

**Exploring the Underrepresentation of Women of Color in
Top Senior Enlisted Roles in the U.S. Navy: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. This qualitative study examined how race, gender, and organizational structures simultaneously affected advancement opportunities within military hierarchical systems through an intersectionality theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 retired E8 and E9 women of color (WoC) from the U.S. Navy, with data collection focused on participants' experiences navigating advancement processes, organizational culture, and leadership challenges analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings within participant narratives. Findings indicated participants encountered distinctive barriers from intersectional biases, including limited mentorship opportunities, exclusion from informal networks, and inconsistent evaluation criteria. Navy policies often failed to address unique challenges faced by WoC, creating disparate impacts on advancement trajectories. Participants reported cultural code-switching demands, questioning of their authority, and isolation within traditional masculine organizational environments. This research contributed evidence-based insights into structural inequities affecting WoC in senior enlisted roles and offered recommendations for policy reforms, targeted mentorship programs, and organizational culture interventions to dismantle systemic barriers. Based on this analysis and recommendation, future researchers should explore comparisons with other military

branches, investigate longitudinal career progression patterns, and evaluate diversity initiative effectiveness in creating sustainable leadership pathways for WoC.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women of color (WoC) in leadership reflected deeply ingrained biases, systemic discrimination, and cultural norms that limited their advancement opportunities (Ospina & Douds, 2022). Decision-makers often overlooked the strong qualifications of WoC for promotions and undermined their authority through microaggressions and excluded them from informal networks essential for career growth (Hernandez & Megivern, 2021). Settles et al. (2021b) highlighted how WoC in academia faced a "double bind," where others perceived them as less competent when they behaved assertively but penalized them when they conformed to traditional gender roles. These perceptions created a challenging environment that obstructed their path to reaching their full potential.

Beyond academia, another area where underrepresentation was evident was the United States (U.S.) military. Military power structures and cultural norms perpetuated inequalities, making these disparities especially evident (Hernandez & Megivern, 2021). Despite military leaders implementing significant efforts in recent decades to promote diversity and inclusion, the U.S. Navy continued to struggle with the underrepresentation of women, particularly WoC, in its highest leadership ranks (Brown et al., 2023a). Within the Navy, this lack of representation posed challenges in achieving diversity and inclusion at its highest leadership levels. While women had made progress in joining the Navy and serving in various roles, they remained underrepresented in senior leadership positions (Cooper & Moore, 2023b). This disparity was particularly true for WoC, who were even less likely to hold top leadership roles. However, the lack of representation deprives the Navy of valuable contributions and weakened its ability to meet the diverse needs of its personnel in a complex, interconnected world.

Coleman et al., (2019) posited that military units led by diverse leadership teams demonstrated greater creativity and problem-solving abilities, ensuring representation at all levels of leadership was crucial for including diverse perspectives in decision-making processes. An intersectional lens could account for the unique challenges WoC faced (Crenshaw, 1989). The intersectional perspective highlighted the compounded effects of racial and gender bias, creating unique barriers for WoC in the Navy. As an example, a Latina sailor may have encountered stereotypes that limited her advancement opportunities (Flores & Chesney-Lind, 2021).

Exploring the psychological and emotional toll of discrimination, its impact on career paths and retention, and the loss of valuable talent and perspectives from WoC was essential. Understanding how WoC perceived and navigated these experiences could drive efforts to address their underrepresentation in leadership across sectors. Gaining these insights could inspire inclusive organizational practices, leadership development initiatives, and strategies to eliminate barriers, fostering a more equitable society where everyone, regardless of race or gender, could reach their full potential.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). Despite ongoing initiatives, systemic barriers continued to impede their advancement, affecting operational readiness, organizational climate, and talent acquisition (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). While existing research highlighted this issue, critical gaps remained,

particularly in understanding the lived experiences of WoC and how the intersection of race and gender shaped their careers (Bridges et al., 2023a; Brown et al., 2023b; Crenshaw, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2021a).

The Navy perpetuated inequity by not addressing these barriers and deprived itself of valuable perspectives and leadership capabilities, which may have hindered innovation, unit cohesion, and morale (Davis & Garcia, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Without further understanding these challenges, the Navy may have discouraged aspiring WoC from pursuing senior roles, increasing the disparity (Garcia & Martinez, 2022; Smith, 2023a). Conducting targeted research could inform the development of effective interventions, fostering an inclusive organizational culture and empowering WoC to reach their full potential within the U.S. Navy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, WoC remained significantly underrepresented in leadership positions within the U.S. Navy (Smith, 2023b). This underrepresentation suggested the presence of systemic barriers hindering their advancement, with potential implications for operational readiness, organizational climate, and talent acquisition. Research revealed that WoC in the U.S. Navy faced a range of barriers, including stereotypes, bias, lack of mentorship opportunities, and a culture that often devalued their contributions (Atwater & Jones, 2021; Belkin et al., 2021a; Washington et al., 2022). The barriers may have had significant negative impacts on WoC, including feelings of isolation, stress, decreased job satisfaction, and limited career progression. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of WoC in leadership roles and the negative impacts of

systemic barriers could hinder operational effectiveness by limiting diverse perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes (Smith, 2023b).

The population of interest was retired WoC who served in senior enlisted roles (E8 and E9) in the U.S. Navy. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit 15 participants. The recruitment phase involved contacting veteran organizations and utilizing social media platforms. Data was collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom to explore the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of career progression, leadership opportunities, and diversity and inclusion within the Navy. An interview protocol guided the interviews to cover topics such as career aspirations, mentorship, perceived barriers, and the impact of race and gender.

Data collection was focused on race, gender, rank, career experiences, perceived barriers, leadership opportunities, and diversity and inclusion through semi-structured interviews, audio recordings, and transcription. NVivo qualitative software aided the thematic analysis and interpretation of the data and identified themes based on data collected through interviews with participants. Barriers and opportunities encountered by WoC in the Navy were delineated, and evidence-based recommendations for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion were developed.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

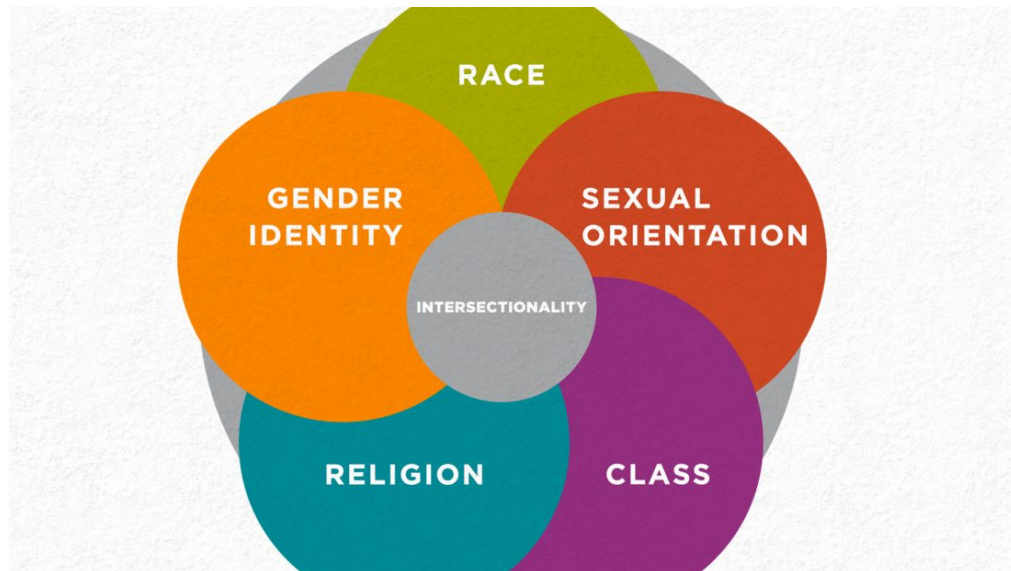
The intersectionality framework guided this study to explore the ongoing issue of the underrepresentation of WoC holding top leadership roles in the U.S. Navy. The lack of representation was inconsistent with the Navy's goals of having a diverse and inclusive workforce (Davis & Garcia, 2021). It also adversely impacted the Navy's operational effectiveness, workplace environment, and ability to attract and keep talented people. The research deepened the understanding of how the intersection of race and gender shaped the

experiences of WoC and identified opportunities to support their career advancement within the Navy (Collins, 2022).

Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality offered a critical lens for analyzing social inequality. As illustrated in Figure 1, Crenshaw (1989) asserted that social categorizations, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, were interconnected and mutually constitutive, shaping individuals' lived experiences in complex ways. This framework highlighted traditional approaches that examined social categories in isolation, arguing instead for understanding how these categories intersected and interacted to produce unique forms of disadvantage and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989; Grzanka, 2023).

Figure 1

Intersectionality



Note: This figure illustrates the concept of intersectionality through overlapping social identity categories including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and class. Reprinted with permission from "Understanding Intersectionality in Social Justice Frameworks," 2023. Credit: UNM Newsroom.

WoC in leadership positions frequently encountered a double bind due to the intersection of their gender and race. A double bind described a situation where an individual faced two conflicting sets of expectations or demands, often resulting in negative consequences regardless of their response (Bateson et al., 1956; De La Sablonnière et al., 2020). The intersection of WoC's gender and race led to conflicting expectations and stereotypes, which could result in WoC being perceived as too aggressive or passive, depending on how their leadership style aligned with traditional gender roles (Banks et al., 2022). Furthermore, WoC encountered racial stereotypes that created additional barriers (Cole & Zuckerman, 2009). This interplay of gender and race created a unique set of challenges, limiting opportunities for advancement.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

A qualitative methodology was employed in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Schwandt (2001) grounded this methodology in social constructivism and interpretivism. Qualitative research was used to emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality and prioritized meaning-making processes within specific contexts. It favored detailed description and interpretation over quantification (Geertz, 1973). A qualitative research approach was used to explore the "why" and "how" of human experiences, delving into individuals' lives to construct a holistic picture of their realities (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Clarke et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative approaches that focused on measurable outcomes, qualitative research allowed researchers to explore subjective experiences and social processes, providing insights into human behavior (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Patton, 2015).

The qualitative research methodology was valuable for exploring underrepresented issues characterized by power imbalances and historical inequities (Harding, 2004; Smith, 2012).

Drawing on feminist and critical perspectives, qualitative research illuminated how power shaped individual experiences and social structures (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Lather, 1991). The U.S. Navy, with its hierarchical structure and history of male dominance, provided a compelling case for employing a qualitative lens to explore women's career experiences. The interplay between individual experiences and the dominant organizational culture was identified as critical (Fathi et al., 2023; Ng & Sears, 2022). This research approach captured the nuances of these interactions and illuminated how power dynamics shaped individual narratives and organizational practices (Acker, 1990; Martin, 2003).

A phenomenological design was selected to explore the lived experience and perceptions of WoC in the U.S. Navy. As Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990) emphasized, this approach provided a pathway to understand the meaning individuals ascribed to their experiences. This approach involved bracketing, where the researcher set aside their biases to understand the participants' perspectives (Finlay, 2011; Giorgi, 2009). This process was crucial for capturing the true essence of the phenomenon studied.

The data collection process involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with WoC in the U.S. Navy. Data was collected through veteran organizations and social media platforms. A detailed interview protocol guided the process to ensure consistency and thorough exploration. Conducting interviews remotely using Zoom facilitated participation and accommodated geographical diversity. NVivo qualitative software was used to organize, code, and identify themes in the data collected from the interview transcripts, enabling thorough analysis and deeper insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2021).

A qualitative phenomenological approach was the best choice to address the research problem because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of WoC in the

U.S. Navy. This approach allowed for the focus on WoC's voices, prioritizing their perspectives and narratives, and capturing the nuances of their experiences with systemic barriers and their impact. The qualitative method allowed for a deep dive into the subtle yet significant challenges WoC faced, such as microaggressions and implicit biases, which may not have been captured by quantitative methods. Through in-depth interviews and analysis, the study showcased how WoC navigated challenges and created opportunities within a historically male-dominated institution, highlighting their resilience and resourcefulness. The rich data collected through this approach informed the development of more inclusive policies and practices within the U.S. Navy and similar organizations. By focusing on women's voices and lived experiences, this study provided a deeper understanding of their challenges, highlighting the strategies they used to navigate these challenges and the opportunities they created. This emphasis on their resilience and resourcefulness was crucial in showcasing how they carved out spaces for themselves. These insights guided the development of more inclusive policies and practices, fostering a culture that valued and supported diversity (Hollis, 2022; Johnson & Smith, 2022).

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1

How do systemic barriers and biases impact the career advancement of WoC in the U.S. Navy, particularly those in senior enlisted roles?

RQ2

How do intersecting factors of race and gender, organizational culture and policies, contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in top senior enlisted roles within the U.S. Navy?

Significance of the Study

This study could significantly impact the U.S. Navy and the broader field of diversity and inclusion. The findings illuminated critical barriers and opportunities specific to this population, enabling the development of more effective recruitment, retention, and advancement strategies. Findings from this study were crucial for developing targeted interventions that moved beyond generic diversity initiatives and addressed the specific obstacles this population faced (Nielsen et al., 2021; Smith & Stewart, 2021). The findings demonstrated that fostering a more inclusive environment maximized the potential of all individuals.

By linking underrepresentation to operational readiness, organizational climate, and talent acquisition, this research highlighted the tangible costs of inequity and provided compelling evidence to advocate for change within and beyond the Navy. Addressing this underrepresentation may benefit the Navy by enhancing operational readiness through diverse leadership, improving organizational climate by fostering inclusion, and strengthening talent acquisition by attracting and retaining a diverse workforce (May, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021). The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the barriers faced and the factors contributing to the success of WoC in the Navy. This knowledge informed the development of effective interventions, such as mentorship programs and policy changes, empowering them to reach their full potential and ensuring the Navy benefited from the diverse perspectives and leadership capabilities of all its members (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Nielsen et al., 2021; Shore et al., 2018).

This research contributed to the body of research based on experiences of women and minorities in the military, including work on intersectionality and military service, study of Black women's leadership experiences in the U.S. Army, and examination of microaggressions

experienced by WoC (Cooper & Moore, 2023b; Griffith, 2022; Nadal & Hayes, 2021). These existing body of research highlighted the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by WoC in the military and the need to analyze and address systemic barriers to their advancement. This study contributed to this body of knowledge by specifically focusing on the enlisted ranks in the U.S. Navy and the implications for operational effectiveness.

Definitions of Key Terms

Chief of the Boat (COB)

The senior enlisted advisor on a submarine, who acts as the commanding officer's right hand in overseeing enlisted operations, maintaining discipline, upholding standards, and ensuring crew readiness while serving as the vital communication conduit between officers and the enlisted submarine force (Becker, 2021).

Code-Switching

The strategy of shifting between different cultural, social, or linguistic expressions of self-based on context, which allows individuals to navigate multiple identities and adapt to different social environments (Jones & Kang, 2022).

Command Master Chief (CMC)

The senior enlisted advisor to the commanding officer, who represents the interests and concerns of enlisted personnel while providing leadership, guidance, and expertise on matters that affect readiness, morale, discipline, and professional development within the command (O'Rourke, 2021).

Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS)

A federal advisory committee established in 1951 that provide advice and recommendations to the Secretary of Defense on matters and policies relating to the recruitment,

retention, treatment, employment, integration, and well-being of professional women in the Armed Forces, with particular attention to issues that affect deployment, family policies, and quality of life concerns for servicewomen (Rutherford & Miller, 2022).

Department Leading Chief Petty Officer

The senior enlisted leader within a specific department aboard a naval vessel or shore command, who is responsible for managing personnel, maintaining operational readiness, implementing policies, coordinating training, and serving as the crucial link between division leadership and department officers (Hagan & McMaster, 2023).

