment how space impacted his comfort, security, and connection.

As veterans, study participants all reside in different geographical areas but what was common was the recognition that their experiences of social connections were molded by what those spaces would allow (close physical contact, happening frequently, towards shared objectives). Following their discharges from the military, participants spoke of struggling to gain grounding in their communities: socially, economically, and existentially or ontologically. The meaning the spaces in the military afforded appeared absent upon their return home. Structured space facilitating meaningful actions were routine in the service. The organization of the space and their roles in it defined this; the
soldiers did not have to use their individual agency to find it. Without that structure, veterans had to use their own agency to attempt to find ways of being in their new communities that afforded a type of familiarity, a comfort derived from clarity of expectations, movement towards a common goal in a way that would facilitate meaningful social connections. The lack of structure in their respective home communities, relative to what they experienced in the military, caused the participants to feel unmoored, and adrift, and disconnected from other veterans; in whom they might expect to find some sense of connection given similarity of experiences in the military.

**Masculinity.** All the men in this study discussed masculinity and talked about its importance in their lives. Their sense of themselves as men represented a fundamental part of their identities. All the participants engaged in in some actions that served to bolster a stereotypical representation of masculinity. Actions taken were not in isolation. The participants discussed their actions in the context of relating to other people in some fashion.

All of the men identified strength and providing for others as part of their ideas about how they should be as men. Providing including making sure that one’s family had what they needed to survive. As Paul noted:

Being a man to me is fulfilling your responsibilities and obligations. And I think that as a veteran it’s even, it’s even more imperative because those are the rudimentary values on which, are inculcated into you as a service member, you know what I mean. Fulfilling obligations, handling responsibilities. So handling responsibility, I think it's paramount. I think it’s paramount to manhood. And I think when a grown man is not fulfilling his responsibilities, he is not fulfilling
what I think, he is not fulfilling his responsibility as a man. When I say responsibility I mean pay your bills. Take care of your family, your kids or spouses, and being a positive influence in your community. Mentoring other young people, you know. Using your experiences to shape other people. To me that is what being a man is about.

I believe Paul’s sense of masculinity is in line with ideas of “decency” or “respectability” in that the way he presents to the world demonstrates a straightforwardness, a sense of morality, and commitment to adhering to traditional positive norms of masculinity (ex. Fulfilling obligations, caring for family) that counteract negative stereotypes of Black men, and often brings with it acceptance and respect by members of one’s race and in the broader society. I think this aspect of masculinity was apparent when Paul talked about striving to the best in an effort to address racism:

Back then you pretty much just did what you were told. But, like I said a lot of things that you were told to do…you learned later that they were really, they had another motive behind it… they was racist. But again, I didn't know at that time and I didn't really care. Not that I didn't care about it being racist, because I was driven. I'm like, I'm gonna do what I have to do. But at the same time I got my eye on the prize. And I wanted to excel. I knew that whatever I did I had to be the best like my daddy used to tell me. When it came to physical fitness, I had to do the best, when it came to marksmanship, I had to do the best, when it came to a drill ceremony, I had to be the best. When it came as a warrior task and drill. I had to be the best. And that's what I did. And. So. Because. I was driven. I was driven
I'm like no one is gonna outdo me and if anybody did. They got to know they were in a fight. And that was my perspective. That was what drove me.

Here Paul’s efforts to address racist ideas of inferiority through working to demonstrate that he is the best, is in part, a performance of respectability in that there is intent to address negative perceptions of self by others and also to portray himself as worthy of respect. The idea of respectability not only involve adhering to the norms of society but also includes addressing negative racist portrayals of black people and demonstrating a type of morality or decency.

The ability to provide protection was depended upon possessing strength. Whereas providing involved giving or acquiring something for self and others, protection involved stopping or keeping harm away from loved ones. The participants in the study all talked about men as providers and protectors at both and familial and communal level. Doing so was part of meeting their sense of obligation as men, to look out for the physical wellbeing of others.

