Searching for safe space: Graduate student veterans' uneven pathways to STEM careers by race

Abstract

As both the student demographics of higher education in the United States and the U.S. military continue to diversify, the enrollment numbers of student veterans of color are on the rise. And while higher education has served as a space of knowledge, community, and self-discovery for many students, it maintains itself as primarily a space of White hegemony which has been the cause of persistent difficulties and traumas for students of color, whilst maintaining comfort and homogeneity for White students. This study focuses on the identity and relational experiences of three graduate student veterans, one White male, one White female, and one Black male, in their higher education journey as student veterans. This work examines the ways that the military and higher education provide privileged and normalized spaces of safety and belonging for Whiteness–even if these spaces are more haphazard for White women–while marginalizing Blackness by posing enormous challenges to Black veterans trying to find a support system on campus.

Keywords: graduate student veterans, BIPOC student veterans, White hegemony, double consciousness

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, institutions of higher education have acknowledged the importance of students' academic and social integration into the institutional cultural context. Tinto (1993) explains social and academic integration is key to a student's commitment to an institution; this integration affects student retention, persistence, and academic success. With the increasing number of students from marginalized identities, an institution's effective support and facilitation of diverse students' cultural and social backgrounds have become an important task assigned to university administrators and faculty members. While universities are making strides toward diversity and inclusion, many marginalized populations remain noticeably underrepresented and underserved in the larger campus community and find it difficult to create community and feel a sense of belonging (Forbus et al., 2011).

Students of color and student veterans are two populations that often struggle to find safe and affirming space in higher education that can feel oppositional to their cultural and military backgrounds. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student veterans are left particularly dissonant with a campus culture that precludes their two pivotal identities from full inclusion (Hunt et al., 2022). And even though the BIPOC community is more likely to serve in the military (Gamble, 2020) and women are enlisting at increasing rates (Rank & Heroux, 2018), the archetype of the White male soldier and veteran remains durable (Alexander, 2006), leaving BIPOC veterans alienated from a core component of their identity and experiences.

Critical scholars have long contested that hegemonic Whiteness is the cultural backdrop of American higher education, most explicitly manifested in predominantly White institutions (PWI). At PWIs, students of color constantly experience microaggression and struggle to find safe and affirming spaces essential to their sense of belonging, development, and academic

success (Keels, 2020). Those claiming to be "veteran-friendly" campuses are not exempt from the profound impact of hegemonic Whiteness; these institutions, like many other PWIs often ignore or negate the importance of racial equity (Cabrera et al., 2017). Whiteness remains prioritized (Cabrera et al., 2017), and institutional support is often funneled to the service of White male veterans as the archetype of American military veterans who deserve the university's attention and support (Alexander, 2006; Saunders et al., 2021). As a result, student veterans of diverse profiles (e.g., racial minority, women) are invisible on campus and their needs are neglected by the institutional support system. Considering such variability in sociocultural climate and available institutional support across sub-groups of student veterans, it is reasonable to postulate that each group may need to enact different types of support systems in higher education to circumvent and overcome challenges and create new bands of camaraderie to replace those lost when exiting the military.

This study focuses on the college transition experiences of three graduate student veterans: one White male in his early 30s, one White female in her late 20s, and one Black male in his early 40s. Selected from a larger sample of 68 student veterans of diverse backgrounds, these three cases offer a stark contrast of diverse student veterans whose experiences reflect their privileged or marginalized position within the space of Whiteness. Although each student seeks a sense of belonging and community in higher education, the White veterans find that community already awaits them, was pre-provided for them, predestined even, while the Black student had a difficult and painful journey building friendships. We intentionally selected White/Black students and male/female students to highlight the contrast between their respective journeys. This work examines the ways that the military, higher education, and American society provide privileged safety nets and perpetual spaces of belonging for Whiteness, even if these spaces are

more haphazard for White women. In contrast, Blackness remains liminal, marginal, and forever peripheral, posing enormous challenges to Black veterans trying to find a support system on campus. Situated in STEM graduate programs at a PWI in the southeast where normalized Whiteness and anti-Blackness create intensified marginalization of Black students, this study pursued the following two research questions.

1. How does the social construction of U.S. veterans as White males complicate three graduate student veterans' searches for community in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the southeastern United States?
2. In what ways do both the military and higher education prioritize, center, and protect Whiteness while disenfranchising and attacking Blackness?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Veterans' Civilian Transition and Identity Reconfiguration

Military veterans' transition to civilian society is accompanied by a significant cultural shift that inevitably demands identity reconfiguration between their prior military identity and new civilian identity (Hall, 2011). As a total institution with its own values, practices, and beliefs (Hall, 2011), the military's success depends on the successful acculturation of its members to develop a strong military identity as their core identity. As a result, veterans transitioning to civilian society deal with the challenging task of restructuring their core military identity to adapt to the civilian cultural context and pressure to enact a civilian self.

Influenced by multiple transition models and identity theories, DiRamio & Jarvis (2011) proposed a conceptual model of student veterans' identity development which lists four major typologies: ambivalent, skeptic, emerging, and fulfilled civilian self. They explain that *ambivalent* student veterans have minimal discomfort as they depart from the military since its

influence on their core identity is modest. *Skeptic* student veterans possess a strong military identity and experience enormous stress transitioning back to civilian society. In the *emerging* category, student veterans go through an identity crisis and adapt their identity to enact new meaning and purpose in life, which aligns with the cultural and social norms of their new civilian environment (e.g., higher education). In the fourth and final typology, *fulfilled civilian self*, student veterans have managed all the tasks of identity crisis and exploration, and established a balanced and contended core identity (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This model was one of the initial scholarly endeavors to highlight the importance of veterans' cultural identity in their civilian transition through higher education. However, their model ignores the fact that student veterans' identity is much more complex and multi-faceted and cannot be reduced to two simple binary axes: military and civilian identities. For example, race and sex/gender are powerful axes in one's identity. These are also significant axes of power, privilege, and marginalization in both military and civilian society, which inevitably influence diverse student veterans' identity reconfiguration during transition and in higher education.