Double-Bind

A situation where an individual face two conflicting sets of expectations or demands, often resulting in negative consequences regardless of their response (De La Sablonnière et al., 2020).

Mentorship Programs

Connects experienced members with those who are less experienced to help them grow and succeed in their careers (Yoon et al., 2022).

Operational Readiness

Having trained personnel, working equipment, and the necessary supplies to carry out missions and operations successfully whenever required (Horowitz & Bader, 2022).

Organizational Climate

How employees feel about their work environment, including leadership, communication, teamwork, and support (Schulte et al., 2021).

Reflexive Journaling

A systematic documentation process where researchers record their thoughts, reactions, assumptions, and decision-making throughout the research process to acknowledge positionality, enhance transparency, and mitigate potential biases during data collection and analysis (Thurairajah, 2019).

Senior Enlisted

The top-tier, most experienced enlisted leaders in the armed forces (Slapakova et al., 2022).

Talent Acquisition

A strategic process that finds, attract, and hire the best people with the right skills and experience to help an organization succeed (Cappelli, 2020).

Women of Color

A term used to describe women who are not white or of European descent (Crenshaw, 2023).

Summary

The U.S. Navy, despite its commitment to diversity and inclusion initiatives, continued to exhibit a significant disparity within its ranks. Women of Color (WoC) remained severely underrepresented in senior enlisted leadership roles, indicating a persistent challenge in achieving equitable representation at the highest echelons of the organization (Brown et al., 2023b). This lack of representation suggested the presence of systemic barriers that may have hindered the career advancement of qualified WoC. The findings of this study provided insights on this critical issue by exploring the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC navigating the complexities of naval leadership.

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in senior enlisted leadership roles within the U.S. Navy, despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion (Armstrong, 2024; Brown et al., 2023a). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC as they navigated their careers within the Navy, seeking to understand the systemic barriers that hindered their advancement into leadership positions. The main research questions sought to uncover how systemic barriers and biases, including both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, impacted the career trajectories of WoC. Furthermore, guided by the intersectionality framework, the study aimed to explore how intersecting factors of race and gender, along with organizational culture and policies, may have contributed to this persistent underrepresentation. The study used a phenomenological qualitative design to analyze in-depth interviews with WoC serving in the Navy. This approach allowed for a rich exploration of their individual narratives and perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they encountered in their pursuit of leadership roles. Centering on the voices and experiences of WoC provided valuable insight into the complexities of navigating a predominantly white, male-dominated institution and identified potential areas for intervention. To contextualize these barriers and understand the broader landscape of diversity in military leadership, Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review. This review examines existing literature on intersectionality, organizational culture, gender and racial dynamics in military institutions, and the systemic factors that influence career advancement for underrepresented groups in hierarchical organizations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. This underrepresentation persisted despite ongoing diversity initiatives and revealed significant gaps in understanding the barriers WoC faced.

The U.S. Navy had yet to achieve representative numbers of women of color (WoC) in senior enlisted ranks despite ongoing diversity initiatives (Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), 2022; Miller, 2023b). While women made up approximately 20% of the enlisted force, WoC held only a fraction of senior enlisted positions (Department of Defense (DoD), 2022b). This disparity underscored the persistent challenges WoC faced in reaching the highest levels of leadership. Brooks et al. (2021d) and Cook and Lafferty (1987) identified systemic barriers hindering WoC advancement; however, these studies frequently failed to sufficiently address the critical intersection of gender and race in shaping leadership opportunities. Examining race and gender in isolation did not adequately capture the unique challenges created by their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Analyzing this overlapping system of oppression was essential for understanding the full scope of barriers WoC encountered and for informing targeted interventions that could foster a more equitable Navy.

The literature review chapter included the intersectionality theory, women in leadership, women and racial minority representation in the Navy's senior enlisted ranks, intersectionality's impact on WoC in military leadership, and the Navy's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. Multiple academic and professional databases, including Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC), EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), ProQuest, and SAGE Journal, provided the sources for the literature review on the underrepresentation of women in the U.S. Navy. The search terms included combinations of keywords such as *gender diversity*, *intersectionality*, *military leadership*, *racial diversity*, *senior enlisted ranks*, *underrepresentation*, *U.S. Navy*, *women of color*, and *women in leadership*. Boolean operators were used to refine the search. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles, books, government reports, dissertations, and grey literature such as technical reports and policy briefs published between 2020 and 2025, with inclusion of key seminal works from earlier periods that established foundational concepts in the field.

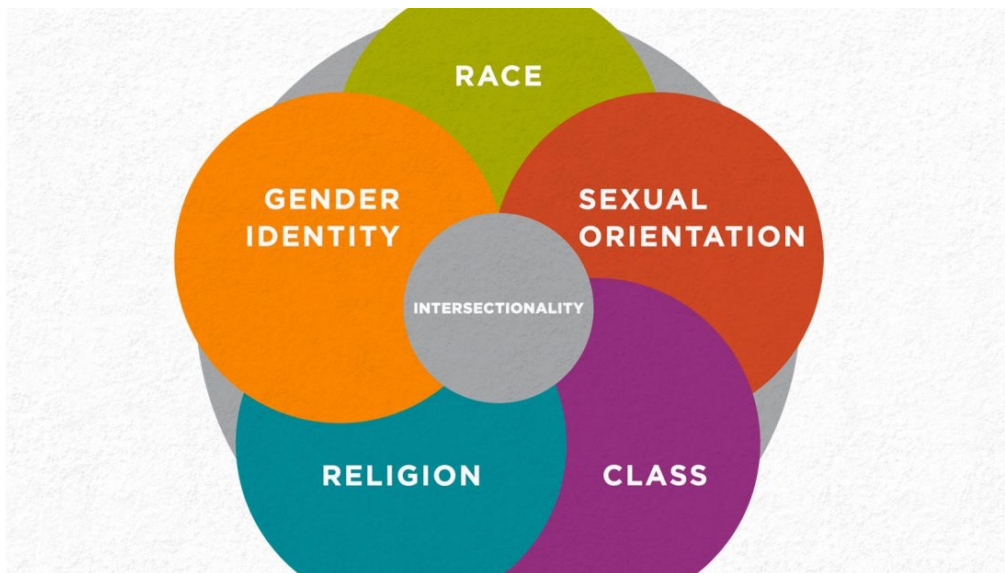
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) used to explore how overlapping social identities shaped experiences of WoC in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted ranks. Crenshaw (1989) pioneered intersectionality, focusing on Black women's experiences in the legal system. While Crenshaw was credited with intersectionality, Black feminist scholars like Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett had already articulated how race and gender intersected to shape Black women's experiences (Collins, 2022). Crenshaw and other scholars further developed intersectionality to analyze the complex interplay of multiple social identities and power structures (Collins, 2022).

Figure 2 illustrates how intersectionality is used to analyze the interconnection of social categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality, creating overlapping systems of discrimination (Collins, 2022). This concept moved beyond single-axis identity analyses to show how these intersecting identities shaped unique experiences of power and oppression. Understanding intersectionality is crucial for analyzing complex social phenomena, especially within hierarchical institutions like the military.

Figure 2

Intersectionality



Note: This figure illustrates the concept of intersectionality through overlapping social identity categories including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and class. Reprinted with permission from "Understanding Intersectionality in Social Justice Frameworks," 2023. Credit: UNM Newsroom.

Intersectionality served as a framework to guide the interaction of social identities and power structures, helping to explain the underrepresentation of WoC in senior enlisted ranks within the U.S. Navy (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersecting identities such as race and gender

influenced experiences and access to power, creating distinct situations that a singular focus on each identity missed (Collins, 2022). This intersectional perspective suggested the combined impact of race and gender presented specific challenges for WoC seeking advancement in the Navy's enlisted ranks. Addressing this underrepresentation required a comprehensive analysis of these complex interactions and the systems they influenced.