Three of the four men described a sense of masculinity that involved strength through emotional detachment. Not showing when they were wounded or emotionally hurt was associated with a strength through demonstrating an imperviousness to harm. In the interpersonal field the men described not revealing most of their emotions. The men considered this as part of their masculinity. One participant, Darius, noted:

Masculinity in terms of being a veteran, oftentimes I think it means, um, it means not showing emotion. Uh, it means ….whether or not you want to do something or not realize, you know, preparing yourself emotionally and intellectually to do
things you may not want to do and to do them when they need to be done, and with precision.

My reflection and interpretation of the significance of emotional detachment for men in this project not only references men’s emotional wellbeing, but also the ways in which men prevent themselves from connecting with other men in emotionally vulnerable ways.

Assertiveness and taking action in the world, in contrast to passivity, was also part of the sense of participants’ masculinity. This self-directed movement toward a goal included themes all the men discussed, from engaging in conflict as part of efforts to protect others, to attempting to establish a hierarchy and position themselves favorably in a dominant position. As important as the actions themselves, the perceptions of having taken action in the eyes of others also held importance for participants as men.

While all four participants talked about the importance of contributing to others in some way, Marcus and Eric described manhood as involving an emotional vulnerability that allowed them to engage others in transformative ways. For both of these participants this vulnerability led to communication that may have been difficulty, and at times elicited strong emotional responses, but ultimately forged stronger emotional connections. The ongoing effort represented a challenge, and the men talked about the difficulty of sustaining this practice as it was not in line with dominant narratives about how men should be.

While engaging in actions that demonstrated strength, emotional detachment, efforts at dominance men formed social connections with each other through their mutual validations of the appropriateness of these goals and actions. This mutual support manifested as comradery while in the military for the men that adhered to these ideas. As
Veterans these aspects of masculinity lead to disconnect between men and reinforced feelings of a need for isolation or led to an awareness of the loss of connections of brotherhood they once had.

**Power dynamics in the military and as veterans.** All participants identified power dynamics as meaningfully influencing their experience of social connections to other male veterans. Three of the participants explicitly made this connection while the fourth implicitly noted the implications of power dynamics on the experiences of active duty soldiers and veterans. Of the three participants that explicitly discussed elements of power, they described how opportunities could be foreclosed for Black service members who were too critical of the White power structure. These dynamics benefited White veterans without their awareness of the differential benefit they had over Black veterans. This difference in reduced access to resources that could help their future caused many Black veterans to feel confused, angry, disappointed, betrayed and led to a disconnect in how White and Black male veterans approached friendship.

The three participants that explicitly discussed power described a hierarchal structure in the military with White soldiers at the top and Black soldiers with comparatively less power at the bottom. Of these, two participants mentioned “Good ole boys” as the arbiters of granting or denying access to resources. One participant, Darius shared:

I would say that there's definitely, um, a good old boy club in those situations and in those work centers and divisions. So basically you have, Whites who come from similar regions of the country. Oftentimes, with similar socioeconomic statuses [and they] tend to look out for one another, just protect one another,
groom each other for leadership, provide support for their careers. Um, and at the same time, the few Black people who are in those divisions tend to miss out on resources and grooming for leadership and for promotion because of that. So yeah, there's a disconnect.

The fourth study participant indicated the presence of a social structure in the military, born out of historical dynamics that privileged White soldiers over Black soldiers. He discussed how these power dynamics can manifest among Black, and other non-White soldiers and veterans. Marcus shared one incident:

A lot of these people come from rural America. You know, a lot of dudes told me I was the first Black person they’ve ever had a conversation with…. a lot of Black people living in these groups start to think like, you know what? These are my brothers now, those people out there are different from me. So they start to, even Black people will start to speak about them differently. … I talked to, I had a guy in my platoon who was half Mexican half White, but at this point in his life he just, like, he won’t even claim the Mexican part of it. He just thinks that all Mexicans should be deported. His parents are illegal immigrants.

I reflected on Marcus’ experience and have used the term internalized racism to refer to the way in which negative ideas about one’s racial identity are accepted as true, and are adopted by a person as their own view.
Discussion

Despite the importance of social connections and continued diversification of the military, the phenomenon of social connections among African American male veterans has been woefully understudied. My goal for this dissertation was to bring to light African American male veterans’ experience of connection in a way others could recognize and identify with their lived reality.

