Focused on the Objective: Experience of Male Combat Veterans in BSN Programs

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Abstract:
Background: Veterans may provide a recruitment source to increase the diversity of the nursing workforce and increase the percentage of baccalaureate-prepared nurses. This study sought to understand the lived experience of male combat veterans in pre-licensure baccalaureate degree nursing programs.

Method: Using Van Manen’s interpretive phenomenology methodology, a purposive sample of seven male combat veterans in pre-licensure baccalaureate degree nursing programs participated through written lived-experience descriptions (n = 2), photo-elicitation (n = 2), and unstructured interviews (N = 7).

Findings: The essential nature of the phenomenon is focused on the objective and four themes describing the participant’s experiences were identified: tools of the trade, identity, turbulent waters, and fuel.

Conclusion: Despite the presence of barriers and frustrations, participants applied their identity and used the strengths gained through military service along with supports to focus on their objective of becoming a nurse. Thus, this research has implications for nurse educators.

Keywords: male combat veterans, nursing education, lived experience, nursing students, interpretive phenomenology, photo-elicitation

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Several challenges face the nursing workforce including a lack of gender diversity and a need to achieve increased numbers of baccalaureate-prepared nurses by the year 2020 (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2010; Institute of Medicine, 2011; National League for Nursing, 2016). As nurses who are male tend to achieve a baccalaureate degree (BSN) at higher rates than their female counterparts (HRSA, 2010) and there are increasing numbers of veterans entering colleges and universities (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014), recruiting military veterans into nursing may produce more BSN-prepared nurses and increase the diversity of the nursing workforce. Although military veterans may be a potential recruitment source for nursing, both veterans and nursing students who are male may experience feelings of isolation, a lower grade point average, and higher rates of attrition (Durdella & Kim, 2012; MacWilliams, Schmidt, & Bleich, 2013; Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Additionally, veterans are more likely to be non-traditional students who have additional responsibilities such as families and jobs that compete with coursework for their time, energy, and effort (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

The United States of America (U.S.) military is comprised of those who volunteer for service with each member serving in a designated rank. These volunteer members have either earned a commission as an officer or are considered enlisted (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). Officers are considered of higher rank and earn their commission through pre-military education or direct commission as a specialist in specific fields such as medicine, nursing, or as a chaplain. Enlisted personnel hold a lower rank than officers and become enlisted through taking the oath of one of the five branches of the U.S. military, including those within the National Guard. Among enlisted personnel are those who have earned a rank congruent with being designated as a non-commissioned officer (NCO). These NCOs are enlisted personnel with specific skills and duties and are leaders responsible for executing the mission and training others. With the designated ranks, the U.S. military is hierarchical, structured through units based upon mission and occupational specialty with each member having a commanding officer. Although volunteers, each member becomes a physical asset of the military upon their enlistment or commissioning. Thus, a member has the duty of carrying out the mission of the unit and branch, through orders, given through the chain of command which culminates with the President of the U.S. as Commander in Chief. An ability to function independently is necessary; however, each member must do so within a highly structured environment, functioning in a manner that is consistent with the expectations and mission of the U.S. military (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).
Military experience may provide some preparation for being a good student. Despite this preparation, formal learning skills may be weak. Male veterans attain degrees at rates lower than both female veterans and non-military students; greater time in service and amount of combat exposure can have a negative effect on educational attainment (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Teachman, 2007). In 2013, the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration created the Veterans’ Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) Program to aid veterans to expand their military healthcare training and experience to become registered nurses (RNs). Since this program’s inception, 488 veterans graduated, with 100% success on the licensure exam (Smithey et al., 2018). Despite some general education literature describing the experience of veterans as learners, research literature related to veterans in nursing programs remains limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of male combat veterans in pre-licensure BSN programs.