An intersectional framework was essential for analyzing Black women's military experiences, as examining them solely through the lenses of gender or race failed to capture their complexity. The intersection of race and gender created unique, irreducible challenges and opportunities that shaped their experiences within the military's power structures. This framework offered critical insights into how overlapping identities influenced their experiences, revealing distinct forms of discrimination, stereotyping, and marginalization that distinguished their realities from those of white women or Black men.

Crenshaw (1989) articulated how intersectionality emphasized interconnected social categorizations, creating unique experiences of power and oppression. Collins (2020) aligned with Crenshaw and demonstrated how intersecting identities shaped access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility within institutions like the military. An exploration of WoC veterans' challenges in accessing healthcare and navigating Veteran's Affairs (VA) further demonstrated the importance of intersectionality in military research (Harmsen et al., 2021). To fully comprehend the multifaceted nature of WoC's experiences in the military, an intersectional framework became essential, going beyond isolated identity categories and instead examining how race, gender, and other social dimensions interacted and overlapped with one another.

Crenshaw, Collins, Davis, and Hooks developed intersectionality from critical race theory, feminist theory, and post-structuralism to address the limitations of single-axis analyses

in social justice (Cho et al., 2020). Intersectionality is used to emphasize the necessity of recognizing the complexity of intersecting identities to achieve a nuanced understanding of social inequality (May, 2021). Acknowledging that individuals occupy positions within power systems where multiple identities intersected reinforced the importance of intersectionality in analyzing social inequality (Cho et al., 2020).

Intersectionality offered the most effective lens for analyzing the complexities of military life, a perspective absent in social identity and standpoint theories (Harding, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The focus provided through intersectionality on intersecting social categories allowed for a complex understanding of power dynamics within institutions. The analytical value of intersectionality had been demonstrated in studies of WoC, LGBTQ+ service members, and individuals with disabilities within military settings (Belkin et al., 2021b; Lundquist, 2019; Wilkerson, 2020). By acknowledging the interconnectedness of social identities, intersectionality helped to reveal the unique challenges and opportunities faced by those at the margins. It served as a crucial framework for understanding and addressing inequality within the military context.

Intersectionality offered an essential analytical tool to grasp how interwoven social identities influenced personal experiences amidst the military's intricate power structures. Race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability intersected within military structures and culture, creating complex challenges and opportunities from these overlapping identities. This intersectional lens revealed how intersecting identities affected access to resources, leadership, and well-being, contributing to systemic barriers that impeded advancement and negatively impacted readiness, climate, and talent acquisition (Collins, 2022; May, 2021). In senior enlisted roles of the Navy, the underrepresentation of WoC resulted from the convergence of race, gender, organizational culture, and policies, exposing their unique experiences of disadvantage.

Examining identity and power dynamics within institutions such as the military was paramount. The military provided a compelling example of how intersecting social identities shaped experiences, opportunities, and leadership styles (Cho et al., 2020; Grzanka, 2023; May, 2021). Rank, role, and the unique demands of military service further complicated this interplay within its structured environment. These intersecting identities influenced individual military experiences, from access to opportunities and discrimination to leadership styles.

Core Concepts and Principles of Intersectionality Theory

Social categories including race, gender, class, and sexuality interconnected, created unique experiences of oppression and privilege. These categories were not isolated but interacted and shaped each other, resulting in complex and nuanced identities. Individuals held multiple, equally important social identities that intersected to create unique experiences, that shaped their social position and lived reality (Crenshaw, 1989). Individuals simultaneously experienced privilege and oppression as they occupied social categories that conferred both advantages and disadvantages (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Interlocking systems of oppression created unique disadvantages and privileges based on intersecting identities, potentially contributing to the underrepresentation of WoC in senior enlisted ranks in the Navy (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989).

The impact of intersecting identities varied depending on the context and power dynamics (Crenshaw, 1989). Black women experienced more race and gender-based microaggressions in predominantly white, male-led divisions compared to diverse divisions (Sue et al., 2007). This contrast highlighted how environmental context shaped the experience. Intersectionality prioritized centering the voices and perspectives of those most marginalized by intersecting oppressions, aiming to amplify their experiences and address their needs (Brooks et

al., 2021c). Listening to the experiences of senior enlisted WoC revealed hidden barriers to advancement, like the lack of mentorship opportunities specific to their intersecting identities (Ely & Thomas, 2001). This approach incorporated a social justice perspective that challenged power structures perpetuating inequality and promoted a more equitable society.

Power structures, social norms, and institutional practices interacted with identity categories to shape lives, moving beyond simple labeling (Crenshaw, 1989). This framework revealed distinct experiences from the intersection itself, not merely additive discrimination. Diverse experiences emerged in institutions like the military, where LGBTQ+ and disabled service members faced intersecting discrimination, and WoC encountered unique barriers to senior enlisted ranks (Belkin et al., 2021a; Cooper & Moore, 2023a; Wilkerson, 2020). For example, a Latina woman faced stereotypes regarding family obligations that conflicted with senior enlisted roles, unlike white men or even Black women (Cooper & Moore, 2023a). Recognizing these intersections was vital for fostering military inclusion and equity, as these oppressions significantly impacted opportunities and contributed to WoC underrepresentation in leadership (Cho et al., 2020; Grzanka, 2023). As an evolving theory, intersectionality remained crucial for analyzing and addressing social inequalities.

Compounding Effects of Gender and Race in Military Contexts

Military leadership required understanding how social identities influenced experiences and perspectives (Coleman et al., 2019). Male leaders did not fully grasp women's challenges, like gender-based discrimination, hindering effective leadership. Internalized oppression was more limiting than external forces, making self-awareness crucial for inclusive leadership (Nielson et al., 2021). Diverse teams improved innovation and resilience, which was vital for

ethical and operational effectiveness (Dobbins & Kalev, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2021; O'Connor & Chaffin, 2021).

WoC in the military experienced racialized sexism and gendered racism, encountering authority-undermining stereotypes (Jones & Williams, 2021; Miller, 2023a). They were perceived as less competent than white men and experienced sexual harassment while also bearing the burden of representing their entire race and gender (Eagly & Chin, 2022; Miller, 2023a; Purver et al., 2021). These compounded challenges created significant barriers to their advancement and well-being. Understanding these intersecting oppressions was crucial for fostering a genuinely equitable military environment (Coleman et al., 2019; Lytell et al., 2023).

WoC in the military navigated a historically white male-dominated culture and faced unique challenges as a result of this environment (Davis & Garcia, 2021). Black women reported they experienced more discrimination than white women, which impacted their overall well-being (Davis & Garcia, 2021). Latina servicewomen encountered challenges linked to both their gender and ethnicity, which included harmful stereotypes and discrimination (Banks et al., 2022; Eagly & Chin, 2022; Garcia & Martinez, 2022). Asian American servicewomen often faced a combination of stereotypes like being hypersexualized or docile portrayals while also experiencing the model minority stereotype (Cooper & Moore, 2023a). These discriminatory practices created pressure and a sense of invisibility, causing others to overlook their struggles (Cho et al., 2020; Garcia & Martinez, 2022; Johnson & Williams, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2021b). Native American servicewomen also faced prejudice rooted in historical injustices (Garcia & Martinez, 2022). These diverse experiences underscored the critical need for intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing discrimination within the military, promoting equity for all servicewomen.

Intersectionality revealed the unique needs of marginalized groups by analyzing how overlapping identities shaped experiences, opportunities, and challenges. Gaining a better understanding of intersections allowed for the development of targeted policies that created a more inclusive environment. Culturally competent healthcare and tailored mentorship programs were examples that promoted diverse leadership and addressed the specific challenges faced by individuals with intersecting marginalized identities (Kim & Lee, 2021b).