Racial Tension and Support

Race was a salient factor in the lives of all study participants and both positively and negatively impacted their experience of social connectedness. Du Bois (1903/1989) noted one strategy used to cope with racism and problems resulting from it was to avoid discussing the racist elements of the problems directly. Yancy (2005) argued that this silence has been the means through which power remains consolidated in the hands of White people. Attention given to Black people means less attention placed on White people. This lack of attention on the power and actions of White people supports continued exploitation of Black bodies through problematizing them. My findings support Yancy’s position in that African American soldiers who desired to bring up racial problems feared retribution, even when official military policy totes being color blind and non-discriminatory. African American men who do not speak out about problems involving race within the military inadvertently maintain the structure that allowed the problems to surface. As a result, they continue to experience tension in their connections with other veterans.
Striving against a Racialized Black Body

DiAngelo (2018) argued that Whiteness is seen in the US as objective and neutral. White bodies then are also neutral. It is the Black body that is distinguished as different, and that calls for noting this difference when engaging Black men. My findings support this position in that it was Black soldiers that felt a pre-reflective onus to hold or move bodies (cautiously or dynamically) in ways to address tension that arose when meeting White soldiers for the first time. Participants used their bodies, rather than their words, to navigate tension. With caution and watchfulness the sense of unquestioned connection was largely absent. Bodies were also used to garner respect through exemplary performance, also impacting the connection felt between men.

Calling attention to Whiteness, stripping it of its neutrality through requiring a response, is seen as challenging the existing power structure in society. Actions taken by Black men to use their bodies in ways that challenge notions of White superiority are important and reflect a desire to be seen as their authentic selves. Being seen as one’s authentic self is a sign of respect and an important for building social connections.

Higginbotham (1993) and Anderson (1999) argued that the idea of respectability has been important for Black Americans in their struggle for racial equality. Black men are often thought of as “decent” or “street.” The men in this study who used their bodies to rebut ideas of negativity and criminality also made claims of decency and respectability. These actions are towards social connection with White veterans and soldiers as ideas of decency are based in adaptation of White cultural normative behavior.

Though beyond the scope of the data of this study, Black men holding and using their bodies in ways that might represent “street” identification also are likely moving
towards social connections, but not ones based upon White normativity. The findings of this study revealed that Black men who were identified by White men as being too demonstrative of Black culture were marginalized, and positive connections were not formed with these men. Study participants who encountered such Black men noted feeling a familiarity with them. How bodily engagement of this type more fully influenced social connections with other Black men in the military or as veterans remains an open question.

These findings show that in the military the unasked question of “what does it feel like to be a problem?” is answered by Black soldiers with corporeal attunement in an attempt to address the problem at hand while also not risking a backlash from White superiors or comrades.

**Power dynamics in the military and as veterans**

Walson, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) found when individuals identify shared interests with others, they also come to see others’ views and values in a positive light and are more likely to adopt these values or perspectives as their own. My findings show how personal ideas about race can change when soldiers spend time with other soldiers that have different ideas or values. Additionally Black soldiers can subsequently engage in new behaviors after internalizing these values (ex. bullying other Black soldiers using racially derogatory language).

Cohen and Spencer (2012) found that individuals are motivated to engage in the behaviors of the larger group by a desire to belong. My findings support this in that African American male veterans, having served in an all-encompassing institution, noted the power of dynamics in the institution to alter views and have fundamental needs met.
At its extreme end the power of institutions can result in internalized racism. My findings indicated that this process does occur in the military where African Americans, and other soldiers of color, adopted and internalized pejorative views about their own racial identities.

During my interviews, my journal reflections noted that I was surprised by the complexity of some veterans’ ideas about how race had shaped their experiences in the military; on one hand men said race did not matter and on the other hand the same veterans noted encountering problems of racism. Upon further reflection I came to see this tension between both acknowledging and denying as navigation of their own “double-consciousness.” The “strife” that Du Bois (1903/1989) spoke of that comes from being a Black American is very much alive in the military for some as a part of their way of being men in the military.