Methodology

This study was guided by Van Manen’s (1990, 2014) methodological approach to interpretive phenomenology. Textual expressions in the form of written lived-experience descriptions, interview transcripts, and aesthetic representations such as photographs were gathered to help the reader see that which deepens understanding of the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990, 2014). Van Manen’s (1990) six steps of interpretive phenomenology guided this study and are described in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turning to the phenomenon</td>
<td>Making sense of an aspect of what it means to exist as a human, includes a sense of wonder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigating experience as lived</td>
<td>Lifeworld as the source and object of phenomenological research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflecting on Essential Nature</td>
<td>Includes multiple readings and re-readings of the data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describing the Phenomenon</td>
<td>Making visible that which was found in the text; includes writing and re-writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation</td>
<td>The sense of pedagogy out of which the teacher will act; remaining open to the process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balancing the Research Context</td>
<td>Consideration of the parts and whole through careful planning and conduct of the study.</td>
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Participants (N = 7) selected their settings for all data collection, including audio-recorded unstructured interviews using web conferencing, writing lived-experience descriptions (n = 2) and gathering photographs (n = 2). Purposive and snowball recruitment occurred nationally through an email blast sent twice to members of the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA) which is a professional organization for nursing students in the U.S. Participants were male combat veterans who were fully separated from the U.S. military, enrolled in a pre-licensure BSN degree nursing program, were honorably discharged within the past seven years, were of enlisted rank at time of discharge, and had not obtained a prior baccalaureate or higher degree. Honorable discharge or separation within the past seven years was selected as Teachman (2007) suggests that educational attainment may increase with increased time since service, and at the recommendation of a military expert. Participants had served from three to 12 years and had separated from the Army, Air Force, or Marines. Four experienced two combat deployments, one experienced a total of four deployments, and two experienced one deployment. Deployments ranged from three to 15 months. Three ranks were represented and included enlisted and non-commissioned officers (n = 5). Ages of participants ranged from 26 to 33. Four participants were married, five had dependents, and two were employed. Participants were from various regions in the U.S. including the South (n = 3), West (n = 2), and Midwest (n = 2). The study included participants from public (n = 5) and private (n = 2) institutions.

Data collection for this study included written lived-experience descriptions, photo-elicitation, and audio-recorded unstructured interviews. Written lived-experience descriptions encourage entering a reflective state for describing the experience (Vagle, 2016; Van Manen, 1990). The prompt for the written lived-experience description was similar to the prompt for the audio-recorded interviews in which participants were asked to write a description of the lived experience of being a male combat veteran in a BSN nursing program. After the researcher provided an orientation to the process, the first two participants submitted a written description before proceeding to the photo-elicitation phase of the study protocol.
Multiple forms of data assist in providing context within interpretive phenomenology. Gathering of photographs provides an aesthetic perception of the event and a feeling of empowerment (Plunkett, Leipert, & Ray, 2013; Vagle, 2016; Van Manen, 1990). Plunkett et al.’s (2013) protocol for photo-elicitation (also known as photo-voice) was adapted and used to guide participants (n = 2) in gathering photographs with descriptions representing their experience. All participants (N = 7) participated in audio-recorded unstructured interviews that were then transcribed by a National Institutes of Health-certified transcriptionist. Due to time constraints, only the first two participants provided written lived-experience descriptions and participated in the photo-elicitation component of the study. Data analysis, occurring concurrently with data collection, indicated information redundancy following the third participant’s interview. Four additional participants had consented to participate and were eager to share their story and were also interviewed. Additional interviews confirmed information redundancy (Polit & Beck, 2012), enriched the findings, and allowed the inclusion of additional branches of the U.S. military.

This study received institutional review board approval. Informed and process consent was completed for study enrollment. Participants provided a pseudonym to enhance confidentiality. They received information on receiving counseling services if needed. Participants received a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation for completing the study, and those who provided photographs (n = 2) received a photo book containing their images.

Data analysis included listening to the audio-recorded interviews and multiple readings and was supported by ATLAS.ti software (Van Manen, 2014). The raw data available for data analysis included the written lived-experience descriptions, photographs and accompanying titles and descriptions, interview transcripts, and anecdotal summaries (Van Manen, 1990). Anecdotal summaries are the researcher’s summarization of the participant’s experience and become a component of data available for analysis (Van Manen, 1990). Participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy but none elected to do so. The researcher verified accuracy through listening to the audio-recorded interviews and comparing them to the transcripts, and completed all data analysis. The lived-experience descriptions were read before interviewing the participants. Photographic data were also viewed before the interviews took place and included multiple readings of the photograph titles and descriptions. During the interviews, participants were asked questions based on the photographs; however, coding for thematic analysis occurred following interviews to help minimize any formation of preconceptions that could have arisen through coding. Thematic analysis occurred after listening to the recordings and through multiple readings of all interview transcripts and was supported through the use of ATLAS.ti software.