Military Demographics and Advancement Disparities

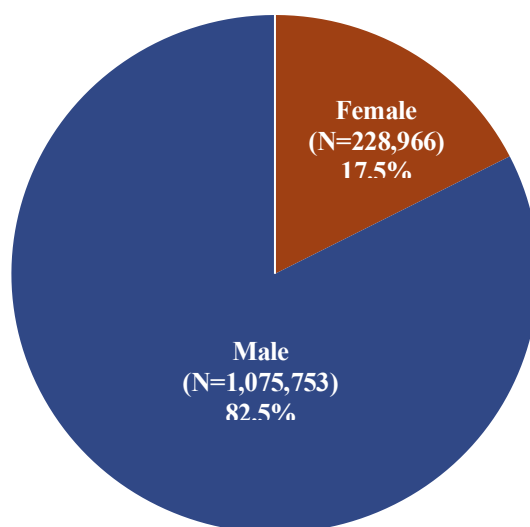
The military's demographics reflected a complex and evolving landscape where gender and race intersected. Historically, white males dominated the armed forces, but contemporary militaries worldwide strove to mirror the populations they protected (Miller, 2023a; Smith, 2023a). Within the U.S. military, branches revealed varying levels of gender and racial representation (Smith & Jones, 2021a). The Army, the largest branch, increased female presence, but senior leadership roles remained disproportionately male (Harris & Ford, 2023b). The Navy progressed in sea-going female integration, yet the officer corps struggled with racial diversification (Romanow & Sargeant, 2023). The Air Force integrated women into technical roles like piloting and engineering, but racial minorities still faced barriers in advanced technical positions (Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022). The Marine Corps, traditionally male-dominated, actively pursued female participation, navigating unique challenges within its combat-focused culture (Montgomery et al., 2024). These branch-specific variations highlighted the ongoing need for targeted diversity and inclusion initiatives (Cruz et al., 2023).

Figure 3 showed that in 2022, women were 17% of active-duty forces but only 10% of combat roles, highlighting a clear underrepresentation in these critical areas (DoD, 2022b). While Black Americans comprised roughly 19% of active-duty enlisted members, as depicted in

Figure 4, they represented only about 9% of active-duty officers (DoD, 2022a). These figures underscored a significant gap in progression to higher ranks, a challenge further illuminated by analyses of organizational culture and historical perspectives. The Task Force One Navy (TF1N) Report (2021) acknowledged ongoing progress toward equitable representation but emphasized that challenges persisted, specifically in leadership positions and career advancement. Subtle biases and a lack of inclusive leadership training significantly hindered the advancement of both women and racial minorities (Belkin & McNulty, 2018). This notion echoed classic sociological theories, such as tokenism and the 'glass ceiling' effect, which demonstrated how minority groups faced barriers to advancement even when formal policies promoted equality (Kanter, 1977).

Figure 3

Gender of Active-Duty Members (N=1,304,720)

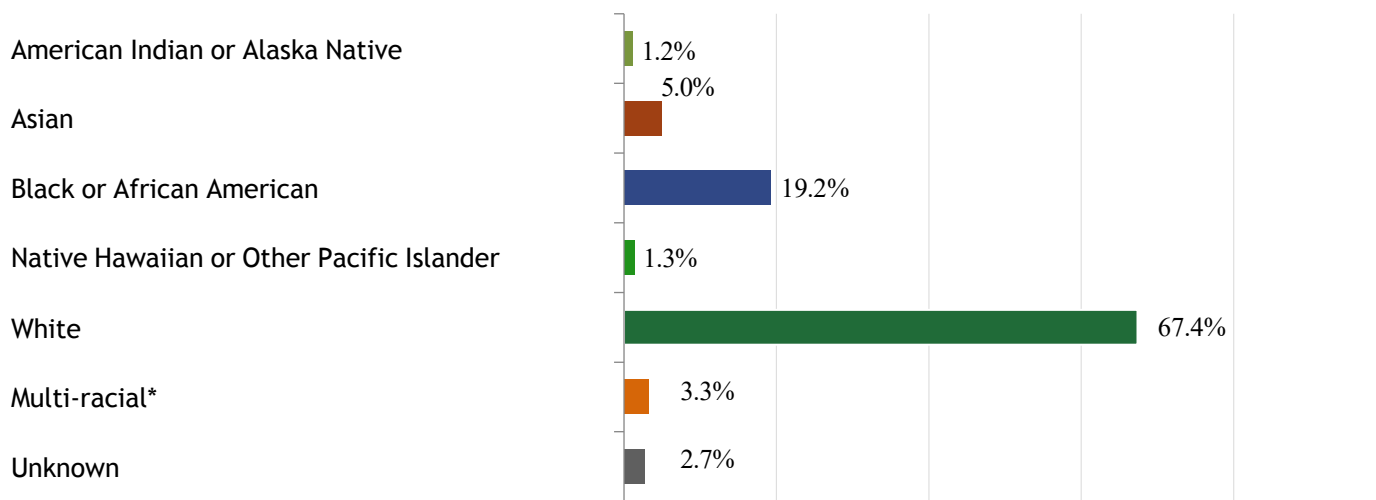


Note: Displayed percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

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Figure 4

Race of Active-Duty Enlisted Members (N=1,067,756)



Note: Displayed percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. *The Army does not report "Multi-racial."

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The military, as a social institution, emphasized cohesion and meritocracy (Moskos, 1993a). These ideals were undermined by implicit biases and discriminatory practices, adding depth to the understanding of why disparities existed beyond simple numerical representation (Moskos, 1993a; Reskin, 2003). Institutional inequality, as a systemic issue within organizations, provided a theoretical foundation for understanding these disparities (Reskin, 2003). These perspectives illustrated that while formal access to military service had broadened, equitable progression within the ranks did not follow suit (Moskos, 1993a; Reskin, 2003). The data points and analyses collectively suggested that addressing disparities required monitoring recruitment

and retention and implementing policies and training initiatives that fostered an inclusive environment, promoting equitable advancement for all service members (Moskos, 1993a; Reskin, 2003). This analysis integrated empirical data with sociological theories to examine military representation and advancement, exploring progress and ongoing systemic challenges. A thorough examination of organizational culture, implicit biases, and historical inequality patterns provided crucial context for understanding the multifaceted nature of these challenges (Moskos, 1993a; Reskin, 2003).

Historical Perspective and Changes in the U.S. Navy

The U.S. Navy's progression from exclusion to inclusion revealed a pattern of delayed, contested change. Initially, policies barred women and people of color (McKinney & Rumsey, 2022). Wartime needs and shifting social norms spurred gradual integration in the mid-20th century (Herbert, 2022a). Significant resistance accompanied this integration, highlighting the struggle for equality (Sagiv & Ward, 2022). *An American Dilemma* observed similar trends of initial exclusion and slow advancement in other U.S. institutions, demonstrating a broader societal pattern (Myrdal, 1944). The Navy's experience mirrored historical trends of institutional resistance to inclusivity (Herbert, 2022b).

While legislative changes and the Civil Rights Movement propelled the Navy toward greater inclusivity, persistent barriers hindered progress (Herbert, 2022a; Holm, 1992; McKinney & Rumsey, 2022;). Women graduated from the Naval Academy in the 1970s, but there were limited promotion opportunities and gender stereotypes (United States Naval Academy (USNA), 1976). Increased minority enlistment did not translate to senior leadership access (Herbert, 2022a; Holm, 1992; McKinney & Rumsey, 2022). Work on racial evaluation and realistic threat offered insight into why cultural biases persisted despite these legal advancements (Pettigrew,

1975). These accounts illustrated that legal advancements did not eliminate cultural biases and institutional barriers, leading to periods of stagnation, demonstrating that legal changes alone did not guarantee cultural change within hierarchical organizations.

Current demographics revealed the lasting effects of historical exclusion. While diversity had increased, the Navy continued to display the consequences of previous discriminatory policies (Smith, 2023a). WoC remained underrepresented in leadership, indicating persistent biases and structural inequalities (Jackson, 2022). This underrepresentation emphasized the gap between legal equality and lived experience. The Navy's historical analysis informed the development of effective diversity and inclusion strategies. While women and racial minorities faced common leadership obstacles from increased representation, they also experienced unique discriminatory experiences, like gender stereotypes and racial bias, highlighting the complexity of diversity within the military.