2.2 Identity Theories

Scholars have long debated the concept of individual identity and identity development as a complex and rapidly changing construct that is also frequently misunderstood and misused in many academic discussions (Burke & Stets, 2009). Stryker (2008) critiques G. H. Mead's popular theory of symbolic interactionism for portraying that all communities are equal contributors to society, that society is a homogeneous entity, and that people, too, have coherent and singular selves that exist in relative harmony. Stryker dissented from these views, positing that the concept of a singular and coherent self cannot properly address multiple issues, such as "the evident impact of social structural and situational variables on social behaviors and when

and how apparently disparate roles result in intrapersonal conflict" (p.18). Stryker (2008) further contends that we hierarchize our identities and that we perform these identities based on the circumstances we are in and the people we are around; thus, different identities become more salient based on the external environment.

By extending Stryker's theory, Jones & McEwan (2000) found that identity salience is tied to both internal awareness and internal scrutiny; a lack of salience is associated with those with privileged identities. Those who possess a privileged identity (Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, etc.) do not experience identity salience around these characteristics; however, those who do not possess them do. Those who experience a marginalizing difference with regularity (e.g., BIPOC, women, 2SLGBTQIA+) form their salient identities around this difference. For example, in the military's hypermasculine environment, female service members often experience intense marginality, thus being female/woman emerges as their salient identity (Iverson et al., 2016). Likewise, Black male service members who experience marginality based on race preserve their racial identity throughout their service years creating tension between their military identities and the institution's meritocratic ideology (Hunt et al, 2022).

Identities are not static, either as people constantly negotiate their identities based on shifting contexts. Those who have multiple marginalized identities are more likely to incorporate those identities into their everyday lives than others in the position of privilege that is not associated with a salient identity (Jones & McEwan, 2000). For example, racial minority student veterans integrate multiple, and sometimes contradictory identities to adapt to the college environment (Hunt et al., 2022; Saunders et al, 2021). In contrast, White student veterans' racial identity-Whiteness–is not salient and overshadowed by their veteran, gender, or other types of social identity (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019; Iverson et al., 2016; Mobley et al., 2019).

Since Whiteness is normative in our society (Cabrera et al., 2017), there is no need for White veterans–both male and female–to integrate or intersect it with their veteran status, or any other identity; these identities all exist relative to and in harmony with their Whiteness. However, research also shows that the more core identities a person has increases the chances that one of those identities will be valued in various social contexts (Berhane et al., 2020). Therefore, those with multiple identities (student, veteran, Black, female) can afford more opportunities for social adaptability and increase the likelihood of enacting a sense of belonging to multiple groups (Berhane et al., 2020). Recent studies found that female and racial minority student veterans–despite their invisibility and lack of institutional support–exhibit high resilience and adaptability by incorporating multiple layers of their social and cultural identities during the college transition process (Hunt, et al., 2022; Iverson et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2021).

2.3 Female and Black Student Veterans' Identity Construction in Civilian Transition

Kang and Bodenhausen (2015) contend that multiple identities can help to blur and shift the line between in- and outgroups, and that bias and discrimination can be undermined and usurped by those with nontraditional identities belonging to certain groups that may have previously excluded them. Women and BIPOC may use these identities to obtain membership into groups that have been historically exclusionary, they often find that sexism, racism and other bigotry remain pervasive, and that their inclusion is tenuous at best. Veterans are one such group despite the fact the military claims itself as the epitome of American meritocracy. After enduring and internalizing their secondary status in the male-dominated environment, some women veterans question their worth and veteran identity returning to civilian society (Iverson et al., 2016). Some consider themselves undeserving veterans as they did not have a "combat experience" that signifies real soldiers (Dunkin, 2012). Furthermore, some female service

members experience physical and sexual trauma during the service years, which can plague their civilian/college transition and post-military lives and complicate their relationships with most male veterans (Iverson et al., 2016). It is important to note that sex/gender was the most salient identity during their military years (Culver, 2013), which may overshadow their veteran identity often invisible and rarely acknowledged in their civilian/college transition process.

Undoubtedly, race functions as another critical axis of marginality in the U.S. military and for veterans. Alexander (2006) contends that some bodies, particularly Black and Brown ones, are considered inherently unpatriotic and deviant regardless of veteran status. BIPOC veterans are often otherized in the same ways as America's "enemies" (Alexander, 2006). Alexander (2006) notes that the idea of a veteran or soldier is to be both hypermasculine and heteromasculine and is "more often racialized as White externally so as to be juxtaposed against the dark enemy" (p. 209) and that this White citizen is "in sharp contradistinction to the dark naturalized citizen, the dark immigrant, or even the dark citizen born of the dark immigrant whose latent "loyalty" is perennially suspect and, therefore, ultimately threatening" (p. 210).

Therefore, even though BIPOC veterans may experience identity salience around their veteran identity, there are external forces barring them from full inclusion in this identity. For example, many Black veterans served their countries with pride, yet their experiences of racism, both in the military and at home, work to delegitimize that pride and their veteran status (Black & Thompson, 2012). BIPOC veterans are not recognized as legitimate American veterans (Alexander, 2006; Saunders et al., 2022); their contributions are discounted throughout history (Harris, 2014).

