



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

Factors Impacting Female Senior Enlisted Leaders' Representation in the U.S. Army's Basic Combat Training Units

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This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of 10 retired female senior enlisted leaders assigned as first sergeant (1SG) and command sergeant major (CSM) in initial entry training (IET) to ascertain if their experiences shed light on the underrepresentation of female leaders in the basic combat training (BCT) environment. Data collection emphasized factors that led to success in the IET environment, as well as challenges and barriers they faced. The theoretical framework underpinning this study included the social role theory, which holds that the expectations for men and women are based on sex differences that regulate behaviour in an adult's work and family life, and the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, which suggests women do not reach top-level positions because they are less capable than men and because women are judged more harshly when they are in leadership roles. Having to prove oneself, reaction to female leadership, family obligations, and fighting stereotypes emerged as barriers and challenges. Attributes needed for success in the IET BCT environment included Army values and toughness and tenacity. Coding of positions and male perception of female leaders emerged as barriers that prevent females from attaining 1SG and CSM in the BCT environment. The findings support the social role theory and role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. The results extend research on the representation of women in senior leadership positions because they illuminate female leaders in a nontraditional educational environment in the largest branch of the U.S. military.

Keywords: women, leaders, U.S. Army, basic combat training, glass ceiling, women in leadership; leadership theories

In the United States, women make up just over 50% of the nation's population and nearly 47% of the labor force (Schaeffer, 2024). Women hold over 51% of management, professional, and related positions in the U.S. labor force (Catalyst, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), yet they remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles across a wide range of sectors, including education, higher education, law enforcement, Fortune 500 companies, and the military (Cater et al., 2018; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; Moore, 2020; Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2024; Seo, Huang, & Han, 2017). Despite considerable qualifications and demonstrated contributions to improved organizational outcomes, women still encounter systemic barriers that restrict their progress in the highest echelons of leadership (American Psychological Association [APA], 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Nanton, 2015; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). For instance, women account for only 15% of school district superintendents, 29% of senior-level executives, and 10% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies (Johnson, 2021; Rhode, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Within the U.S. military, these disparities are equally

pronounced, with women comprising just 8.5% of active-duty general officers and 12% of the Army's most senior enlisted ranks of sergeant major (SGM) and command sergeant major (CSM: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, 2024).

Following the formation of the all-volunteer force, women entered the military in record numbers, and the 2015 lifting of the combat exclusion policy opened 220,000 military positions, including many combat roles, to women (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; National Defense Authorization Act, 2016; Rosenberg & Philipps, 2015). Today, women represent about 16.5% of the Army's active-duty strength and serve in a variety of roles, including as fighter pilots, infantry soldiers, and members of elite units like the Rangers (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Yet as the military's female population grows, the need for women trainers and mentors in Basic Combat Training (BCT) has become essential. Female senior enlisted leaders are particularly crucial in BCT because they serve as visible

role models reinforcing the Army's commitment to leadership diversity and inclusivity (Rosenberg & Philipps, 2015); Editorial Team, 2024).

This study draws upon social role theory and the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders to analyze the enduring barriers faced by women in the U.S. Army. Social role theory posits that traditional gender roles shape expectations about what men and women can or should do, thereby creating challenges for women in roles typically associated with men, such as military leadership (Eagly, 1987). Additionally, the role congruity theory suggests that prejudice arises when there is an incongruity between societal gender norms and role expectations; this prejudice creates significant challenges for women pursuing military leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although studies have examined the barriers women face in the military (Braun et al., 2015; Doll, 2007; Pinch et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Defense, 2013; Williams & McGivern, 2017), a lack of research exists on the underrepresentation of women in senior enlisted positions within the BCT environment. Enlistees make up approximately 82% of the Armed Forces and 83% of the Army's ranks, making it critical to explore the challenges and barriers faced by enlisted women in leadership roles within BCT, where role models are key to inspiring future female leaders (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2020; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

Context of Study: United States Army Basic Training Program

BCT is the training course that transforms civilians (recruits or trainees) into soldiers. Typically, all enlisted recruits, both male and female, attend BCT. The Army BCT program has three goals: (a) convert civilians into soldiers by motivating the trainee volunteers, instilling discipline, and encouraging acceptance of the seven core Army values—loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage; (b) ensure the trainees reach the required physical fitness standards; and (c) train them to the basic level standard on tasks to make them successful soldiers (Klimack & Kloeber, 2006). Over the course of 10 weeks, recruits learn basic tactical and survival skills, along with how to shoot, rappel, and march. They also learn the basics of Army life and military customs. Male and female trainees receive the same program of instruction and are mixed at the operational level of basic training. The basic training staff is typically organized into battalions commanded by lieutenant colonels and CSMs. Battalions are organized into companies commanded by captains and first sergeants (1SGs; Klimack & Kloeber, 2006).

In the BCT environment, the most senior enlisted ranks are CSM and 1SG. Although women represent approximately 15% of the Army's active-duty strength, they make up only 10% of the senior enlisted ranks from 1SG through SGM of the Army (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Further, women account for only 10.5% of the CSM ranks (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). In 2020, women held 12% of the 1SG positions in BCT and One Station Unit Training (OSUT) units, and only two women were assigned to CSM positions in BCT units (Department of the Army, 2020). These statistics highlight the persistence of a glass ceiling within the Army whose structural barriers limit women's advancement into senior leadership roles despite their

qualifications and representation at lower levels (Smith, 2020). Increasing the number of female senior enlisted leaders in BCT and OSUT environments can provide essential representation and role models for recruits, helping to close the gender gap in leadership and foster a stronger, more inclusive force. Studies note that when individuals see leaders who reflect their own demographics, they feel more motivated to aspire to such roles (Latu et al., 2013).