Representation and Demographics in the U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy ranks exhibited disparities, with women and minorities underrepresented in higher positions (Brooks et al., 2021a). Black and Hispanic women faced a "double bind" due to gender and racial bias (Smith & Jones, 2021b). A 2024 Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report confirmed the persistent underrepresentation of minorities in leadership roles (GAO, 2024). These reports collectively indicated a gap between overall representation and leadership positions, hindered by systemic biases (Brooks et al., 2021a; GAO, 2024; Smith & Jones, 2021a). The importance of institutional versus occupational factors in military careers and structural barriers to women's advancement provided frameworks for understanding these disparities (Kanter, 1977; Mosko, 1977). While all minorities and women faced challenges, Black and Hispanic women experienced compounded disadvantages (Smith, 2023d).

Despite women comprising 17% of the Navy's active-duty force, they held only 9% of flag officer positions, revealing a significant gap in leadership inclusion that disproportionately affected minority women (Miller, 2023d). This disparity, attributed to systemic biases, aligned with broader patterns of women's underrepresentation in military leadership, as consistently documented by academic studies and government reports (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; DoD, 2022c; Marchant, 2022; Morin et al., 2023). Examining the historical context provided insight into the evolution of military roles and the professional soldier, which informed our understanding of current representation challenges (Janowitz, 1960). Underrepresentation varied across ranks, with the most significant disparity in flag officer positions underscoring the complexity of addressing gender equity in the military (Morin et al., 2023).

Minorities constituted 40% of the enlisted force but only 28% of senior enlisted personnel (E-7 to E-9) (DoD, 2022b). Black and Hispanic women represented 4% of senior enlisted sailors despite making up 11% of the overall enlisted force (Smith & Jones, 2021a). Minority sailors were concentrated in support fields and underrepresented in technical fields with higher promotion potential (Rodriguez & Lee, 2021). Occupational segregation limited equitable advancement for senior enlisted WoC (Bridges et al., 2023b; Lytell et al., 2023; Rodriguez & Lee, 2021; Romanow & Sargeant, 2023). The Navy's concentration of minorities in specific occupational specialties limited access to high-promotion career paths (Bridges et al., 2023b; Lytell et al., 2023; Romanow & Sargeant, 2023). Research on occupational segregation demonstrated the significance of cultural diversity for organizational effectiveness (Segal, 1986; TF1N, 2021). Field-specific barriers caused varied concentration and underrepresentation, with varied levels of underrepresentation across racial groups within enlisted ranks (Brown et al., 2023c; Coughlin, 2021).

Perceptions and Experiences of Women of Color in Military Leadership

Intersectional analysis revealed how gender and race shaped military leadership perceptions and experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Ospina & Foldy, 2022; Sasson-Levy, 2023). Intersecting identities influenced subordinate and superior perceptions, impacting leadership navigation, deeply ingrained stereotypes about gender and race influenced leader perception (Lytell et al., 2023). Women were seen as lacking assertiveness, while leaders of color faced competence assumptions (Rodriguez et al., 2022a). These stereotypes created hurdles for WoC, who had to overcome biased perceptions. Research suggested that stereotypes were a primary barrier to influencing perception and evaluation (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gabbin et al., 2022a).

Gender and race challenged WoC in establishing leadership credibility (Jefferson, 2023a). Colleagues and supervisors questioned WoC's authority and expertise due to compounded biases (Harris & Ford, 2023b). Supervisors and colleagues undervalued WoC's contributions, questioned their decisions, and undermined their leadership due to these biases. Biases actively shaped how people attributed successes and failures (Johnson & Williams, 2023). External factors often received credit for WoC's successes, while internal factors received blame for failures (Saguy & Ward, 2022). Supervisors and evaluators applied this attributional bias, hindering WoC's recognition and advancement opportunities. Despite strong performance, institutional systems and decision-makers consistently devalued WoC's leadership (Miller, 2023c).

Microaggressions and exclusion hindered WoC leaders, fostering hostility and isolation (Belkin et al., 2021a). WoC performed emotional labor and code-switching to navigate white, male-dominated spaces risking emotional strain and inauthenticity (Jones & Kang, 2022). They balanced conflicting gender and leadership expectations, leading to stress (Brooks et al., 2021b).

Discrimination varied, from microaggressions to role conflicts (Nadel & Haynes, 2021). Intersectional identities influenced how people perceived and treated WoC military leaders, subjecting them to stereotypes and biases that challenged their authority despite their qualifications and performance (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Addressing these complex dynamics built inclusion within military institutions, where systemic biases and discrimination created the primary barriers impeding WoC from advancing to senior leadership positions.

Intersectionality in Military Leadership

Drawing from foundational works by Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2020), intersectionality offered a crucial framework for understanding power and identity within military structures, particularly in leadership contexts. By highlighting how interlocking systems of oppression uniquely shaped the experiences of marginalized individuals and by emphasizing the interconnected nature of power structures through the 'matrix of domination', this approach revealed the complex interplay of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. In military leadership, this meant that individuals, especially WoC, experienced unique barriers that were not simply the sum of individual discrimination (Romanow & Sargeant, 2023).

Gender stereotypes and biases impeded women's military advancement (Brooks et al., 2021e; Brown & Davis, 2020; Herbert, 2022b). An intersectional view revealed diverse experiences, not a monolithic one. Race and gender compounded challenges for WoC, creating unique obstacles. WoC faced racial discrimination and gendered expectations that underscored the necessity of analyzing multiple identities to comprehend their military experiences fully (Rodriguez et al., 2022b). The concurrent impact of both racial bias and gender-based expectations highlighted why examining intersecting identities was essential for a complete understanding of their military service experiences.

Racial disparities persisted in military leadership despite strides in integration (Saguy & Ward, 2022). Intersectionality showed how race, gender, and socioeconomic status shaped leadership opportunities and experiences. Black women faced unique leadership challenges from combined racial and gender stereotypes (Harris & Ford, 2023a). An intersectional analysis revealed how intersecting identities impacted career progression and access to leadership roles (Saguy & Ward, 2022). The persistence of these disparities highlighted the need for systemic changes within the military.

The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" repeal did not eliminate LGBTQ+ discrimination (Belkin et al., 2021c). Intersecting marginalized identities increased bias, particularly for transgender individuals (Rodriguez et al., 2022b). An intersectional perspective was crucial for understanding the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ service members. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how multiple forms of discrimination interacted. A comprehensive analysis of LGBTQ+ experiences required the consideration of all intersecting identities.

Military leaders needed an intersectional lens when analyzing leadership dynamics and opportunities. In future studies, researchers should examine the complex interplay of identities and their impact on leadership experiences and outcomes. Diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and military occupational specialties required researchers to provide a complete picture. Findings from such research may have suggested that intersectional leadership development and training programs could have addressed diverse service member needs. Applying this understanding may have fostered an inclusive military environment where diverse talents were valued and leveraged.

Intersectional Barriers to Military Leadership Advancement

Intersecting gender and race dimensions created a multifaceted barrier system for military leadership advancement, particularly for WoC. Military institutions systematically limited leadership opportunities through underrepresentation in senior roles, restricted network access, and constrained occupational specialization paths (Brooks et al., 2021b; Jones & Kang, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022a; Saguy & Ward, 2022). These structural impediments manifested differently across demographic groups yet intensified for those with overlapping marginalized identities, creating exponentially greater obstacles (Barbero, 2024). The institutional mechanisms maintaining these disparities included limited mentorship availability, competency stereotyping, and systemic discrimination patterns that persisted despite surface-level inclusivity initiatives. Kanter (1977) and Collins (2020) established the foundational understanding of these institutional barriers, documenting how organizational structures maintained exclusionary practices that continued to shape current military leadership demographics. The compounding nature of these barriers created a self-reinforcing cycle that restricted advancement opportunities most severely for those navigating multiple identity-based challenges (Bridges et al., 2023b).