Given the brutal history of slavery and racism still prevalent in society, the hyperawareness of Blackness, as articulated in WEB Dubois' (1903) concept of 'double

consciousness,' colors the experiences of many Black people - whether in the military, in higher education, or elsewhere. Though Black people are increasingly serving in the military (Jenner, 2017) where they undoubtedly find community and forge friendships, when they return to the civilian world they may find that these veteran communities are not as welcoming, even hostile to them. In the military, camaraderie amongst servicemembers is pivotal to the productivity and even survival of the unit; thus, Black soldiers developed haphazard, yet necessary relationships with their White peers. However, similar communities in the civilian world may no longer serve them; Black student veterans enact a different identity to find other communities in higher education that are less hostile than the veteran communities in civilian society. Developing a new support network is pivotal to veterans' successful civilian transition (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; Eakman et al., 2019); For many Black student veterans, these support networks need to be free of anti-Blackness to feel safe (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021); for many women student veterans, particularly in male-dominated fields, these friendships need to be supportive and free of sexism (Leaper & Starr, 2019). On today's college campuses, White male veterans possess great advantages as their potential support communities are well established, visible, and easily accessible by them. Serpe and Stryker (1987) found that students sought relationships with others that allowed them to keep prior identities; therefore, White male student veterans possess the ultimate trump card of maleness and Whiteness in navigating and easily finding a safe space for themselves in higher education.

2.4 Higher Education and STEM as the Space of Whiteness

Despite the public's perception of higher education as the most progressive space in American society, many scholars acknowledge that Whiteness--powerful cultural and racial hegemony--is still a solid ideological bedrock that governs the systemic inner workings of the

privileged institution (Cabrera et al., 2017). STEM programs in particular epitomize the privileged space of White males grounded in the meritocratic norms of success through solitary, individualistic, and competitive practices (Ong et al., 2018). There is no shortage of literature testifying that universities' STEM programs are a hazardous sphere for underrepresented and marginalized students such as Black, Latinx, and Native American students (Berhane et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2020). These students are often subject to faculty and peer scrutiny and doubt regarding their qualifications and capabilities to succeed in STEM (McGee, 2016). Facing negative stereotypes and experiencing subtle but degrading racial microaggressions are also commonplace (Miles et al., 2020). In their thematic synthesis, Ong et al. (2020) articulate the concept of "social pain" triggered by rejection and feeling left out, which ultimately diverts one's cognitive resources away from the academic task to cope with emotional stress prompted by the social environment. Each of these added adversities perpetuates and exacerbates the already established social, academic, and economic disparities between racially minoritized students and their White counterparts (Miles et al., 2020). Scholars explain that persistent racial and ethnic inequities in STEM disciplines are not coincidental, but an inevitable outcome of "structural racism in higher education [that] keeps underrepresented students of color marginalized and feeling like outsiders at predominantly White institutions" (Burt et al., 2019).

Student veterans are one of the promising student groups to enrich diversity in STEM education. As the racial/ethnic demographics of the U.S. military are more diverse than ever, the proportion of military veterans and student veterans of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds will naturally increase over the years (Schaeffer, 2021). Recent studies suggest that STEM fields, particularly engineering, may serve as a positive academic environment that facilitates student veterans to forge their prior military self into a new professional identity as an engineer

(Camacho et al., 2021). Engineering student veterans value their military-learned skills, such as self-discipline, leadership, teamwork, and technical skills, and consider them as advantageous competencies in their engineering studies (Camacho et al.; Lim et al., 2020). One's military identity can remain strong even after their initial civilian/higher education transition period (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019), thus if it is accepted and valued in their program environment, student veterans express their identity with a sense of pride (Camacho et al.). A typical STEM graduate program's structure (e.g., hierarchical apprenticeship model, intensive teamwork in a shared lab space) resembles the structure of a military unit and facilitates similar close-knit human relationships. Therefore, depending on the lab's shared cultural values, graduate student veterans may find their STEM program well aligned to their prior military identity and express it without self-scrutiny, or suppress their military identity to adapt to a new academic environment where the military identity has no value or even separate them from their program peers.

While the number of studies on engineering student veterans is on the rise, almost all studies up to this point were based on predominantly White male samples reflecting the larger structural problem of underrepresentation of women and BIPOC in STEM programs. The lack of gender and race-based analysis has repeatedly been referred to as a major limitation of those studies (Camacho et al., 2021; Mobley et al., 2019). Women and racially minoritized student veterans are positioned at the intersections of multiple marginalities (veteran status, race, gender), which complicates their transition experience and identity reconfiguration in STEM programs historically dominated by White males and a stronghold of hegemonic Whiteness. Therefore, a focused and thorough analysis of a limited number of graduate student veterans who embody those critical axes of privilege and marginalization will provide an important insight that

has been overshadowed by the dominant voices of White male student veterans in the existing literature.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Context

This cross-case study is derived from larger evaluation research that explored student veterans' civilian transition experiences and professional development in STEM graduate programs. The university, with an enrollment of approximately 30,000, was established as a post-secondary education institution serving World War II military veterans returning home in the South. In 2018-2019, the number of GI beneficiaries on campus was 1039, which suggests the actual number of student veterans on campus would be over 1,100. Out of the 1,039 students using GI benefits, about half (n=510) are students of color, and 375 students are women. The university's records show that out of 107 graduate students using the GI benefits, only 19 are STEM majors (17.7%), including five students of color and seven women.

The entire evaluation research included 52 male and 16 female student veterans, including 11 student veterans enrolled in STEM graduate programs. Out of the 11 graduate student veterans, nine identified as White, one as Black, and one as Asian. The only woman veteran in our sample was White. Ten students were in engineering (e.g., mechanical engineering, applied energy and mechanical system engineering, electrical engineering), and one was a chemistry major. The three cases analyzed and reported in this paper were drawn from this subset of student veterans whose graduate education was partially supported by an external grant and placed in a systematic mentoring program designed for them.