Beginning with a wholistic reading (Van Manen, 1990, 2014), the raw data were read multiple times to craft a summary statement. Next, through selective reading (Van Manen, 1990, 2014), the data were again read multiple times to identify passages and phrases that could be labeled with terms capturing the essential meaning. An additional selective reading occurred through the use of the data analysis software. This step also enhanced identification of quotations that could be used to provide a rich narrative and give voice to the participants. The final reading was detailed and included crafting an anecdote summarizing each participant’s lived experience (Van Manen, 1990, 2014). Although information redundancy was noted and themes began to coalesce following the third participant’s interview, data analysis with full identification of themes was not completed until after all data had been read and reread multiple times. Following the final reading, the codes were reviewed, clarified, and merged. This merging resulted in 47 codes that revealed the essential nature and four themes. Once themes emerged, to be consistent with the aesthetic nature of the data and to give voice through each participant’s language, thematic labels were selected from their photographs, as well as written lived-experience descriptions and terminology used during the interviews (Vagle, 2016; Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness of this study was enhanced through credibility, transferability, consistency, authenticity, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation through multiple modes of data collection, and peer debriefing. Peer debriefing occurred through discussing the research process and activities with a fellow doctoral candidate who served as a disinterested party to the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Five participants wished to review the findings of the study; therefore, member checking included these participants reviewing the final themes along with thematic descriptions. Provision of a demographic description of the participants along with the inclusion of rich narratives from participants enhanced transferability. An audit trail available to the researcher’s dissertation committee enhanced both consistency and confirmability. Authenticity aids in fairness and usefulness of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and was enhanced through multiple modes of data collection and member checking. The voice of the participants aids in enhancing authenticity: thus, at least one quote from each participant was included in the presentation findings. The inclusion of multiple forms of data collection enhanced confirmability, as did the researcher’s reflexive journal and audit trail.
Results

Through writing and rewriting, the essential nature, or the essence that makes the phenomenon what it is (Van Manen, 1990) emerged and was identified as focused on the objective. The term “objective” was used by participants to describe their identified goal, such as Andy stating about getting into nursing school: “What’s my objective?” Four themes and three subthemes emerged within the essential nature of Focused on the objective. The themes included tools of the trade, identity, turbulent waters, and fuel. The theme turbulent waters included subthemes of rocks (barriers), rapids (frustrations), and eddies (emotions). Several photographs aligned with the phenomena and were selected to represent the essential nature and themes.

Essential nature of the phenomenon: Focused on the objective

“Objectives” varied for the participants, but all seven described being focused on meeting their objective. Although the participants did not use the verbal term “path,” several of the photos submitted included paths leading to a destination, indicating two of the participants viewed nursing school as a path. The photograph in Figure 1 represents this focus. Of this photograph, John stated, “things are out of focus on the sides, but you can kind of see where you’re headed ... like it’s a goal at the end.”

![Figure 1: Focused on the objective.](image)

John’s objective included completing each clinical day while Archer saw learning a disease process as an interim objective. For Andy, the initial objective was acceptance into a nursing school but then, the objective included future advanced nursing practice. Jason’s focus was on mastering the tasks of nursing school rather than being distracted by building relationships. Sam needed to focus on functioning within the narrowed scope of being a nursing student rather than a combat medic.

The participants also expressed a perspective, represented by the photograph in Figure 2, which allowed the participants to gain clarity and view themselves as capable of meeting their objective and to filtering out the edges, or distractions and challenges that might interfere with meeting the objective. Submitted by John and titled “Pressure,” this photograph represented the pressures of nursing school as insurmountable at times, yet the participants gained a perspective through combat that these pressures could be overcome to achieve the objective.
The upward view in this photograph was intentional, creating the perspective that the objective is distant. The steps are somewhat of an obstacle towards attaining the objective; yet, the path is clear and illuminated by light showing through the clouds in the distance.