WoC in military contexts experienced heightened challenges that directly undermined leadership potential through multiple simultaneous mechanisms (Belkin et al., 2021a). Stereotype threat and constant performance pressure created cognitive burdens that measurably impacted leadership effectiveness and career progression trajectories (Belkin et al., 2021a; Harris & Ford, 2023b). Military environments often subjected WoC to intensified discrimination and harassment that created professionally hostile conditions, deteriorating both psychological well-being and tangible advancement opportunities (Jones & Kang, 2022). The severe underrepresentation of WoC in leadership positions created a critical absence of relatable role

models and mentors, further impeding emerging leaders' ability to envision viable leadership pathways. Pioneering work on stereotype threat provided essential context for understanding these psychological burdens, while earlier research documented the concrete career impacts of these intersecting barriers before current military studies confirmed their persistence (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The military's structural advancement pathways imposed specialized constraints through occupational segregation patterns that disproportionately channeled WoC away from leadership-track positions (Jones & Kang, 2022).

Critical patterns in how institutional barriers operated across different organizational contexts, including military structures, had been documented in recent research (Maheshwari et al., 2021a; Settles et al., 2021a). Consistent elements across institutional settings had been identified, including exclusionary networking practices, biased performance evaluation systems, and insufficient mentorship structures that systematically disadvantaged WoC (Brown & Davis, 2020; Yoon et al., 2022). Their comparative studies revealed essential variations in how these barriers manifested, with military contexts showing distinct patterns of occupational segregation and promotion structures that created unique advancement challenges. Foundational research introduced the conceptual tools essential for analyzing these overlapping identity factors, showing how various forms of discrimination interacted to produce unique challenges beyond the mere sum of individual biases (Crenshaw, 1989). Historical military integration efforts revealed persistent patterns that continued to shape current advancement limitations through institutional inertia and policy gaps (Moore, 1996). The consistency of these findings across decades of research demonstrated the deeply embedded nature of these structural barriers despite superficial policy changes aimed at increasing diversity.

Intersectionality in Military Leadership: Evidence and Implications

Multiple studies demonstrated that WoC faced unique challenges resulting from combined racial and gender discrimination (Collins, 2022; Cooper & Moore, 2023a; Crenshaw, 1989). The convergence of these multiple identity factors presented substantial obstacles for WoC seeking advancement into military leadership roles. Evaluators perceived WoC as less competent and deserving of leadership than white male counterparts with equivalent qualifications (Rodriguez et al., 2022b). This perception led directly to fewer promotions and limited advancement opportunities, contributing to persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles (Erwin, 2025). Historical examination of military promotion patterns revealed persistent disparities across decades (Morgan & Williams, 2020). Hooks (1981) and Davis (1983) identified these compounding effects in various institutional settings, establishing a foundation for modern intersectional studies. The impact of these barriers extended beyond individual experiences to affect organizational effectiveness and readiness (Belkin et al., 2021a).

Black women officers faced a "double bind" within Army leadership structures that forced them to simultaneously fulfill traditionally feminine stereotypes while meeting assertive leadership expectations (Harris & Ford, 2023a). This precarious balance created contradictory demands that white male officers never faced and directly impacted performance evaluations and career advancement. WoC in combat roles endured heightened scrutiny, creating hostile environments that demanded constant competence demonstrations (Saguy & Ward, 2022). This perpetual proving ground exhausted individual resilience while creating unnecessary interpersonal tensions that undermined unit cohesion (Smith, 2023e). The psychological toll manifested in measurable stress indicators among WoC service members (Britt et al., 2022b). These findings extended earlier work on Black women's unique challenges in predominantly

white institutions (Hooks, 1984). The resulting tokenism created predictable organizational challenges (Kanter, 1977). Military effectiveness suffered through the systemic undermining of qualified leaders' contributions (Barbero, 2024).

Service members with intersecting disadvantaged identity characteristics encountered more pronounced obstacles in their military careers (Belkin et al., 2021a). Research revealed exponentially higher discrimination rates against individuals with intersecting identities, such as LGBTQ+, WoC, or transgender service members (Christensen, & Kyed, 2022). These overlapping identities produced distinct experiences that resisted simplified categorization. This discrimination correlated directly with deteriorating mental health indicators, reduced job satisfaction scores, and plummeting retention rates (Lundquist, 2019). Multiple marginalized identities created unique lived experiences that single-identity frameworks could not understand (Miller, 2023c). Military institutions lost valuable talent through the resulting attrition cycles, depriving branches of experienced personnel and institutional knowledge (Brooks et al., 2021c). These patterns mirrored historical precedents, connecting to early civil rights era military integration studies, documenting similar challenges among pioneering Black service members (Nadel & Haynes, 2021).

Senior Enlisted WoC, specifically in the Navy, encountered distinct barriers when attempting to advance to Chief Petty Officer (CPO) through Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO) positions despite demonstrating technical expertise and leadership capabilities (Jefferson, 2023a). Subjective elements within the Navy's advancement evaluation process created inequities for WoC through implicit prejudice in performance documentation and assessment narratives (Richards & Thompson, 2021). Senior Enlisted WoC received less substantive mentorship from senior leadership compared to white male counterparts, particularly in

specialized ratings with low female representation (Washington et al., 2022). The Navy's rigid career progression pathways created additional barriers for WoC who face disproportionate challenges during sea duty assignments (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2018). Despite the Navy's public commitment to diversity, WoC remained significantly underrepresented among Command Master Chiefs (CMC) compared to their overall presence in enlisted ranks (Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), 2023; Department of the Navy (DON), 2023a). These findings complemented earlier research on how organizational structures perpetuated inequalities through seemingly neutral policies and practices (Slapakova et al., 2022). Early research established the critical importance of mentorship for marginalized professionals in institutional settings (Brown & Davis, 2020; Washington et al., 2022).

Addressing these documented barriers required targeted interventions in military settings. The Navy could have implemented inclusive leadership training programs incorporating bias mitigation techniques drawn from successful initiatives in other organizations (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). Structured mentorship programs supporting WoC could have addressed identified gaps for Senior Enlisted personnel, building on established frameworks for institutional change (Crenshaw, 2017). Policy reforms establishing equity benchmarks with appropriate accountability mechanisms could have improved the Navy's promotion and evaluation systems (Rodriguez & Lee, 2021). Standardizing leadership evaluation criteria could have reduced documented bias patterns in performance reviews, applying lessons from pioneering diversity management frameworks (Thomas, 1990). These interventions drew from promising models implemented in other organizations facing similar challenges, potentially improving the Navy's effectiveness through broader access to leadership talent. This approach aligned with recommendations advocating for institutional reforms that recognized and addressed intersecting

systems of disadvantage (Davis & Gabriel, 2021; Lorde, 1984). Successful programs in other institutions provided models for adaptation while accounting for the unique military context and culture.

Women in Leadership in the U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy senior enlisted ranks lacked equitable female representation (TF1N, 2021). This disparity persisted due to the Navy's historically male-dominated culture, where ingrained gender stereotypes and cultural norms continued to impede women's advancement (Ospina & Foldy, 2022). While women's participation in naval service had grown, their representation in leadership positions lagged considerably behind (Smith, 2023e). This underrepresentation necessitated further research to identify and analyze the systemic barriers impacting women's advancement. Understanding these barriers was essential for developing effective strategies to promote equitable representation.

Several interconnected factors may have contributed to this persistent gender gap. The inherent demands of military service, including frequent deployments, long hours, and associated risks, disproportionately impacted women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities (Ospina & Foldy, 2022). These demands may have often created a difficult balance between career progression and family life, hindering women's ability to pursue and attain senior leadership roles. There was also a perception of implicit biases in promotion and evaluation processes, coupled with the persistent association of leadership qualities with masculinity, further compounding these challenges (Christensen & Kyed, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2021). These biases could have undermined women's leadership aspirations and limited their opportunities for advancement.