3.2 Data Collection

While the larger evaluation research included multiple types of data (e.g., institutional enrollment and retention statistics, observations in key classes or labs, and faculty mentor interviews), in-depth individual interviews with student veterans were the primary data collection. Following the approved IRB protocol, the research team sent out solicitation emails to eligible individuals and conducted interviews with those who had positively responded to the request. All interviews were semi-structured and guided by a protocol listing several key initial questions and follow-up probing questions to ensure flexibility, adaptability, and conversational improvisation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews that lasted from 45 to 90 minutes included the three participants who were selected for focused analysis, comparison, and discussion in this paper; each participant was interview separately. One participant, Justin, was interviewed twice over the course of two years. His first interview conducted in the early stage of his graduate program revealed a fragility in peer-supported social identity when compared to other graduate veterans. Because Justin was the only Black student in our sample, we decided to interview him again at the end of his graduate program to probe his program experience further. His second interview was conducted by the first author of this paper sharing a social identity as a member of BIPOC, thus providing a safe space to discuss his experiences as a Black veteran in a traditionally White male's space–engineering graduate programs.

3.3 Data Analysis

Our data analysis for the entire data set started with a case summary of each participant followed by an inductive and thematic analysis that intended to identify key commonalities and contrasts across cases (Ezzy, 2002). After our first round of data analysis, we noticed findings from three graduate student veterans, Justin, Tammy, and Jake—and their contrasting transition journey in higher education—poignantly mirrored the stark heterogeneity that we also

discovered in the entire student veteran data set. Despite the same veteran status and being graduate students pursuing professional careers in STEM fields, these three veterans had significantly different transition experiences, which made them choose contrasting paths of coping strategies to affirm their privileged or marginalized identities. As a result, we found it relevant to present an in-depth cross-case analysis of these three veterans to illuminate the significant heterogeneity that clearly exists across different groups of student veterans based on their racial identities in our study. Our subsequent analysis focused on the role of race/gender in the availability or construction of an on-campus support community for each participant, and how each student navigated the White space of higher education with normalized privileges and disadvantages. The first author of this paper is the American Indian female PhD student who led the analysis of the STEM graduate student veteran's data set. The second author is an Asian American faculty member who led the entire research project with her expertise in research on student veterans and qualitative research. Both authors engaged in all aspects of the research process sharing their analytic notes and emerging interpretations to build consensus on the major findings presented in this paper. Therefore, the entire research was a collaborative, systemic, and reciprocal endeavor, which enhances the overall quality and trustworthiness of its outcomes (Ravitch & Carl., 2021).

3.4 Authors' Positionalities

Both authors of this paper are women of color educational researchers pursuing critical and advocacy-based scholarship as the focal point of their work. We envision our research as grounded in communitarianism that underscores the democratic, critical, social justice-oriented, and reciprocal research process (Lincoln & Denzin, 2008). Moving beyond the traditional ideas of neutrality and objectivity, we believe our advocacy stance and communitarian approach are

pivotal to illuminating diverse human experiences, especially those that embody multiple intersected marginalities. The first author of this paper is an American Indian (Lumbee) woman who was a Ph.D. student at the time of the study and is now a junior faculty member at another research institution in the south. She grew up in a rural county, the heart of the Lumbee territory, where her early life was seamlessly integrated and enriched in the communal environment of her indigenous community. During her undergraduate studies at a prestigious private PWI, she experienced peers' constant anti-Indigenous commentaries and microaggression, which discounted her Native identity and added pressure to conform to the stereotypical, restrictive, and monolithic notions of Indigeneity. Her continuing journey in higher education deepened her desire for critical indigenous scholarship and commitment to those possessing socially and culturally marginalized identities and thus exposed to constant microaggressions in the space of normalized Whiteness, such as a PWI. She acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of her Native identity and multiplicity of her entire social identity as a graduate student, as a woman, and as a racial minority, some of which overlapped with each of the three participants and helped establish rapport and reciprocal trust and understanding.

The second author of this paper is an Asian American female faculty member whose gender and racial minority identity partially intersected with the female and Black participants. She started her academic career as an educational researcher applying a critical social justice lens to mathematics education and later to STEM higher education. Her involvement in student veteran research started as a program evaluation task, yet she experienced a powerful moment of learning and personal connections that made "the familiar strange, and the strange familiar." She discovered that student veterans are invisible cultural minorities on college campuses and experience similar struggles as other cultural minorities because they cannot decipher the hidden

curriculum deeply embedded but unspoken in college environments. She also noticed that the voices of racial minority student veterans are completely missing in the existing literature, and the critical void could be filled in only by a team of diverse researchers sharing strong communitarian research ethics and commitment.

As racial minority women in higher education, we both have experienced subtle, yet persistent cultural subjugation and microaggressions, yet also learned how to navigate the precarious cultural space by creating an alliance and support networks with others working toward a more inclusive and equitable campus environment. While neither author is a military veteran, both have family members (e.g., spouse, brother, uncle) who are military veterans. Therefore, we are familiar with military culture and have a personal commitment to supporting student veterans in higher education. We acknowledge that our intersecting identities, relationships, and prior experiences support our advocacy stance and selection of the theoretical framework and subsequent analysis.