Literature Review: Barriers for Women

A review of the literature reveals that while women in the U.S. military have significantly expanded their roles since 2001, longstanding barriers continue to limit their advancement into senior leadership positions. With the 2015 lifting of the combat exclusion policy, all military roles, including combat positions, are now open to women (Bensahel et al., 2015; Orrick, 2016; Pellerin, 2015). Despite this progress, structural barriers and intersectional challenges persist. The glass ceiling effect remains, particularly due to the high percentage of general officers drawn from combat specialties—roles historically restricted to men—that has limited female representation at the highest ranks (Cook & Glass, 2014; Haring, 2013; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009; Jackson et al., 2014; Smith, 2020; Tama, 2016).

Barriers rooted in perceptions regarding physical standards and leadership stereotypes further constrain women's opportunities. Social role theory highlights how traditional beliefs about gender roles influence perceptions of men's and women's capabilities, thus creating bias when women pursue roles outside of these expectations, such as combat (Eagly, 1987). Physical standards in BCT reinforce these biases—with women often perceived as less physically capable than men—which contributes to institutional bias (Chapman, 2008; Cohn, 2000; Trobaugh, 2018). Family obligations also complicate women's advancement since extended duty requirements and deployments disproportionately impact single and dual-service parents (Clever & Segal, 2013; Dindoffer et al., 2011). Additionally, maternity policies may reinforce perceptions of women as burdens or being less devoted to their careers (Bensahel et al., 2015). Further, Smith (2020) identified other structural and cultural barriers within military environments that hinder women's progress. The literature underscores that, while gender remains a central factor in the military's leadership structure, an intersectional lens is necessary to fully address the unique barriers faced by women in pursuit of senior leadership roles.

The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders adds that women in leadership often face bias because they are perceived as less aligned with traditional male-dominated leadership traits. Studies show that women who exhibit agentic or directive leadership styles in male-dominated environments are often seen as insufficiently communal, leading to negative evaluations (Brescoll, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 1992). Although women have gained more opportunities, skepticism about their suitability for combat and command roles lingers, with biases from past restrictions still affecting perceptions

(Rollins, 2012; Rostker v. Goldberg, 1981). Internalized biases are also evident; research shows that even fewer women than men support female combat roles, and cadets tend to view a female presence as potentially hindering combat effectiveness (Kurpius & Lucart, 2000; Matthews et al., 2009; Snider et al., 2001).

Addressing these barriers requires fostering diversity and inclusion in military leadership. Research indicates that a diverse leadership pool—valuing both agentic and communal traits—can reduce gender bias and promote an inclusive culture (Berkery et al., 2013; Powell, 2012). Increasing female representation in senior roles is key to dismantling stereotypes and positioning the military to meet the evolving demands of 21st-century leadership.

Theoretical Foundation of the Study

Imagine you are an 18-year-old girl, newly graduated from high school, and you have decided to enlist in the U.S. Army to serve your country. You have seen groundbreaking achievements for women in the military—the first female graduates of Marine Corps Infantry training (Drake, 2013), the Army’s first women to complete the Ranger Training Course (Vergon, 2016), and the recent promotions of women to high-ranking positions across the services (United States Army, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). Yet when you arrive at BCT, you notice that only 2 of the company’s drill sergeants are female, and there are no senior enlisted females in the roles of 1SG or CSM. Where are the role models?

This absence of visible female leaders reveals underlying barriers shaped by perceptions of traditional gender roles supported by social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1988) and the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002). These theories help explain the persistent barriers that influence the leadership opportunities and representation available to women in male-dominated environments like the military.

A foundational understanding of these theories is vital to this study and to advancing organizational constructs and policies. Madsen and Scribner (2016) emphasized the necessity to understand the lack of progress women have made in ascending ladders of leadership and management positions; this study supports the same inquiry. Because progress continues to be protracted, examining the roles women embody shapes the destiny of women, whether in corporate America or governmental positions. The social role theory provides a conceptual framework “to understand how sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people’s perceptions of men’s and women’s social roles in the society in which they live” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 458) and to understand from where beliefs about social groups are derived. Koenig and Eagly (2014) suggested that the social role theory “postulates that social perceivers’ beliefs about social groups in their society derive from their experiences with group members in their typical social roles” (p. 371).

Social Role Theory

We explored the social role theory to determine its impact on leadership challenges, barriers, and opportunities for women.

Social role theory discusses two kinds of expectations for leaders—agentic and communal (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Agentic behaviors refer to give-and-take tendencies (Eagly, 1987). Agentic characteristics are described as assertive, controlling, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, and prone to act as a leader and are normally associated with male leaders (Hogue, 2015; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Communal behaviors refer to a concern with interpersonal relationships (Eagly, 1987; Hogue, 2015). Communal characteristics are often ascribed to women and relate to care and welfare—being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hogue, 2015; Stegaroia et al., 2017). A successful leader should possess both communal and agentic qualities; however, there is a traditional perception that agentic leadership is more successful than communal leadership, especially in a military setting (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017).