Power in US society is inextricably associated with, and manifested through, the racial hierarchy in the country that has privileged White people and marginalized others. Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, and Abdulrahim (2012) noted that with structural racism, where the hierarchal power dynamic in the society becomes ingrained in the social institutions and daily practices of people, imbalances in power between racial groups becomes normalized to the extent that it can easily be ignored. DiAngelo (2018) indicated that White fragility is the byproduct of structural racism in that White people can resist looking at, thinking about, and giving importance to structural racism. Whiteness becomes invisible and with privilege comes the capacity to ignore or dismiss claims of racial injustice. My analysis suggested military culture makes use of the ideology of a level playing field where individuals succeed or fail according to their merits. For
soldiers in the military this included a reluctance by some African American male soldiers to question the degree to which racism is prevalent in the armed services.

The lack of questioning by some men is the result of the power of being subjected to the normalization process that comes with existing in the hierarchal racial structure of an institution where membership is heavily connected to personal identity. This study contributes to our understanding of this experience within the military.

Power imbalances negatively impact the ability to establish social connections. For the African American male soldiers that remained at a comparatively lower rank, power dynamics operated to privilege White soldiers at their expense. Thus power operated here to keep them at lower ranks, despite positive performance reviews and praise from supervisors. When these soldiers became veterans they continued to be subjected to these same power dynamics and opportunities to engage in known employment endeavors were curtailed. Participants reported misunderstandings between them and White veterans and suggested that they each held different ideas about the meaning of friendship, and expectations of the nature and extent of their social connection. Black veterans felt disappointed, hurt, and betrayed by White veterans who abandoned plans, withheld resources, and ignored veterans despite their willingness and openness to form friendships.

**Masculinity**

Higate (2013) found that the military values masculinity expressed as traits of aggression, coolheaded rationality, and a sense of invulnerability. Morgan (2007) found that in the military feminine qualities are discouraged. My findings are consistent with this literature in that participants reported qualities of masculinity of aggression and lack
of emotional awareness. These shared notions of masculinity served as a stabilizing force and kept open the potential of social connection among soldier and veterans. Those that violated these norms of military masculinity would likely find it challenging to form social connections. My finding support Higate (2013) and both White and Black soldiers subscribed to the same definitions of manhood (valor, strength, stoicism, indifference) and this supported connections between them.

The Masculinity to be adopted and practiced in the military is a White masculinity, meaning one that maintains the social hierarchy by rejecting any notions that problematize Whiteness. This was done by not acknowledging social positions, differences in power, or race explicitly when performing masculinity. Soldiers who questioned race neutral performance of masculinity were discouraged from considering this further, and language that normalized race neutrality was used towards that end. To have harmonious social connections meant that Black soldiers had to learn to police themselves and continue to put forth a masculinity that did not disrupt the racial hierarchy. A contribution of this study is an understanding that Higate’s military masculinity then should be understood as a White military masculinity. The Black masculinity of veterans then is based upon normative White masculine values. One key difference being that Black masculinity is lived within the context of a society with a hierarchal structure based in part on race. Black military masculinity among study participants was lived in a manner largely consistent with the traditions of decency and respectability. This meant that the men portrayed themselves in ways that counteracted negative stereotypes of Black men, adhered to White cultural norms of appropriate public behavior, followed the rules of society, and demonstrated that that they were
straightforward and upstanding men. Black soldiers and veterans performing masculinity as decency demonstrated consistency with Higginbotham (1993) and Anderson (1999) in that decency is a mechanism long used by Black Americans striving for recognition, respect, and racial equality.

Affectively, masculinity has been associated with aggression and stoicism. One study participant’s idea of masculinity evolved when he became a veteran in that he incorporated emotional engagement as a part of his sense of himself as a man. He found it a strength rather than a weakness within his family, and in particular with his children. He also noted a willingness to be more emotionally open in general and suggested that if more veterans were able to incorporate this into their conception of themselves as men overall social connections would strengthen, as the isolation that many men and veterans experience is harmful to their health and social well-being. Williams, Cheung, and Choi (2000) found that significant emotional distress is associated with social isolation and suggest maintaining relationships as a key to preventing this.