3.5 Protection of Vulnerable Populations

The authors are part of a larger research team that had a total of eleven members from diverse cultural backgrounds, including three military veterans and four counseling professionals who have served as critical sounding boards at varying stages of the research process. Reflecting communitarian research ethics (Lincoln & Denzin, 2008), the larger team's rich cultural and racial diversity was intentionally created and cultivated. The research team engaged in many open discussions, including how to ensure the highest ethical standards and reciprocity throughout the entire research process from veterans' and counselors' perspectives. The team also acknowledged the importance of shared social and cultural identities between researchers/interviewers and participants (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Diverse team members

helped create a safe space for participants of color and served as advocates for their interviewees' voices throughout data analysis. Our study was conducted based on the university's IRB approval and annual review for the subsequent three years. Nonetheless, confidentiality still emerged as the most significant ethical concern due to the limited number of graduate student veterans in STEM programs on campus. We conducted all interviews in a private space selected by each participant to ensure their comfort, privacy, and confidentiality. Most importantly, the research team set a clear policy that student veterans' study participation was strictly confidential and not accessible by their program faculty members. To further minimize any negative repercussions caused by backward identity tracing, the authorship team intentionally delayed the final submission of this three-case analysis until the key participants graduated and were no longer under the influence of their program faculty members. We carefully examined all possible risks of confidentiality breach and their impact, considering the ultimate goal of our communitarian research as advocacy-based scholarship.

4. Findings

In this section, we will present findings from three selected graduate student veterans: Jake, a White male in his 30s, Tammy a White female in her 20s, and Justin, a Black male in his 40s. These student veterans' experiences in higher education unravel a stark contrast based on race, gender, and age. These three students' cases epitomize the clear divide found between White veterans and veterans of color in our larger sample, confirming normative Whiteness on college campuses that generate privileges and marginalization. We examine the narratives of the three selected student veterans based on identity theories, normative Whiteness, and identity salience.

4.1 Jake: Homogeneity and the Archetypal White Male Student Veteran Experience

Jake, a White male veteran in his 30s who served in the Marines, grew up in the rural North Carolina mountains. He completed a year of technical school before enlisting, received an associate degree in science after serving for five years in the Marines, and then pursued and completed a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. He is also interested in motorsports and the automotive industry. He is currently a graduate student in mechanical engineering. Jake expressed feeling a disconnect between himself and the average undergraduate student in their teens or early twenties because of his age and being a veteran. Jake, who felt that he had more life experience than most undergraduates, noted that "it helps to have someone who knows what you've done or, you know, has that similarity and you're all in the same classes together." Thus, Jake found comfort in establishing relationships with others from similar backgrounds.

Jake's affinity for "similarity" and for those "who know what you've done" is not a unique perspective. People seek out those who mirror themselves for many reasons. However, Jake is privileged because the university and engineering community provide him with the ready-made community to which he seeks to belong, rather than either coincidental or hard-won friendships that his non-White, non-male peers must forge. Jake notes:

> if you can find a group of people, you know, say within the [student veterans] program here at school, or even as an undergraduate student, if you can find a group of people who've had those experiences, then you're far better likely to succeed.

Jake's success, though, was preordained. His experiences as a White male, which he does not name explicitly, often preclude him from most kinds of marginalization. Jake leverages these realities and identities, though perhaps unknowingly, to continue to subvert and subside many of the struggles that veterans face in the civilian world that often misunderstands and undervalues them.

Noteworthy is that Jake claims veterans' superiority in terms of their ability to work hard to get the job done. He states, "if we have a project, for instance, chances are the person who's going to try the hardest, if there's a veteran in that group, chances are [it's] the veteran." He continues his ascription to the veteran-as-the-hardest-worker theory by stating:

> I found people that were similar to me in the aspect of, if we have work to get to, if we have work to get done, we're going to do it regardless of outside circumstances or anything like that. Those people that would see the value in hard work towards your studies...I'd rather try harder on it and live with that rather than just let it roll.

Jake believes that the average veteran possesses a tenacity that exists regardless of obstacles or challenges. In Jake's world, failure is not an option. Therefore, in many ways, he believes that the key to success in the military also unlocks doors to achievement in the academy (Madriaga, 2005).

Similarly, Jake believes that the military's emphasis on collectivity and communality sets student veterans up for similar success in higher education, particularly in spaces where group work is common, (e.g., in STEM fields which are structured around teams in a lab environment). He notes that often in higher education "people don't recognize their value within the team," whereas in the military, this value is foundational. Jake also notes that now that he has transitioned into a graduate program, his classes are smaller, and "a lot of the graduate students are veterans," both of which he identifies as beneficial. Therefore, though Jake supports a communal view of education, he also hopes that that community reflects backgrounds and mindsets like his. This commitment to sameness is the undercurrent of both his experiences and his success in the military and in higher education.

4.2 Tammy: White Womanhood in the Military and the Academy

Tammy, a White female student veteran in her late 20s, the oldest of seven children grew up on a farm. Her father, also a veteran (Marines), left the service before she was born, so her family was not a military family. After completing her undergraduate education, she struggled to find relevant employment, and with her student loan payments fast approaching, she enlisted in the Army. Unlike many women who struggle with gender-based discrimination and harassment, Tammy was able to mostly circumvent sexism, noting:

> I've heard a lot of stories of women having negative experiences in the military...I was in an intelligence field and there's a lot more women in intelligence fields, a lot of my direct supervisors and then even much higher supervisors were women. And I did not feel in any way discriminated against or put down because I was a woman…I always felt very confident. [If] I heard somebody saying something or treating me in a way that I felt was degrading, I would just call them out and there were never any repercussions.

Tammy's superiors in the Army were women, which fostered an environment of safety and inclusivity that other women in the military often do not enjoy, particularly as they circumnavigate sexism. Tammy also felt that within this protected space, should instances of sexism occur, she had the bandwidth and support necessary to challenge, rebut, or report them. Therefore, unlike many others in the military who do not have superiors who look like them to safeguard against bigotry, nor the ability to 'call out' their colleagues, Tammy felt safe and empowered to do so.