Theme One: Tools of the Trade. The theme tools of the trade describes the strengths that the participants gained through military experience to help them achieve the objective set before them. The photograph in Figure 3 of syringes and simulated medications used for practicing injections was provided and titled by Archer as Tools of the Trade. Archer described this kit of supplies as tools used by nursing students as similar to the tools gained through military service. Archer and other participants described the strengths gained through military service as tools that were useful to them as nursing students. Thus, this photograph was selected to represent the theme describing strengths the veteran has gained through military service. These strengths are varied and multifaceted and included the ability to cope, advocacy, enjoying and seeking learning, and using military skills such as leadership and discipline to facilitate learning. The strengths of being prepared for the stress of nursing school, accountability, the ability to self-reflect, and time management occurred most frequently. It is these tools of the trade that contributed to the perspective that the participants had in remaining focused on meeting their objective.
Being prepared for the stress of nursing school through military experience was the most frequently occurring code within this theme. Archer described the chaos of combat as “baptism by fire,” and this prepared him well for the stress of nursing school, while others felt surviving combat provided reassurance of the ability to succeed in nursing school. Although participants described nursing school as challenging, participants felt that knowing they had survived combat, they could survive nursing school. For example, regarding the difficulty of nursing school, Andy stated: “... it doesn’t seem as difficult as it should ... . Man up, dude. This is not the hardest thing you’ve ever done. It’s not the hardest thing I will do.” This preparation allowed participants to focus on learning rather than feeling anxious or stressed.

Accountability included a recognition that it is necessary to admit when help is needed, included focusing on preparation through studying, being prepared for, and arriving to class on time. Regarding accountability, Liam stated, “We’re all about honor, integrity, and doing our duty.” The participants applied the strength of accountability gained through military service to fulfilling obligations required of them as nursing students.

Self-reflection was learned through post-mission debriefings as well as competing with self and others with an objective of improving skills to keep oneself and the unit safe. Participants recognized struggling and making mistakes would help them learn, such as Jason stating of simulation experiences, “I go in knowing that I’m going to do something wrong.” Discipline and maturity gained through combat experience supported the participants in having an ability to self-reflect.

Time management was another strength described by the participants. They described knowing when and how to eliminate distractions to stay on task to meet both short- and long-term objectives. Andy described using the skills of planning for a mission to plot his course for earning admission into nursing school, while Liam described planning his days for study time and making sure he could arrive on time to class even if an obstacle such as traffic occurred.

**Theme Two: Identity.** Participants described their identity related to their military experience and how they now view themselves as nursing students. Archer’s photograph of his desk prepared for an exam (Figure 4) represented the theme of identity. He titled the photo Early/On-Time as representative of military characteristics that are a component of the identity of being a veteran. While some participants discussed their identity of being male in a female classroom, the primary components of the theme of identity are viewing self as honorable and being more than a veteran.

Participants described being a person of honor by doing the right thing, which is an expectation of being a member of the military. As an example, Jason described being honorable as not pretending he knows what he is doing and includes studying when he should. Liam stressed faculty members should value veterans as honorable and worthy of trust by stating, “You’re not going to find a veteran nursing student that’s just gonna slack off and do nothing.”

From this sense of honor and pride in their service stems the final component of the theme of identity, which is not just a veteran. The participants were all clear that, although proud of their military service, their
identity extended beyond veteran and included additional components. As an example, Andy acknowledged that being a veteran is who he is. However, he articulated further stating, “I don’t want this military to be the highlight of my life, and that’s all I’ve ever been … . It’s not my end all …. the peak of my life.” Several participants described other student veterans they know, in the participant’s perspective, had used their veteran status to draw attention or have scholarly responsibilities reduced. However, the participants in this study wanted their history in the military to be respected and appreciated but not used for receiving special treatment. Instead, Bruce discussed finding honor in meeting the same challenges as other students when he stated: “I just want to get through what needs to be done.” Bruce’s statement summarized the thoughts of the other participants by making it clear that no special favors were wanted due to their veteran status.

**Theme Three: Turbulent Waters.** The theme of turbulent waters describes challenges and emotions that may be present for the veteran during nursing school and was represented by a photograph of the same title that was submitted by John. In this photograph of a river, seen in Figure 5, John described the rapids and eddies present as being similar to the challenges and easier times faced in nursing school.

![Figure 5: Turbulent waters.](image)

This theme includes three sub-themes: rocks (barriers), rapids (frustrations), and eddies (emotions). All participants described barriers, frustrations, and emotions experienced as a nursing student; however, each participant also described using the previously described sense of perspective. Through this sense of perspective, the participants were able to navigate the turbulent waters to remain focused on the objective.