**Security in Social Connection**

Spatial considerations also impacted Black veteran’s experience of social connection. Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011) found that soldiers in combat zones were able to form close connections with one or two fellow soldiers in which they were able to share their fears and concerns. The likely explanation for the limited number of close connections like this involve contradictions between these types of close relationships and military cultural norms of stoicism. The structured space of being in a combat zone provided security and allowed for a type of connection that soldiers did not experience when not in spaces as structured or as intense (where what to do, when, and at what spots
were dictated through the needs of military missions in those spaces). My findings revealed that the veterans returned to communities with little structure, which was initially difficult to deal with, but which ultimately provided more freedom than military life.

I assumed that African American veterans would use that freedom to form positive relationships with other African American Veterans. It was my assumption that these veterans would form connections with others they knew who had served in the military, or they would actively seek them out in order to form connections. In my reflections I noted being surprised to find out that many, while holding positive ideas regarding connecting with Black veterans, lived in areas where very few other veterans lived. Many did not encounter, or know of, other Black veterans that lived in their vicinity. The Black veterans also noted the lack of organizations in their communities that catered to Black veterans, implying that the traditional veterans’ spaces and organizations were not welcoming to them. Race was the one identified factor for this. Future studies may reveal additional factors related to this spatial dynamic of social connection.

**Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

One of the limitations of this study was its exploratory nature. Given that existing literature on social connection among African American men in the military or as veterans was sparse, this study sought to obtain a broad level understanding of the phenomenon of social connection. This meant sacrificing the ability to follow-up on areas in which detail would have provided further insight into the nature of connections experienced by African American males in the military. For example, while data showed that African American men in shared service occupations provided support for one
another in sharing racial concerns, it is likely that in these relationships they also shared concerns of a broader nature. Due to the limitations of time, multiple aspects of connection across different domains of concern could not be explored in this study and they could be future topics for research projects.

This study also identified the need for further study on the ways in which power disrupts social connections among veterans, or can prevent them from occurring. As it relates to resistance by White solders and veterans, follow-up research could explore social connectedness, and potentially lived power differentials, in a study conducted with White members of the military and veteran communities.

**Clinical Implications**

Given the association between social connections and health and well-being, it is important to discuss the clinical implications of this study’s findings. This study’s findings offer an opportunity for clinicians to consider engaging veterans along a number of dimensions related to how veterans experience social connections. Each of these factors, discussed below, represent ways to take up new, and some previously considered, aspects of being in the world in new ways for African American veterans.

Phenomenology’s ability to speak to meaning is useful in helping clinicians understand the pre-reflective lifeworld of veterans. In doing so, this methodological approach opens up dimensions of the lifeworld (like embodiment and spatiality) and helps us consider implications for social connectedness. The first clinical implication of this study then resides in its methodology. We must endeavor to deeply understand the lifeworld of veterans. Therapists understand the importance of attempting to put aside preconceived ideas and seeing phenomenon through the eyes of clients. Phenomenology
challenges us to not only attempt to address our own biases but to work towards understanding study participants pre-reflective experience of phenomenon. As part of this process, we must continue to revisit our work to further and deepen our understanding of phenomenon.

My own experience working with veterans generally has involved hearing reflections that a people cannot understand veterans unless they have lived through the same or similar experiences as the veterans did while a soldier in the military. Feeling deeply understood and heard can serve as a powerful foundation for building rapport with patients, and facilitating a commitment to engaging in therapy. The phenomenological sensibility then is to understand topics through the lived experience of participants and not simply as they would explain it. This sensibility in approaching clinical work with veterans has the potential to deepen our understanding and strengthen rapport with veterans and is one response to a common refrain of a lack of ability for others to understand veterans. This might be particularly helpful when clinicians are experiencing difficulty building rapport with clients.