Current research supports the social role theory claim that inference from group members’ typical role behaviors concerning their group stereotypes is a key process that creates stereotypes. Kiser (2015) theorized that findings aligned to the expected roles of men and women, which lent credence to why women did not hold as many high-level positions as men. Kiser also found that men viewed it as their right to a job in conditions when jobs are few. Kiser also asserted that men are better political leaders and executives and that children suffer when women work (Kiser, 2015). These stereotypes often derive from social role theory and explain why men and women serving in the military are typecast (Bissessar, 2013; King, 2013).

Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders

A theory by which to explain gender stereotyping is the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders is grounded in social role theory’s treatment of gender roles, which emphasizes promoting gender differences as a result of behavioral characteristics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory extends beyond social role theory in that it factors in gender roles with leadership roles (Buckalew et al., 2012).

According to role congruity theory, individuals are penalized when they do not perform according to the expectations of society (Ferguson, 2018; Skelly & Johnson, 2011). Because effective women leaders tend to violate standards for their gender when they manifest stereotypical male, agentic attributes and fail to manifest stereotypical female, communal attributes, they may be ostracized (Bongiorno et al., 2013). An important aspect of Eagly and Karau’s (2002) research is the conditions that moderate incongruity. Eagly and Karau contended that unpredictability exists in gender roles and how leadership is defined. Eagly and Karau (2002) noted a distinct principle: “The greater the incongruity between the descriptive norms that define the female gender role and a leader role, the more likely that women are perceived as less qualified for

leadership” (p. 577). This premise was a cornerstone to this study.

Gurbuz et al. (2014) found that the military was perceived to have very distinct definitions of what leadership is and the expectations of its leaders. Although the military has made advancements in the number of women serving, the idea of women serving at all is still counter to social expectations (King, 2013). Therefore, women are caught in a dichotomy; they can either (a) conform to the stereotypical communal role and face criticism for not meeting the requirements of being a leader; or (b) follow the leader role and fail to meet the stereotypical communal role (Bongiorno et al., 2013; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women find themselves trying to meet the perception that leaders must espouse agentic traits, all while performing communal roles that submit to gender role expectations (Zheng et al., 2018).

Another characteristic of conditions that moderate incongruity is that of the culture of organizations. Eagly and Karau (2002) described how organizations that are male dominant present adversities for women because of the incongruity with the expectations placed on women, thus causing limited access and a perception of ineffectiveness. The military is a classic depiction of such incongruity. For decades, women were not authorized to serve in combat roles, a role often used as a barometer for advancement to senior positions. Without combat experience, women faced difficulty garnering the respect of decision makers sitting on promotion boards who determine the future career paths of senior leaders.

Allowing women into combat roles in 2015 was a divergent as well as a historical shift (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; King, 2013). The change required military leaders to recognize perceptions and unconscious biases that may have existed that prevented women’s assignments to leadership positions historically held by men (Tama, 2016). This fact is critical and illuminates Eagly and Karau’s (2002) findings that the type of organization moderates the role congruity theory. Because of the change to allow women in combat, this study proved timely because it allowed us to examine how the traditional, highly male-centric environment is evolving and whether there is hope that change is possible in how women are perceived in leadership roles, thereby allowing them greater access to upward mobility and equalizing leadership diversity.

Study Design and Methods

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and understand retired female senior enlisted leaders’ experiences while assigned to the leadership positions of 1SG and CSM in initial entry training (IET), specifically BCT and OSUT, to ascertain if their experiences may shed light on the underrepresentation of female 1SGs and CSMs in the BCT environment. By examining factors that contributed to their success, as well as the challenges and barriers they encountered, this study aimed to address the gap in literature regarding female representation in senior enlisted roles within this nontraditional educational setting.

A transcendental phenomenological approach that relies on detailed narratives to reveal collective insights was chosen to capture the essence of the participants’ experiences. This

approach emphasizes the practice of bracketing, in which the researcher set aside personal biases to focus purely on participants’ descriptions to illuminate the shared meaning of experiences within the IET environment (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell, 2013).

This study explored how participants’ successes, challenges, and barriers intersect with broader patterns of underrepresentation in senior leadership assignments within BCT and OSUT. Structurally, BCT battalions consist of five 1SG positions and one CSM position, each of which is crucial to shaping the early leadership experiences of new soldiers (United States Army, 2016). A similar study by Williams and McGivern (2017) examined the lived experiences of retired female general officers within a specific military branch. Although Williams and McGivern identified key barriers—such as limited mentorship, persistent stereotypes, and few female role models at the general officer level—their findings did not address the unique experiences of senior enlisted leaders within the training environment.

Smith’s (2020) study built upon those insights by focusing on senior enlisted leaders’ experiences within IET, specifically in BCT and OSUT, where female senior enlisted leaders face operational challenges that are not typically encountered at the general officer level. In contrast to Williams and McGivern’s (2017) focus on broader command experiences, the current study centered on the critical role that senior enlisted leaders play in the initial training and development of new soldiers. By investigating the enlisted perspective, this study fills a gap in understanding the barriers and opportunities unique to senior enlisted women who are directly involved in soldier training and development, offering new insights into how gender representation at these formative stages might impact the Army’s leadership pipeline.