After serving for six years, these feelings of community, empowerment, and safety carried over into her experiences in higher education when Tammy enrolled in a graduate program in biochemistry, a STEM field with women's recent and significant advancement. She notes that her lab is all female except for one male and said, "I personally love just the

camaraderie that we have as females, just all working together. And I hate the stereotype that when you get a lot of girls working together, it's all catty, and that's just not true. I'm sure it's true sometimes, but it's not often true." She believes that all-female working groups can be sources of support and strength rather than competition or tension because of her personal experiences. Though the faculty member leading the lab is male, she notes:

> he doesn't treat us differently because we're women [and he] doesn't think he's special...so I don't feel like there's been that much of a transition or that much of a difference on my time in the military or my time here because I'm a woman. And I feel very grateful for that.

Additionally, one of Tammy's on-campus mentors is a woman whom she refers to as the "mom of the lab," making her time and space at the University even more female-centric. Tammy, therefore, unlike many women both in the military and in STEM, has been fortuitous enough to circumvent most of the problems inherent to these archetypally male spaces.

While Tammy claims no significant challenges due to sexism in either space, her awareness of women's sizable representation—and her sense of gratitude for such an environment— reflects a grim reality that both spaces could have been otherwise if few women were standing around her. The visibility of her female identity sharply contrasts with the complete absence of Jake's male identity and his blindness to male dominance in the same contexts. Jake's comfort as a man in the male-dominated space is natural, thus invisible to him. Despite Tammy's no explicit experience of sexism in the military, she admits she felt high stress figuring out "all these unwritten rules that you have to follow" and "keep my composure perfectly." Even a year after her discharge, she "still feel[s] that pressure" and just "realizing that

I don't have to put that pressure on myself." She did not-or possibly did not want to–name the source of the extreme pressure and anxiety.

Tammy holds a strong military identity. She states that the culture of the military is to "eat, sleep, play where everything is Army," indicating that in many ways, the Army had subverted her previous worldview and identity and replaced it with an all-military mindset. She was proud of her military service and wanted to meet with other student veterans even though she did not have many chances to do so. However, she understands her veteran identity is a point of difference—rather than a point of connection—from her program peers. She states: "I talk about the Army way too much. I'm like, 'Oh yeah, that reminds me of when I was in the Army,'" implying that she should avoid such behaviors in her program. Undoubtedly, military identity is the most salient identity to Tammy. It is her treasured identity, yet it separates her from her program peers; thus, she needs to submerge under her more connectable identity as a female graduate student.

Tammy's transition was plagued with exactly the same challenges as her male counterparts' experiences, such as loss of camaraderie, cultural shock, and time management issues. However, unlike White male veterans who forge friendships with other [White] male veterans on campus and program, Tammy builds her support network based on her female identity and self-monitors oversharing her veteran identity and military experiences with her non-military friends. Her military background and identity do not add any advantage to her social adaptation on campus or academic success in her graduate program. Still, Tammy's overall transition within her graduate experience was largely smooth and seamless as she embodies possibly the most powerful axis of privilege in higher education--Whiteness. She entered into spaces that provided ready-made [White] communities for her to join, protected

from explicit sexism, microaggressions, or marginalization, while BIPOC students like Justin were less accommodated.

4.3 Justin: Double Consciousness and the Black Male Student Veteran

Justin, a Black male veteran in his early 40s, who briefly attended community college before enlisting in the Army Reserves. While serving in the Reserves, Justin notes the military culture of unity and how it is contradictory to the experiences of racism he endured while enlisted. He speaks of the experiences of sexual harassment that many women soldiers experience, noting that "a lot of that other stuff is...veiled for the sake of camaraderie." Justin notes that during his time in the military "after our training, we all went out for drinks. And then on the ride back from the bar, I was in the backseat and the guy started talking. He was like, he was just saying, Justin's my N-word, ain't that right, N-word?" He also says that he has "been called the N-word plenty of times in the military." Though his White colleagues and friends exist in the world with freedom to insult, injure, violate, and to speak and act whenever, wherever, however, and to whomever, Justin understands that Blackness requires separate standards. He cannot act with impunity because that is a privilege ascribed only to Whiteness. Justin's White colleagues enact this privilege at whim, while Justin operates under constant restraint and surveillance.

After serving for 10 years in the Army Reserves, Justin worked in the civilian sector and did well, and was promoted often. However, he was not able to ascend to a leadership position since he did not have a degree, so in 2015 he enrolled in college. And like the veiled camaraderie of the military, Justin notes the "veiled racism" ever-present at the University, both during his undergraduate and graduate experiences. He notes that this form of racism is not hatred, but ignorance, which presents significant challenges for him as a Black student. He notes

that most White students' perceptions of Blackness are "based off something they see on television or something they heard in music, and you have to correct them and be like, '...that's not how it really is...we're not all gangsters and stuff, you know (Cross & Paretti, 2020)" Like DuBois' (1903) theory of double consciousness, Justin is forced to engage in double work at the University - one to his studies and one to educating his White classmates about Black identity. The latter is a burden to which his White peers remain thoroughly untasked and unencumbered.

Justin, out of loneliness, forged friendships with a group of White students early on in his undergraduate program. Though he did not experience the more explicit forms of racism as those during his tenure in the military, it remained a part of the uneven dynamic he shared with these university friends. He notes this experience:

> And I put myself around in a group of friends. I was the only Black guy out of like 18 White guys. And two of them were, I hate to say the word *woke*, but they saw how the others were treating me. Like they [the non-*woke* friends] would get away with little, little racist jokes and stuff and [the two *woke* friends] would come to me like, 'Man, are you good? Cause you know, they going in on you...and I don't think it's cool.'