One of the key findings of this study was that race impacted social connections for all study participants. The clinical implication of this is that we should assume that race has an impact on non-White patients rather than starting with a default assumption of no impact. Currently, many therapists across clinical sites attempt to understand the importance of race through asking participants if race has any importance for them, or if they have any problems related to racial/ethnic identification. Starting from a place of assumption of the importance of race, and stating this explicitly, orients the client to thinking about the significance of race/ethnicity for them and may suggest to them that
the clinician is open to hearing about, or thinking about, the meaning and significance of race in the life of the client. This framing also predisposes clients to thinking through how they would articulate the meaning of race/ethnicity in their lives. This approach is in juxtaposition to asking a closed-ended question of whether there is significance, or if there are racial problems, followed by a request for additional information, an approach which is less likely to generate meaningful responses useful for addressing the mental health of patients.

Another key finding of this study is that race is embodied. Asking a client about the significance of race in their life is different from considering the embodiment of clients. How participants move and engage the lifeworld through their bodies impacts their experience of social connections, and likely other phenomenon as well. This study found that all participants understood that their bodies were objects of attention of White service members and veterans. Here the body is laden with historical meaning inextricably connected to narratives of the past. As such the embodiment of veterans in this study contended with pejorative descriptions of Black bodies that emerged over time. For clinicians to understand the unique ways in which African American male veterans might live this we should consider asking questions about their experience with embodiment. Questions that could be asked involve working to discern the meaning of veterans’ particular embodiment. For example one study participant described himself as being a “large Black man,” we might ask him questions such as “what does it mean to be a tall Black man in the world?” Some clinicians may ask and answer these questions in their own minds. However, bringing these questions out for collaborative discussion with
veterans also presents new ways of understanding veterans and increasing the depth at which they feel heard, understood, engaged, and cared for.

The finding of this study regarding how the experience of positive social connections while in the military provided hopefulness for the future suggest that clinicians can explore how veterans might take up such experiences in the service of maintaining or engendering hopefulness for the future. This might be done through discussing specific connections veterans had in the past or developed in the present. At the very least, positive social connections in the past might be discussed as indicative of the capacity to develop beneficial connections once again.

A finding of this study that might seem unlikely when considering clinical implications involves understanding how veterans have moved in and felt in space, and how those experiences facilitated or hindered forming social connections. The familiarity of being in structured space with other veterans while engaging in shared activity demonstrated how space helped veterans find meaning and bolstered social connections. Clinicians should think about how veterans conceive of space and what their experience of moving through space in their daily lives has been. The reflections of felt space shared by veterans will help clinicians understand another crucial dimension of veteran’s life worlds and could provide an avenue to help veterans gain a sense of security. This could be through thinking about interesting or potentially meaningful shared structured activities that veterans could engage in. This type of exploration is not simply about doing things, but engaging in activities that have meaning with others in structured space. The process of exploring this with veterans could yield beneficial results for veterans and
help them consider how their being in space might impact their experience of connectedness.

Regarding masculinity, all participants held stereotypically traditional masculine beliefs prevalent in the US. These identity factors, or values, are from Eurocentric culture and are reflected in White masculinity. With the normalization of these values (like aggression, violence, or emotional stoicism), questioning them becomes less likely in that one tends to not question what is perceived as normal. Military service further normalizes these values and likely leads to a decreased chance of questioning the implications of holding these traditional masculine values.

In 2018 the American Psychological Association released its “Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men.” Two of the guidelines bear repeating here: Guideline 1 ask psychologists to recognize the cultural, social, and contextual factors that influence how masculinity is socially constructed; Guideline 7 ask psychologists to pay attention to and try to address problems boys and men experience resulting from violence or aggression. Considering this, findings from this study suggests that unpacking the unquestioned normalized masculine identities of Black veterans may be beneficial in helping them consider how their performance of masculinity is inextricably connected to racial considerations, and may have deleterious effects of these men’s lives.