Through this research, a deeper understanding of the experiences influencing the assignment of women to senior enlisted roles in BCT emerged, thereby contributing valuable insights into strategies to promote greater representation and mentorship of women in crucial leadership positions.

Participants

The 10 participants were retired Army senior enlisted leaders who retired from the Army between 2009 and 2019 and served as a 1SG or CSM in the IET environment at three Army installations (Table 1). We identified 13 retired females who served as a 1SG or CSM in an Army BCT environment. Ten of the 13 met the participant criteria. Prior to collecting any data, the researchers obtained institutional review board approval and gained consent from each participant. The interviews took place via video conferencing.

Table 1*Description of Study Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Years of service	Degree	Highest rank
Jane	50	Married	30	Master's	SGM
Debbie	54	Single	27	Bachelor's	CSM
Sue	47	Single	30	Master's	CSM
Beth	56	Married	25	Master's	CSM
Becky	56	Married	28	Master's	CSM
Kim	53	Married	22	PhD	CSM
Cindy	55	Married	34	MBA	CSM
Lisa	55	Married	25	Master's	CSM
Carol	64	Married	32	Dual Master's	CSM
Mary	53	Single	30	Master's	SGM

Four of the participants had basic training as their IET assignment. Five of the women had experience as drill sergeants. All of the senior enlisted officers were in a gender-integrated BCT environment. Promotion of eight participants to CSM occurred between 2003 and 2012 (Table 2).

Table 2*Participants' IET Experience*

Participant	Experience with BCT prior to assignment as 1SG/CSM in IET	Promoted to 1SG or CSM in IET	Assignment	Type of IET environment	Appointment to rank of CSM
Jane	Drill sergeant	2006	BCT	Gender-integrated	NA
Debbie	Drill sergeant	2007	Advanced Individual Training	Gender-integrated	2009
Sue	None	2008	Advanced Individual Training	Gender-integrated	2012
Beth	None	2005	Reception battalion	Gender-integrated	2005
Becky	Drill sergeant	1997	BCT	Gender-integrated	2004
Kim	As a recruit	2002	Advanced individual training	Gender-integrated	2006
Cindy	Drill sergeant	2000	BCT	Gender-integrated	2005
Lisa	BCT BN training NCO and Security NCO for a BCT brigade	2000	Support battalion	Gender-Integrated	2005
Carol	Drill sergeant	1SG-1997 CSM-2003	IET-Advanced individual 1SG and IET Support Unit CSM	Gender-Integrated	2003
Mary	Drill sergeant	2001	BCT	Gender-integrated	NA

Data Collection Procedures

After IRB approval, data collection involved a triangulated approach: a research journal, individual interviews, and a focus group. This multi-method strategy, as Creswell (2013) and Denzin (1978) suggested, adds credibility by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. The careful sequencing of methods—beginning with journaling, followed by interviews,

and concluding with a focus group—enhanced data depth and validity (Deshefy-Longhi et al., 2009; Morse, 2005).

Throughout data collection, the researcher maintained a research journal to reflect upon the data as they were gathered, documenting my impressions, reflections, and potential biases. This journaling process, described by Creswell (2013), created an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that tracked my interpretations over time. For instance, after one participant spoke passionately about proving herself in a male-dominated setting, the researcher noted my reflections on the subtle challenges of interpreting her experience without inserting my assumptions. Journaling helped balance my perspective and mitigate bias as themes emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Next, the researcher conducted individual interviews to capture each participant's personal stories and experiences as senior enlisted leaders in BCT environments. Semistructured questions, as Moustakas (1994) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended, allowed participants to openly discuss significant events and challenges. One participant shared a story of leading a physically intense drill that gained her respect from initially skeptical male colleagues—a critical moment of leadership that she believed shifted perceptions within her unit. These 45–60-minute interviews were conducted privately via online video calls or in person based on participant preference (Aborisade, 2013; Lo Iacano et al., 2016), recorded, transcribed professionally, and supplemented with notes reviewed in my research journal.

The final data collection method, a focus group, was conducted to validate themes that surfaced during individual interviews. Focus groups enable group interaction, enhancing insights by encouraging participants to share and expand upon each other's experiences (Gill et al., 2008; Patton, 2015). In this study's focus group, participants discussed shared experiences of gender-based barriers, with one noting the expectation to meet both Army standards and additional unspoken male standards to gain acceptance. This shared discussion environment allowed participants to exchange and refine their views on common themes such as resilience, teamwork, and the impact of subtle biases in leadership roles (Kreuger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

Together, these methods provided a comprehensive view of the participants' lived experiences, contributing to an in-depth understanding of success factors, barriers, and leadership attributes for female leaders in military environments. This triangulated approach ensured credibility and addressed the research questions, offering rich insights into the experiences of women in senior military roles.