**Rocks (Barriers).** Participants identified barriers that were present within their experience. The rocks present in the turbulent waters represented the barriers present within the experience and included complex mental health issues and hypervigilance. Hypervigilance has previously been described as a heightened sense of attentiveness, being on alert, scanning for potential dangers, and feeling uncomfortable in crowded areas with loud noises (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bauman, 2013). The barriers of adjusting to a new environment and having a military personality occurred most frequently.

Adjusting to a new environment included being in a new geographic location, changing from military to civilian mindset, missing the structure of the military, and struggling to be in a classroom rather than doing tasks. One adjustment was acclimating to the differences between the military training approach and the pedagogical approach found in their experiences in nursing school. Participants described training in the military as systematic and step-by-step; thus, the participants missed this approach of the military, struggled to relax within the less structured school environment, and disliked not getting clear answers from instructors. The participants also experienced hypervigilance, making it difficult to be in a classroom with many people. The participants expressed a preference to choose their seat in a location that felt safe.

Military personality included traits learned while in service that may present a barrier to fitting in and displaying the professionalism expected of nursing students. Participants described having to avoid using profanity or making gruesome or shocking jokes. Andy described this need to control his military personality as akin to a video game character being drained of energy stating, “That’s how I feel when I have to purposely not swear … your patient encounter is almost over. Don’t swear, don’t swear, don’t swear.” The participants also described that their military role required them to be independent, capable of finding solutions, and ready to take action. Therefore, another component of the military personality that could present a barrier was the belief that seeking help may be a sign of weakness. This belief might result in a reluctance to ask faculty and staff or guidance or support.

**Rapids (Frustrations).** Rapids were described by John as providing an analogy for the frustrations experienced by the participants and were confirmed by all participants. The frustrations described included a lack
of appreciation or understanding of their military service, generational differences, lack of faculty response to peer disrespect, difficult learning, and a narrowed scope of practice for medics. Frustrations that occurred most frequently were a lack of faculty clarity of instruction and consistency of policy application and expectations, stereotyping and stigma expressed by faculty and peers, and a lack of peer discipline and engagement.

Participants were used to consistent military policies and standards and had a clear preference for specific, supported, and precise instructions. Feelings of frustration arose when assignment instructions were unclear or when test answers were defended based on the faculty member’s experiential knowledge rather than an assigned reading or resource. Unclear clinical expectations resulted in feelings of confusion, exhaustion, and defeat. Bruce expressed frustration when there seemed to be different standards for faculty members and students, especially when faculty members expected students to demonstrate caring that the faculty seemed to lack or fail to demonstrate.

Stereotyping included characteristics viewed as positive; yet, included assumptions related to veterans that may be inaccurate. A stereotype described by the participants is that veterans are strong, self-sufficient, and able to adapt; yet, the participants were frustrated when this stereotype from faculty members resulted in a lack of guidance or clarity due to the assumption that veterans will independently complete tasks. Stereotyping included the negative assumption that all veterans suffer from mental illness and have the potential to become violent. John had the belief that stigma strongly influenced a negative encounter with a faculty member, while peers told Andy that he was intimidating due to his military history.

Participants described being highly engaged with their learning, seeking learning opportunities in the classroom and clinical settings. For this reason, lack of peer engagement and discipline were other frustrations related to learning and included peers talking in class and in simulation, being disrespectful to faculty members, lacking initiative, and feeling entitled to high grades on the basis of completion rather than quality. Participants did not want to be grouped with students whom they viewed as lazy, with Andy expressing annoyance at students who complained the work was hard, and which to him seemed easy when compared to combat. Interestingly, participants described frustrating peer behaviors as being due to generational differences.

**Eddies (Emotions).** The term *eddies* was also provided by John’s description of the photograph of turbulent waters and represents emotions described by participants as being part of their experience. Emotions expressed included respect for faculty members, feeling alienated or isolated, being competitive, and having feelings of pressure and responsibility. The participants often described the feelings of isolation or alienation as not fitting in. Andy stated, “I don’t really connect very well with [classmates] … I’m not part of any of their inner circles.” This isolation was often due to personal choice due to feeling older or having differing responsibilities. Although participants felt isolated, feelings of competition often prompted comparisons with peers. The competitive feelings arose from military service where competition helped benefit self and unit in completing the assigned mission; participants now viewed competition as beneficial to the nursing school cohort.

In addition to feelings of isolation and competition, participants also described feeling pressure and a sense of responsibility. John described the pressure of nursing school as “having someone’s life in your hands, I mean, it’s terrifying.” Andy discussed both the pressure from being accepted into the program and making personal schedule changes to accommodate being a student. Sam described the pressure to not get behind in his studies because he feels a great responsibility to do things the right way.