Even in spaces where White men observed racism against their Black friend and knew that it was wrong, they chose not to interrupt other White men making racist jokes. Rather, they chose to voice their concern privately with Justin rather than making a public declaration of support or rebuttal. Therefore, these friendships, both with the two *woke* but silent White men, and with the larger group of White men who made racist jokes, were unsustainable.

During the end of his undergraduate career and the beginning of his graduate studies, Justin actively sought out friendships with specific demographics of people to avoid the micro-

and macroaggressions he had been subjected to within prior friend groups. While other White veterans prefer not to associate with younger students, he states:

> I started hanging around the young kids that I'm hanging around with now that are like 23, 24, but they were socially responsible. *I don't have to worry about them calling me the N-word.* And they're all diverse racially and ethnically...we're all different ethnicities and we all have the highest respect for each other.

Justin determined that his friendships with White men had been systemically harmful to him, both in the military and during his tenure in undergrad. He notes that "the entire world, especially engineering...is very segregated," and acknowledges that segregation can be negative, but also seems to consider it as protective for Black and other POC students. This "highest respect" that he and his diverse friend group share with one another is perhaps born out of a shared trauma with White supremacy, racism, and isolation (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Therefore, while both Jake and Tammy found community easily and readily, Justin had to actively seek out and forge non-toxic relationships, whilst working to maintain good standing in both his undergraduate and graduate programs.

5. Discussion

Race, Racism, and White Supremacy

Scholars have long discussed that military veterans' transition to civilian society is often challenging. Previous studies report the challenges faced by student veterans who leave behind their collective military identity and peer camaraderie then often face cultural alienation and social isolation on college campuses (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Hunt et al., 2022); however, these studies often find that student veterans are also often armed with resilience and diligence. Findings from this study suggest that race plays a pivotal role in student veterans' access to

support communities in higher education. Though veteran status can be isolating, White veterans often return from the military to ready-made civilian communities, particularly when they matriculate into higher education. Jake found comfort in the homogeneity of his engineering program, which was predominately White, male, and veteran while Tammy found community with other women in her program.

Justin, however, struggled to find friends (Cross & Paretti, 2020), and subsequently remained in friendships that were hostile, anti-Black, and unsafe. Though most military veterans undoubtedly find acclimating to college life difficult, there is a specific and layered form of loneliness and alienation that comes with being multiple types of 'different' on college campuses (Hunt et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2021). In addition to navigating this new collegiate context and keeping up with coursework, Justin must also navigate racism, while trying to establish friend groups that provide respite from this fundamental determinate despite a significant age difference (Hunt et al., 2022). Justin, while experiencing racism and witnessing microaggressions, feels compelled to dispel stereotypes of Black people that his White classmates seem intent on propagating. Therefore, Justin exists as both a voluntary student and a compulsory activist, engaging in both learning in the classroom and teaching the unteachable outside of the classroom (Linder et al., 2019). Justin's struggle, like many other BIPOC students, is a testament to the ways Black students can never exist just as students in the ways that White students are permitted and encouraged to luxuriate in. Stryker (2008) notes that having contrasting identities leads to interpersonal conflict, and DuBois' (1903) theory of double consciousness highlights the conflict of Black identity within the context of Whiteness. Justin's experiences reify these two concepts, particularly as he experiences continual acts of racism by his White colleagues, friends, and strangers. In Justin's interview, he grapples with this reality -

by maintaining friendships with White veterans who called him racial slurs, by distancing himself from them, by entering into similar friendships, and then by terminating those friendships. And though his newfound friendships do not alleviate his sense of double consciousness, there is some sense of comfort or safety within these types of relationships, which did not exist in his previous peer relationships (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021).

American higher education as a space of Whiteness and White hegemony covertly yet powerfully shaped two White participants' transition experiences. Jake's experience as a White male makes him the archetypal soldier, and subsequently, the archetypal veteran (Alexander, 2006), all of which positions him also as the archetypal student veteran deserving tailored support on campus. Tammy, as a White female veteran, finds it hard–and even irrelevant–to use her veteran identity (Alexander, 2006) to access a support network on campus. Still, she finds and joins a ready-made comprehensive support network in her program where gender oppression is subtle and well-controlled by the significant presence of women at all levels. It is important to note that the racial identity of these two White student veterans' transition experience and support network building in higher education is invisible. Their Whiteness being the norm, does not create conflict, binary, or need to reconcile with another identity such as veteran or female. (Cabrera et al., 2017). Though the military and its ideals of structure, cohesiveness, and community are often seen as at odds with academia's more individualistic undertones, both spaces are undoubtedly White spaces. Both normalize, protect, and serve Whiteness sharing a common history of oppression and exclusion of BIPOC communities (Cabrera et al., 2017). Different from BIPOC's experiences of perpetual marginalization in both spaces, White women, even while facing sexism, still have the cloak of Whiteness as protection, even if it covers them haphazardly. Tammy does not need to name Whiteness as protection, nor does Jake as it is

ubiquitous and natural (Cabrera et al., 2017). They simply feel “lucky” to be in the hands of others--their superiors, mentors, and peers-- who genuinely care for them and offer them a sense of continuity, the ‘sameness’ in Jake’s terminology, a key to their success. In contrast, Justin cannot identify such embedded protections or support because they do not exist. His successes are hard-won, treacherously fought for, and not readily available (Black & Thompson, 2012; Cross & Paretti, 2020; DuBois, 1903).