Focus Groups

Patton (2015) recommended using focus groups after individual interviews to validate research themes. These discussions allow participants to share insights, explore differing perspectives, and generate deeper understanding (Kreuger & Casey, 2015; Creswell, 2013). The focus group

protocol included nine open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions. Participants confirmed their participation via email, and the session was conducted via webinar for convenience. The 45- to 60-minute discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist (Creswell, 2013). Notes were documented in a reflective journal, and backup recording devices ensured accuracy. The focus group explored retired female leaders' experiences as CSMs or ISGs in the IET environment, examining challenges they faced in leadership roles and whether these barriers contributed to the underrepresentation of women in BCT units. Discussions also assessed whether these obstacles affected participants' career progression.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this transcendental phenomenological study followed a rigorous and systematic approach, as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Prior to initiating the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical integrity and credibility, particularly as they described their lived experiences. To eliminate potential researcher bias, journaling was employed to reflect on any subjective thoughts, thereby safeguarding the participants' responses from external influence. The survey and interview processes were designed to minimize risk to participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the identities of participants and the military installation. In accordance with Creswell's (2013) guidelines, participants were provided with transcripts of their individual interviews and focus group sessions to review for accuracy, enhancing the validity and credibility of the results. All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The data analysis began with a thorough reading of the interview and focus group transcripts, followed by the removal of any repetitive or irrelevant comments. The data was then clustered into fifteen initial codes that represented significant themes from the participants' experiences. Clustering involved grouping similar data points or codes based on commonalities, such as "tenacity," "guidance," and "self-setting standards," which were aligned with Success Factors. The codes were subsequently organized into broader categories by identifying patterns within the data. For example, Challenges/Barriers emerged from grouping themes such as "old boy network" and "proving oneself," while Leadership Attributes were clustered around characteristics like "integrity" and "caring for soldiers." After organizing the codes into these meaningful clusters, the themes were refined and consolidated into four overarching themes central to the study's findings. This clustering and thematic analysis allowed for a synthesis of the data, accurately capturing the essence of the participants' lived experiences. This transcendental phenomenological approach enabled the exploration of the lived experiences of female senior NCOs in leadership roles within the U.S. Army BCT environment. The study adhered to the principle of bracketing, ensuring that the voices of the participants guided the analysis. Key themes such as Success Factors, Challenges/Barriers, Leadership Attributes, and Barriers to Advancement emerged from the data, providing a deep understanding of how the participants navigated obstacles and defined success in a male-dominated environment. The data analysis in this study placed emphasis on the participants' lived experiences through their voices rather than the researcher's

interpretation of those experiences. The analysis thus contributed valuable insights into their leadership journeys, aligned with the transcendental phenomenological approach.

Participants' Stories

This section presents the stories of the 10 retired U.S. Army senior enlisted leader participants who served as ISGs or CSMs within IET environments. These women retired between 2009 and 2019 and served at key training locations. Each story highlighted individual experiences that underscore their unique journeys, success factors, challenges, leadership attributes, and the barriers the strengths and struggles of female leaders in a traditionally male-dominated military structure.

Jane's Story

Jane, raised in a middle-class, single-family home in Florida, joined the Army seeking new challenges and educational opportunities after participating in Marine Corps JROTC. Over her 30-year career, she reached the rank of SGM, with success factors—including self-motivation and high standards—that earned her respect in a gender-integrated training unit. Jane's challenges involved overcoming stereotypes about physical strength; she felt she had to match her male peers to prove her competence. Her leadership attributes included integrity, resilience, and empathy for soldiers. Reflecting on her journey, Jane remarked, "You have to come prepared, physically and mentally, to meet the standards just as well as the men. There's no room for shortcuts." Regarding barriers to advancement, Jane noted the difficulty of moving beyond entry-level leadership roles due to limited mentorship and entrenched gender biases.

Debbie's Story

Debbie, who grew up in South Carolina with five siblings, joined the Army in 1986 to serve her country and earn college benefits. Over her 27-year career, she reached the rank of CSM, with success factors that included a commitment to duty and strong mentorship. However, challenges arose from having to prove her capability repeatedly to gain respect among male peers, a common theme in her career. Debbie's leadership attributes included discipline, strategic thinking, and a deep care for her soldiers. She reflected, "You have to prove yourself over and over, especially as a female. There's this constant expectation that we have to work twice as hard to get half the respect." Barriers to advancement for Debbie included navigating the old boy network within the Army, which made it difficult for women to be considered for senior roles.

Sue's Story

Raised as an only child in Florida, Sue joined the Army seeking independence and a life beyond college. She served 30 years and reached the rank of CSM; her success factors included her tenacity and willingness to exceed expectations. Challenges were significant because she frequently confronted stereotypes about women in leadership, particularly regarding physical and emotional

strength. Her leadership attributes included integrity, resilience, and a commitment to being a role model. Sue's barriers to advancement included limited career planning resources for women in leadership, which meant she often had to chart her own path. She said, "The only person that stops me is me. They may want me to fail, but I'm here to show them otherwise."

Beth's Story

Beth, raised in a middle-class home with mixed religious influences and 1 of 6 children, joined the Army after marrying a service member. She served 25 years, achieving the rank of CSM, and her success factors included a focus on skill-building and knowledge, which helped her stand out in leadership roles. Challenges centered around her need to consistently advocate for herself to overcome gendered expectations, especially in a male-dominated setting. Beth's leadership attributes included perseverance, effective communication, and a dedication to Army values. Discussing barriers to advancement, Beth noted that position coding often limited female soldiers' advancement opportunities, particularly in leadership roles typically held by men. She shared, "You have to set the bar for yourself and be ready to carry the weight, both physically and mentally, to earn the respect of your peers and subordinates."