**Theme Four: Fuel.** Fuel is the final theme which describes supports that were present to aid the participants in remaining focused on their objective to achieve success. Archer submitted the photograph in Figure 6 that represents this theme. The coffee maker holds a cup that is ready to be filled with the fuel (coffee) that kept him alert and awake to learn. Archer described coffee as symbolic of supportive relationships developed through sharing a cup of coffee, both during his time in the military and as a student. Therefore, fuel describes supports present to fuel the student veteran towards success. It included instructor accessibility and veteran-specific campus services. Supports occurring most frequently were advancing in the program, relationships, having opportunities for hands-on learning, and the routine or structure of nursing school.
Advancing or progressing in the program was a support for two reasons. First, as each participant progressed, they gained greater comfort in the role of being a nursing student, and they were seeing progress toward achieving their objective. Next, participants described the experience as becoming easier as they build relationships with peers. Over time, Andy’s cohort became a greater support for him, and Jason felt greater trust toward his peers through shared experiences. The relationships built with peers aided Sam in managing his desire for social isolation. Supportive relationships were not limited to peers within their cohorts but also included those with family, other veterans, and faculty members. Faculty member accessibility was the main form of faculty support. An example is the faculty members who made themselves available to Archer when he was confused by content. Sam found faculty members who were veterans or had military family members to be particularly supportive.

The hands-on learning found when ending clinical or simulation practice was supportive due to the application of learning. All participants expressed a preference for hands-on learning, described as applying knowledge by acting on information to aid a patient. Taking action was a behavior described as learned during combat. Participants were frustrated when they were not able to immediately apply knowledge. One participant experienced moral distress when provider orders prevented him from giving care he felt qualified and experienced to give. Clinical experiences provided an opportunity for hands-on learning and also provided interactions with patients. These patient interactions resulted in optimism when seeing patients respond to care. They provided the impetus to continue, by providing inspiration, invigorating one’s focus, and validating the career choice. Thus, both hands-on learning and patient interactions became fuel, or supports, toward learning and continuing in their respective programs. As an example of this supportive characteristic of hands-on learning and patient interactions, Bruce shared, “After I first started going to clinicals that is when I knew. That is when I had it in my heart that I was set to be a nurse.”

Routine and structure of nursing school was also a clear support. Archer and Bruce described smaller class sizes as feeling more like their unit in the military. The structure provided by setting up a personal schedule around class schedules was described as comforting and helpful. According to Jason, the structure of nursing school included the schedule, chain of command, and the high standards of nursing school. He stated, “I feel like the people who are there did a lot to get there, and that’s the same feeling I feel with the military.” Jason was fueled to meet the challenge of his program’s requirements and recommended nursing as a career for veterans. He believed they would fit well in the highly structured hospital environments.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of being a male combat veteran in a pre-licensure BSN program. Increasing numbers of military veterans are enrolling in nursing programs. To meet the needs of the growing numbers of veterans as students, nursing faculty members must gain increasing knowledge related to these learners.
Although these study participants described barriers and frustrations, their positive attributes in the form of strengths, supports, and skills gained through military experience allowed them to remain focused on their objective of being a successful nursing student. This study revealed similar findings as other studies, and provides information specific to male combat veterans as nursing students. Similar issues experienced by the participants, such as feeling they do not fit in, complex mental health needs, and the changing environments is evident in the general education literature (Ackerman et al., 2009; Durdella & Kim, 2012). Participants indicated that isolation was often the veteran’s choice unlike the prior literature that had identified isolation as a barrier experienced by military veterans. However, the current study indicated that the veterans became less isolated as they progressed through their programs and built relationships within their nursing cohort. These relationships were most often described as supportive, helping them remain focused on the objective. Helpful attributes previously described and noted in these findings included veterans as having higher levels of engagement with learning, self-discipline, the ability to manage time well, and the ability to set and attain goals, as well as viewing faculty members within a chain of command (Ackerman et al., 2009; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Smithey et al., 2018; Wheeler, 2012). Previous literature also described frustrations related to behaviors demonstrated by their younger peers (Bauman, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). However, the current study revealed that the veterans ascribed these frustrating actions as a result of generational differences. Interestingly, based on age, the participants were in the same generational category of Millennials (McNiell, 2012), yet perceived themselves as more mature than their fellow learners. The current study did not explore the reasons for this perception; therefore, further exploration might be warranted.