Gender and Recognizing Difference

Our 3-case analysis highlights the profound impact of race, yet sex/gender is also critical (Alexander, 2006). Tammy has been situated in female-led contexts, both during her military experiences and in a STEM graduate program, which protected her from many of the microaggressions women experience in their fields. Therefore, she did not mention any explicit conflict or need for reconciliation of her identities as veteran and woman. However, she does not actively seek out community with other student veterans like her colleague Jake. She continues to tap into a social support network primarily composed of women and uses this women's alliance to survive and thrive in both the military and higher education (Iverson et al., 2016). When Tammy evaluates herself talking “too much” about the Army, she recognizes that her veteran identity is a point of difference in her circles, whereas with Jake, it is a point of connection. Tammy’s continuing impulse and self-imposed stress to maintain “perfect composure” may be a lingering impact of her deep–and unrecognized–struggles of “walking a gender tightrope” (Iverson et al., 2016, p. 152) in the military’s hypermasculine cultural environment. Thus, while Whiteness provides an advantage to both Tammy and Jake, Tammy's privilege, particularly as a veteran, is compromised and more fragile than Jake's (Alexander, 2006).

Unfortunately, recognition of privileges and marginality does not reciprocate across the three student veterans. Jake did not discuss race or gender. Though Tammy did discuss gender and negative perceptions of women, she made no mention of race; However, Justin discussed racism and sexism, and specifically the issues of sexual assault and harassment in the military, which women disproportionately face. Therefore, though Justin exists in the privileged space of maleness, he can both recognize and name issues related to sexism that women bear the brunt of; Jake and Tammy did not reciprocate. While military camaraderie was protective and supportive for both Jake and Tammy, leaving them cocooned from both racism and explicit sexism, it remains a double-edged sword for Justin; the same soldier who might push him out of harm's way could call him the N-word that night at a bar. His college peers will not stand up for him when his Blackness is under attack. Race–and Justin's racial marginality–is simply invisible to those living with hegemonic Whiteness as the norm of the military and higher education.

Recommendations and Limitations

Our study, despite its confirmation of structural barriers imposed upon student veterans of color, also offers a few important silver linings. Despite all the difficulties that Justin faced, including many struggles common to student veterans and BIPOC students, his experiences illustrate several safeguards in place on campus that supported his successful transition from military to higher education. This work shows that strong mentoring relationships combined with supportive and safe friendships are instrumental to success in the academy (Mondisa, 2020). Jake, Tammy, and Justin all indicated that the mentoring relationships provided to them in the program were not only helpful academically but professionally, as well. The friendships they formed were safety nets and spaces of comfort and camaraderie necessary for their sense of belonging on campus to develop (Leaper & Starr, 2019; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021).

By focusing on the meaningful variations across three student veterans of diverse backgrounds in the contexts of STEM graduate programs, our study provides several important implications related to student veteran support on college campuses and for STEM education in particular. While uprooting explicit/subtle racism and microaggressions Justin faced is not an easy task, universities and STEM programs can–and need to–take a decisive step to create a more inclusive and anti-racist cultural environment through various strategic interventions, such as providing faculty with anti-racism and cultural competency training, and anti-racist curriculum revisions in core STEM courses. The campus in this study that won the recognition of a "veteran-friendly campus" did not protect Justin, a Black student veteran from harm in this space.

The pervasive and normalized Whiteness on campus and in their STEM graduate programs was the hidden ideological context silently--yet effectively--supporting Jake and Tammy's nested transition and uplifted experiences as student veterans. Therefore, raising faculty and staff's self-critical awareness about Whiteness/White privilege and equipping them with the competencies and skills to intervene in various forms of injustice imposed upon many BIPOC students in STEM and other professional fields is critical. The commitment of the university and STEM programs should be sincere, systemic, and explicit, much beyond plastering pictures of students of color on recruitment pamphlets. It must be proclaiming a commitment to equity at every step, in every office, event, and classroom. Adequate representation of diverse staff and faculty to challenge and disrupt the culture of Whiteness is a must (Cabrera, 2017). STEM program curriculum–both undergrad and graduate–need to highlight professional competencies and ethics aligned with social justice and anti-racism, which will help all students learn how to be

“respectful” to others, especially to those from historically marginalized racial/ethnic communities.

Like all research studies, this study has several limitations as a qualitative case study based on a small number of participants and situated in a specific institutional context. We acknowledge that the geographical location of the university (U.S. Southeast) and institutional characteristics (e.g., urban public research university, engineering program with predominantly White male students) inevitably shaped each student veteran’s experience and perceptions. Therefore, findings from this study need to be understood with careful consideration of those contextual factors. Our analysis is also limited to only three students - one Black male, one White female, and one White male. Though these three students were intentionally chosen based on our team’s analytic goal for this paper, the inclusion of a larger, more diverse group of student veterans would be beneficial and possibly provide more nuanced insights. We particularly acknowledge that though there is one White woman in our study, there are no women of color, no non-Black racially underrepresented student veterans, and no student veterans who identify as queer or genderqueer.

Higher education needs to serve as a contentious space in society that has normalized systemic racism throughout history and turned a blind eye to it. Though there is space for opportunity within the academy to address systemic racism, there is also a necessity for a space of reckoning where the academy can be called out for its creation and perpetuation of Whiteness which continues to plague BIPOC student veterans and keep them on the fringes of academia’s borders. Within this space of both reckoning and opportunity, a more equitable, just, and inclusive institution can emerge where not only the Jakes and Tammys, but the Justins can find solace and safety. Mentorship is a good first step that has proven to be beneficial to all student

veterans, but there needs to be other, more systematic efforts by the program, department, and entire university to ensure inclusive and equitable support for student veterans of color dealing with complex and intensified challenges in the White space of higher education.

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