Becky's Story

Becky, raised in a lower-middle-class family in New York City, joined the Army for adventure and new experiences. Over her 28-year career, she advanced to CSM, with success factors that included her focus on continual learning and self-improvement. Challenges included overcoming societal stereotypes about women's roles and physical abilities, which required her to constantly prove her capability. Becky's leadership attributes included empathy, courage, and the ability to inspire others. She said, "You've got to show up ready and willing to give more than what's expected. That's how you earn your place." For Becky, barriers to advancement included bias in selection processes, with limited opportunities for women in senior roles.

Kim's Story

Kim, raised by her mother and grandmother in a strict Pentecostal home, joined the Army for educational opportunities and personal growth. She served 22 years, reaching CSM, with tenacity being her defining success factor. Challenges included balancing her commitment to work with family responsibilities and overcoming misconceptions about her abilities as a woman. Her leadership attributes included resilience, integrity, and a commitment to high standards. Kim reflected, "It takes stepping out of your comfort zone, pushing past the doubts, and proving that you belong." Regarding barriers to advancement, Kim identified the old boy network as a significant obstacle, noting that senior roles were often allocated based on connections rather than capability.

Cindy's Story

Cindy, the 2nd of 7 children from a small town in North Carolina, joined the Army for educational and life opportunities. Serving 34 years, she advanced to CSM, and her success factors included determination and the support of mentors. Challenges were tied to balancing family obligations with demands of military service, a significant theme throughout her career. Her

leadership attributes included selflessness, dedication, and a focus on supporting soldiers. She shared, "You have to sacrifice a lot, including time with family, to succeed at this level, but you do it because you're driven to lead." Barriers to advancement for Cindy included limited access to mentorship and networking, which often hindered career progression for women.

Lisa's Story

Lisa, raised in a military family, joined the Army initially to earn a college fund. She ultimately served 25 years, retiring as a CSM, with success factors including mentorship and a well-defined career plan. Her challenges included managing male-dominated work environments where women's leadership was often questioned. Lisa's leadership attributes included strategic thinking, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to her values. Regarding barriers to advancement, Lisa noted that promotion opportunities for women were often overlooked, a factor she believed could change with more female representation. She recalled, "I was fortunate to have leaders, both male and female, who guided me, but it took planning and resilience to get where I am."

Carol's Story

Carol, raised in a single-parent family in Florida, joined the Army after training as a social worker. Serving 32 years, she reached CSM, with success factors including her high standards and a clear career path. Challenges included working within a male-dominated hierarchy where women's abilities were often underestimated. Carol's leadership attributes included integrity, resilience, and a commitment to setting a strong example. Discussing barriers to advancement, Carol observed, "I was expected to work harder, to be twice as qualified, just to be considered equal. But I kept pushing." The Army's position coding system, which often excluded women from key roles, was a barrier Carol and many other participants faced.

Mary's Story

Mary, from Baltimore, Maryland, joined the Army to gain independence and escape local economic challenges. Serving 30 years, she retired as an SGM, with success factors including her resilience and a deep care for her soldiers. Challenges she encountered included stereotypes about women's roles in the Army that required her to constantly prove her commitment and capability. Mary's leadership attributes included empathy, integrity, and loyalty. Reflecting on barriers to advancement, Mary highlighted the influence of societal views and traditional gender expectations, sharing, "You have to show you care about your soldiers. That's the foundation of any good leader."

In summary, these stories collectively highlight the resilience and dedication of female Army enlisted leaders and capture their shared experiences and the unique challenges they overcame to lead effectively in the IET environment.

Findings

Experiences of Prejudice and Bias

Each participant reported experiencing prejudice despite their successful service as 1SG and/or CSM in the IET environment. These prejudices align with those described by Eagly and Karau (2002), indicating that even qualified female leaders face entrenched biases. Participants discussed specific challenges and barriers that they believed restricted senior enlisted females from obtaining leadership roles like 1SG and CSM. Male colleagues frequently questioned their capability, particularly in the BCT environment, which participants felt was rooted in stereotypes about women's roles and abilities.

Tenacity as a Key to Success

The participants attributed much of their success to tenacity, describing it as essential in navigating the demanding standards of IET. Whether through physical fitness, mastery of the program of instruction (curriculum), or dealing with male colleagues who doubted their abilities, tenacity was central to each participant's leadership journey. Many went beyond established standards to demonstrate their dedication and capability. As one participant expressed, being "physically fit and an expert" were foundational to her success. Additionally, some credited the support of their team members as a factor that enabled them to overcome challenges and excel.

Structural Barriers in Position Coding

Seventy percent of participants highlighted structural barriers within the Army's coding system for leadership positions. They noted that senior enlisted roles are frequently coded for combat arms (e.g., infantry) soldiers, thus restricting women's access to these positions. One participant criticized the centralized selection process for assignments, suggesting that it neglected important background factors that should be considered when determining candidates for senior positions. In contrast, another participant argued that assignment criteria are gender-neutral and prevented direct discrimination against female candidates. However, the general consensus was that the coding system and current assignment practices unintentionally restricted female advancement into key leadership roles within IET.