Understanding the hierarchal situatedness of Black masculinity allows for consideration of where any enactment of these values might manifest. The likely answer is that men enact these values in the lives of those with less societal power (family members, friends, and in the community broadly). An additional possibility is that these values, and evaluations based upon them, may be directed at their own selves. Clinicians may be
reluctant to broach the possibility of engaging men in a more comprehensive exploration of their masculine identities when men have not explicitly expressed a desire to do so. Clinicians may retreat from such efforts in the face of perceived shame on the part of the men they are serving, discomfort of the men, and due to their own feelings of unfamiliarity with this type of work. Nevertheless, the possible benefit of doing this work is an important implication of this study. Doing so may help veterans with any number of other difficulties they present with, which may be related to living out constrained narrow socialized roles regarding how men are allowed to exist in the world.

A final finding of this study with clinical implications to be considered involves power dynamics. One of the key elements that came out of this project was not only recognition of a power differential between Black and White veterans, but also the perception by African American veterans that White veterans did not see things as they did. Black veterans described feeling that their understanding of friendship differed from that of White veterans. Also, they indicated a lack of awareness on the part of White veterans to the ramifications of their actions on Black veterans. The ability to not have awareness of how one’s actions impact others is engendered by privilege. White veterans by dint of their race have power and privilege that Black veteran do not. This power differential exist independently of an ability to recognize or accept the difference. As an extension of this study’s findings I believe that White clinicians working with Black veterans should consider the implications of the power and privilege that they hold, not only through their position as clinicians, but as a result of being White.

A common practice for understanding the implications of a power differential, or of a diversity factor, is to ask the client about any implication or ramification of these
factors or power differences. Drawing on this study’s findings I believe it is better for White clinicians to not put the onus on Black veterans to unearth the negative ramifications of any power differential. A beneficial approach might involve White clinicians assuming a de facto position of believing that as a White clinician they hold greater power in society. White clinicians should also try to understand that this power differential might produce a type of blindness regarding their ability to consider the ways in which this difference might do harm first to the veterans, and secondly to the therapeutic relationship. A White clinician might question if any reactions, positions, or beliefs they are holding about the Black veteran might be influenced by their own blindness to power differentials. Doing this type of self-reflective questioning throughout the work with Black veterans would be likely to produce beneficial outcomes for Black veterans. Questioning differences in power is an important practice for all clinicians, regardless of the racial/ethnic identification of the clinician, but seems to be particularly important when White clinicians work with Black veterans.

In conclusion, as clinicians we should remember that when considering the above elements we are not discussing flat, discrete, mutually exclusive categories. Black veterans live in the world as embodied beings where ideas of race, their physical bodies, notions of space, time, gender, and power differentials all exist in the lifeworld of the veteran in a way in which these elements are not clearly distinguishable. The veteran as a cohesive whole moves through the world. It can become easy to take up these complete lived realities in simplistic ways that leave veterans feeling misunderstood and not connected. Through engaging in repeated practice over time to better apprehend the elements of experience of Black veterans we can increasingly find ourselves in
collaborative, non-hierarchal relationships that improve rapport and produce better outcomes through truly endeavoring to engage and understand the lifeworld of Black veterans.
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APPENDIX A

Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your current age?
4. Where were you raised?
5. What is your religion or faith tradition, if any?
6. What is your current occupation?
7. What is the highest level of education you completed?
8. Where did you serve?
9. What division of the military were in?
10. What was your rank when discharged?
11. What was your discharge status?
12. Is there anything else that you think it would be important for me to know about your background that I have not asked?

Interview Questions:

1. What was it like when you came home from your service abroad?
2. How do you think being an African American impacted your experience of connection with others in the military and as a veteran?
3. Tell me about a time when you felt most connected to other veterans?
4. Tell me about a time when you felt most disconnected from other veterans?
5. What was your experience like connecting with veterans of a different race following your deployment?
6. What has been your experience connecting with veterans of the same race following your service?
7. What are the things that you feel people do not know about the experience of African American male veterans returning home?
8. Is there anything else I have not asked about that I should know about the experience of African American males in the military or as veterans once they return home?
9. What does being a man mean to you and how do you think masculinity has impacted your experience as a veteran?

Other Questions that may be addressed:

10. Tell me about your experience accessing services for veterans?
11. Tell me about your experience of deciding to join the military?
12. What was your experience like in the military?
13. In what ways do you feel race had any impact on your time in the military?