Implications

Veterans as students are increasing on college campuses. While student veterans have been the subjects of research in some higher education literature, no research literature exploring veterans as nursing students was found. The implications for nursing education must be considered carefully. The participants wanted their military experience not only to be respected and understood, but also wanted standards and expectations to be applied equally. Sharing veteran status is not mandated; therefore, each program may include veterans without faculty member or administrator awareness. Veterans may be cautious in sharing their status with faculty members and classmates, revealing their history only after developing a trusting relationship. Veterans would welcome pedagogies meeting the needs of all students as they do not want to experience special or different treatment than other students.

Participants preferred to minimize barriers, instead, stressing their strengths and how they were working to achieve their objectives. Frustrations were discussed more openly as participants acknowledged nursing school could feel chaotic and a component of military personality is that seeking help is perceived to be a weakness. Therefore, structure is needed along with guidance to access campus resources. Nurse educators can foster success by providing content and policy clarification, and guiding identification of study priorities. Faculty members who were veterans helped build trust and a feeling of security; therefore, identifying faculty members who are veterans or selecting a faculty member as a veteran’s liaison may be helpful towards building trust. Faculty members serving as a liaison should receive training in the needs and strengths of veterans and be familiar with campus resources to support veterans.

Veterans may struggle in the classroom due to being distracted by peer behaviors, hypervigilance, and difficulty understanding the theoretical components of the content. Good classroom management can minimize distractions, and allowing veterans to choose their seat can allow them to feel safe and use their mental energy to focus on learning. Due to the preference for application of knowledge through hands-on learning, open skills or simulation lab time may help solidify their learning. Further, although these study participants preferred learning in the clinical environment, the participants also expressed great frustration with different expectations from different clinical instructors. Strategies that improve the consistency of skills expectations would enhance the learning of all students.

To further support learning among student veterans, nurse educators should consider whether personal stereotyping or stigma may interfere with building a trusting relationship with veterans. The participants were willing to build relationships with faculty members who were genuinely open to learning their stories and strengths; however, they also expressed an ability to identify which faculty members seemed to express stigma. The participants were clear in wanting nurse educators to realize that veterans are an asset to nursing programs, viewing themselves as having an ability to apply their strengths to their learning and to benefit their peers and programs. As Liam summarized, “They’re [veterans] ... are very competitive, so we’re always gonna strive to make our university the best.”
Suggestions for future researchers are to explore the experience of female veterans and the transition of combat veterans into nursing practice. Using these themes to develop a survey instrument to quantitatively measure veterans’ experiences in BSN programs could help validate or reinforce the current findings and uncover additional components of the experience. Finally, as this study was performed with veterans of the U.S. military, replication with veterans of other nations’ military could be valuable, to identify global perspectives.

Limitations

Although accessing and recruiting participants was challenging, this study included seven male combat veterans who had fully separated from military service. These findings may not apply to female veterans, veterans who have not experienced combat, or male combat veterans enrolled in other disciplines within higher education. As proof of meeting inclusion criteria was not required, there is the possibility that a non-qualified participant was included in the study. Another limitation is that the study protocol required revision such that only two participants provided photographs. Despite this limitation, there was consistency of data gathered from each participant and information saturation was noted. Demographic data, as well as type and location of institution, varied among the participants. As military operations and efforts may change in the future, these findings are time and culturally sensitive. Finally, as the researcher has strong ties to the military, there may be the presence of researcher bias. Potential bias was minimized through member checking, use of an audit trail, use of a peer debriefer, and consultation with a military expert (Polit & Beck, 2012).

Conclusion

In this study, the lived experience of U.S. male combat veterans as nursing students in pre-licensure BSN programs was explored. The study participants struggled with barriers, frustrations, and emotions, yet, described multiple strengths gained through military service that aided them in remaining focused on attaining their objective. The perspective gained through military experience allowed them to maintain focus, handle stress, and complete tasks towards earning their degree. While these sampled military veterans had pride in their prior service and saw themselves as being a person of honor, they did not desire different treatment of any type. Maximizing supports can help veterans who are nursing students remain focused on reaching objectives. Although this study was done in the U.S., implications could apply to veterans of other nations.

References