Male Perceptions and Gender Stereotypes

Participants reported that male perceptions of female soldiers often created barriers to leadership roles in the IET environment. They noted that stereotypes about women's capabilities were pervasive, frequently setting an unspoken, additional male standard for female leaders to meet. One participant explained that she was expected to not only meet the Army standard but to exceed it to gain respect from her male counterparts. This factor led many female soldiers to avoid pursuing senior roles like 1SG and CSM because they found the pressure to meet these biased expectations discouraging.

The scarcity of female mentors further limited participants' access to guidance and role models, compounding the challenges women faced in navigating leadership paths. Participants observed that when they employed direct or agentic leadership styles, they often faced backlash for not appearing sufficiently communal, as Brescoll (2016) documented. Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) found similar gender-related challenges for women pursuing senior leadership roles in

civilian sectors such as public education, thus indicating that these biases are not unique to the military.

Despite recent increases in opportunities for women in military leadership (Orrick, 2016; Pellerin, 2015), participants reported that historical biases remain strong. One participant cited a statement from the Commandant of the Marine Corps to highlight the persistence of these attitudes: "When you get right down to it, you've got to protect the manliness of war" (Enloe, 1983, p. 153). This mindset often casts women in senior military roles as insufficiently communal, which generates negative perceptions when they display agentic behaviors. This lack of acceptance and entrenched stereotypes presents significant barriers for women striving to meet both formal Army standards and the unspoken expectations of their male peers in leadership positions.

Leadership Attributes for Success

Throughout the study, participants consistently demonstrated the leadership attributes that the Army values, such as integrity, resilience, toughness, and good judgment. Many of them cited toughness and tenacity as attributes that supported their success, along with a commitment to caring for their soldiers. Participants also emphasized that their dedication to Army values was critical to their success, thereby underscoring the need for both agentic and communal traits that align with the Army's leadership competency model (Department of the Army, 2015). These attributes helped participants earn respect in their roles and establish themselves as effective leaders in the IET environment.

Barriers in Position Coding and Military Occupational Specialties

A major barrier cited by participants was the way positions are coded and assigned. Many recommended changing the structure of BCT position coding to increase female representation because positions often favor combat arms specialties typically associated with male soldiers. Participants suggested that military occupational specialty (MOS) identifiers contributed to this barrier. Until recently, laws and policies restricted women from serving in certain combat-related MOSs, which limited their eligibility for key positions (Kamarck, 2015). Although these restrictions have been lifted, change has been slow; the 2018 military demographics report showed only a 0.7% increase in active-duty females in the U.S. Army (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018).

Family Obligations as Barriers and Challenges

Family responsibilities emerged as both a barrier and challenge to career advancement. Participants noted that, like women in other fields, they often had to choose between career progression and family obligations, with some delaying family planning to protect their careers. This finding aligns with Groyberg and Abrahams (2014), who found that women in leadership positions often anticipate difficulty in balancing motherhood and career demands. In this study, participants echoed those concerns, revealing that

working long hours and postponing family plans were necessary to advance in their careers. Although family obligations do not preclude success, participants observed that military culture often prioritizes career advancement over family life, particularly in BCT environments, where long hours are common. This cultural expectation pressures women to choose between family responsibilities and pursuing ranks and duty positions, thus deterring some from seeking 1SG and CSM roles in BCT.

Physical Ability and Fitness Standards

Although physical ability was not consistently cited as a barrier, participants highlighted the necessity of physical toughness and fitness for success in IET and BCT, noting that proving physical capability—such as excelling in running—earned them respect from male peers and commanders. One participant shared, “Once I proved that I was a runner, I gained respect from my male colleagues and my commander,” thus reinforcing the role of physical fitness in overcoming biases. Historically, lower fitness standards for women created institutional biases and reinforced perceptions that women were physically weaker (Trobaugh, 2018). In 2020, the Army introduced the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) to enforce standardized requirements for all soldiers regardless of age or gender, thus aiming to ensure that every soldier meets rigorous physical standards in preparation for combat roles (RAND Corporation, 2022). Initial findings from the ACFT, however, showed higher failure rates among women than men, which underscored challenges in adapting to the uniform requirements. Participants agreed that maintaining physical toughness allowed them to establish credibility and overcome biases regarding women’s physical abilities in challenging environments, thus highlighting the importance of physical resilience in changing perceptions within the Army.

Discussion

This study helped to clarify how the social role theory and the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders applies to the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of female leaders in the U.S. Army’s BCT units of the IET environment. Individuals involved in the assignment of 1SGs and CSMs must understand the importance of assigning females to these positions in the IET/BCT environment (Kiser, 2015; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014; Tench et al., 2017; Violanti & Jureczak; 2010). The most common themes identified by the participants were tenacity, old boy network, having to prove oneself, reaction to leadership, fighting stereotypes, Army values, coding jobs, and male perceptions of females. The commonality of these themes supports the social role and the role congruity theory’s postulations.

The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leader postulates that individuals are penalized when they do not perform according to the expectations of society (Ferguson, 2018; Skelly & Johnson, 2011). This outcome was evident in the participants’ responses to the question of how they were viewed, considered, or referred to when using the direct approach leadership style. All but one of the participants reported that women were referred to negatively (e.g., angry, aggressive, negative, bitchy, too blunt, over the top, and too direct). The role

congruity theory of prejudice also suggests that women do not reach top-level positions because of two types of prejudice. The first is based on the perception that women are less capable than men are to occupy leadership roles. The second involves judging women more harshly when in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The themes found in this study support the theory.

Empirically, the study’s findings corroborate much of the reviewed literature relative to challenges and barriers females face that contribute to the underrepresentation of females in senior leadership positions. Carli and Eagly (2015) suggested that women in leadership continue to face challenges that men do not. Of relevance to women currently in senior Army leader positions or seeking leadership positions in the future, participants strongly voiced the importance of tenacity in the IET environment—so much so that one participant recommended that female senior noncommissioned officers “be in their [superior’s] face and say, ‘I want to be a first sergeant here. I want the job, and I want to be a first sergeant, and I need your support [to] ensure that I have it!’” Importantly, in order to be successful, women in leadership positions will need to demonstrate confidence and determination, especially in male-dominated organizations.

Concerning challenges and barriers experienced by the participants and the challenges and barriers participants believed are factors that prevent women from seeking out senior enlisted leader positions in BCT, the overarching themes that emerged from both the individual and focus group interviews are that female senior enlisted leaders continue to fight stereotypes, and male perceptions of females may prevent senior enlisted females from seeking out those positions. Beth shared that sometimes she was the only female at the table. She stated, “Male counterparts, African American and Caucasian, let me know that they had [an] issue with me being at the table ... almost as if I took one of their brother’s position.” Mary noted that a few of her subordinates challenged her authority by stating, “You can’t tell me what to do ... because you’re a female.” Mary also shared that her battalion commander made many public statements about how females should only take care of paperwork—processing the soldiers in and out of the unit—and let the male drill sergeants do the training.

These themes imply that challenges and barriers are prevalent in the BCT environment and that these challenges and barriers prevent female senior enlisted soldiers from seeking out senior positions in BCT. They become barriers to advancements for female senior enlisted leaders, thus implying that a glass ceiling may exist in the BCT environment.

The meanings constructed from the data collected can help researchers understand how to increase the representation of female senior leaders in male-dominated organizations. The practical implications are related to participants’ successes, challenges, and barriers they experienced, as well as challenges and barriers that affect female, senior enlisted representation in the BCT environment. The implications

are also related to the participants' perceptions of leadership attributes needed to be successful in the BCT environment.

With diversity and inclusion at the forefront of any organization's success, the Army must continue discussions on how to make the organization more inclusive. Of particular importance is determining how to assign senior enlisted females to positions that are typically regarded as male-dominated positions. Nanton (2015) asserted the need for decision makers to have continuous diversity and inclusion conversations when considering the pipeline of available talent. It is clear from the results of this study that the military cannot merely be about business as usual. The literature is clear on what it takes to produce success, and that leadership is, in fact, gender-neutral (Frye & Pham, 2018; Sahin et al., 2017; Sims & Morris, 2018).

Delimitations and Limitations

The main delimiting parameter set for this study was the inclusion of only females who had retired from the U.S. Army in the previous 10 years and who were a 1SG or CSM in the IET environment. The delimiting factors were important for ensuring the data captured were current and included the lived experiences of participants who had firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon. A major limitation was the number of participants who met the requirement of having served in BCT as a 1SG or CSM and had retired in the past 10 years. During the initial recruitment process of this study, we could not find 10 participants who had served specifically in the BCT environment; therefore, we included participants who had served as 1SG/CSM in IET. We recruited on Facebook and LinkedIn and used the snowball sampling technique. We were able to recruit only 13 interested women, and only 10 met the criteria for the study.

Summary

In male-dominated organizations such as the political arena and military, the leaders and the followers have changed (Diekman & Schneider, 2010; Walker, 2008). Recent studies suggest the scarcity of women in top-level positions warrants a unique leadership approach for aspects of femininity, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and teamwork (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017; Kiser, 2015; Walker, 2008). As societal changes continue to evolve both in leaders and in those who are being led, it becomes important for organizations to distinguish what is indispensable for effective leadership, irrespective of gender.

History has shown that many women have supported and defended their country by serving in the U.S. military. Their roles have changed significantly since they were first formally recognized as military members in the early 20th century (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Although women have served in the military for well over a century, the U.S. military is still a male-dominant organization, and military forces have exemplified a strong and authoritative leadership style, normally exemplified by males (Bass, 1990).

The female participants in this study were successful in the IET environment and attributed their success to their tenacity, genuine care for their soldiers, and guidance from others. The participants also experienced challenges and barriers, mainly from lack of female representation, gender stereotypes, and lack

of acceptance from male counterparts. Overwhelmingly, participants listed one or more Army values as the overarching characteristics needed to be successful in the IET/BCT environment. Participants believed that changing the coding of military occupational specialty of the 1SG and CSM positions in the BCT environment might help increase the representation of female senior enlisted women in BCT units.

Although participants were successful in their senior enlisted positions in the IET environment, they all experienced challenges and barriers that contributed to the underrepresentation of female senior enlisted leaders in the positions of 1SG and CSM in BCT units. The researchers hope to encourage more women to aspire to attain the positions of 1SG and CSM in the BCT units and to pursue these positions to help the Army increase the representation of females in this environment. More female role models and mentors are needed in the BCT environment to train female soldiers who will become the future leaders of our Army. Those 18-year-old female high school graduates need to know that they can succeed!

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