Previous researchers had explored women's leadership challenges and the Navy's culture; however, a significant gap remained in understanding the intersectional experiences of WoC within the senior enlisted ranks (Eagly & Chin, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Ospina & Foldy, 2022; Smith, 2023d). A deeper examination of these experiences was crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment. Despite women's increasing levels of education and experience, the specific barriers and enabling factors for senior enlisted WoC in the Navy remained significantly under-explored.

Targeted interventions such as flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives designed to address the specific needs of women in the Navy had been proposed in earlier research (Ely & Thomas, 2020). A careful assessment of the Navy's distinct organizational structure and cultural nuances may have aided in identifying effective strategies to promote women's leadership within this unique context (Carli & Eagly, 2023). Naval service may have benefited from tailored approaches of fostering diverse leadership that addressed established challenges confronting women like inadequate guidance relationships and evaluation inequities. These approaches may have substantially improved combat preparedness, talent preservation, and operational success by creating conditions where every service member maximized their capabilities (DACOWITS, 2022).

Leadership Theories and Practices

Leadership theories were used to dissect the intricate dynamics of influence and direction within groups. Researchers across disciplines, from psychology to sociology, had dedicated decades to understanding how and why specific individuals successfully mobilized others toward shared objectives (Tims et al., 2020). These theories moved beyond simplistic notions of authority, delving into the complex interplay of personality, communication, and contextual

factors that shaped leadership effectiveness. Leadership theory focused on the inherent traits that predisposed individuals to lead (Stogdill, 1948). Effective leadership behaviors were both learned and innate, as explored through behavioral studies focusing on leadership styles and managerial grids (Lewin, 1947). Situational constraints and opportunities significantly impacted a leader's approach, a key consideration in contingency theories (Fiedler, 1967). This scholarly pursuit had yielded diverse frameworks, each offering a distinct lens through which to examine leadership phenomena.

From the early focus on identifying inherent leader characteristics to contemporary models that emphasized adaptive and relational approaches, such as transformational leadership, the evolution of leadership theory reflected a growing sophistication in the understanding of this complex social process (Bass, 1985; Burns, 2020). This exploration of varied theoretical perspectives illuminated the multifaceted nature of leadership, acknowledging that no single model provided a universally applicable solution. Instead, the field offered a rich toolkit of concepts and insights, enabling practitioners and scholars alike to navigate the challenges of leading in diverse and dynamic environments, as exemplified by contemporary perspectives on leadership practice (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). This theoretical foundation directly informed leadership practices, providing a framework for developing effective leaders and fostering organizational success (Erwin, 2025). Tracing the historical progression of leadership theories, from their initial focus on inherent traits to the later emphasis on situational and relational dynamics, was essential to understanding this framework's development.

Trait theories were created to identify inherent leader qualities (Zaccaro, 2007). Behavioral theories examined observable leadership styles and their impact on follower performance and contingency theories identified how situational elements, such as follower

maturity, determined effective leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Stogdill, 1948). Each of these theories centered on the leader's actions. A clear progression from static traits to dynamic behaviors and situational dependencies was apparent. A common thread throughout these theories was the goal of defining effective leadership. They presented contrasting points in their focus, shifting from internal traits to external situations.

Transformational leaders encouraged followers to achieve shared aspirations (Bass, 1985). This strategy fit well with the collaborative demands of today's knowledge-based economies (Avolio et al., 2022). Hoch et al. (2023) examined authentic, servant, and ethical leadership models, which were characterized by an emphasis on values, honesty, and social responsibility. Their analysis reflected a shift in leadership theory toward greater focus on ethical foundations and the well-being of followers. A common thread revealed a shift from focusing on the individual leader to group accomplishments and ethical concerns (Avolio et al., 2022). There were variations in the focus of the theories, moving from transactional to transformational and then to ethical leadership frameworks.

Leadership theories evolved from leader-centric to follower-centric and context-dependent leadership. Organizations increased in complexity, prompting a greater focus on ethical leadership (Avolio et al., 2022). Trait theories, behavioral theories, and contingency theories established foundational leadership concepts (Billmiera & Busch, 2010).

Transformational, authentic, servant, and ethical leadership theories reflected current organizational demands, while leadership theories were consistently aimed to define effective leadership, their focus had shifted from internal traits to external situational factors (Eaton et al., 2024).

Leadership Theories in Military Settings

Military organizations operated in volatile environments, demanding effective leadership for mission success and personnel well-being. Foundational leadership theories such as Situational Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, and Adaptive Leadership informed military leadership, but theorists had adapted these specific models for unique military challenges (Hoch et al., 2023). These models incorporated chain of command, unit cohesion, and mission accomplishment in high-stress situations. This adaptation ensured that leadership practices aligned with military operations' specific demands and complexities.

Situational Leadership. According to Situational Leadership theory, effective leadership was contingent upon a leader's ability to adapt their style based on the competence and commitment levels of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). This style provided a flexible framework that aligned well with leadership in the Navy, where leaders had to adapt their approach based on the experience, competence, and readiness of their sailors. The Navy's dynamic structure required leaders to shift between directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating, depending on mission demands and the professional development of their personnel (Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). This adaptability was critical for maintaining operational effectiveness, fostering leadership growth, and ensuring mission success in diverse and high-stakes situations (Hoch et al., 2023).

Transformational Leadership. Transformational Leadership was associated with increased commitment among followers through influence, motivation, stimulation, and consideration, transcending traditional military hierarchy when merged with naval structures (Bass, 1985; Shamir et al., 1993). Leaders integrating these practices achieved stronger cohesion and readiness than those using positional authority alone while reducing advancement disparities

when applied across ranks (Slapakova et al., 2022). The DoD had emphasized that creating and maintaining a diverse and inclusive force was essential to mission success (Daniel et al., 2021). The combination of mission focus and individual development addressed dual naval imperatives of effectiveness and retention, resulting in higher retention among underrepresented groups and more innovative problem-solving (Shamir et al., 1993). This integrated approach created resilient command climates that performed through both routine and crisis operations, potentially catalyzing the breakdown of advancement barriers for WoC in senior enlisted leadership (Erwin, 2025).

Authentic Leadership. Authentic Leadership was characterized by a focus on building strong leader-follower relationships through self-awareness, transparency, and ethical conduct (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This approach provided a values-based framework that directly addressed the Navy's dual challenges of maintaining hierarchical authority while fostering the psychological safety essential for diverse teams to function optimally (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Unlike transactional leadership models that relied primarily on rank and position, authentic leadership created legitimacy through consistent ethical behavior and genuine interpersonal engagement across demographic differences (Randel et al., 2018; Vogelgesang et al., 2013). The Navy's operational environment required leaders to demonstrate transparent decision-making while acknowledging their own limitations, a vulnerability that paradoxically strengthened rather than undermined authority in high-stakes situations (Avolio et al., 2022). Authentic leaders created psychological safety that encouraged sailors from underrepresented groups to voice concerns without fear of marginalization, addressing a critical barrier documented in advancement studies of WoC in military settings (Hosek et al., 2001; Smith & Johnson, 2020). Liao and Rupp (2005) indicated that diverse units led by authentic leaders experienced higher

rates of innovation and greater adaptability during crisis situations, as team members across demographic backgrounds felt equally empowered to contribute their perspectives. This integration of authenticity with diversity created a distinctive leadership synergy that built the mutual trust needed for operational effectiveness while simultaneously addressing structural inequities that had historically limited advancement opportunities in naval leadership (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

Adaptive Leadership. Adaptive Leadership involved mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive in evolving environments (Heifetz et al., 2009). This approach provided a dynamic framework that aligned exceptionally well with the Navy's need for organizational resilience, where leaders had to guide their teams through complex, ambiguous, and rapidly changing operational landscapes. The integration of adaptive leadership principles with military hierarchical structures created a powerful mechanism for addressing technical challenges while simultaneously confronting the adaptive work required for organizational transformation (Northouse, 2023). The Navy's complex operational environment required leaders to foster collaborative problem-solving that leveraged diverse perspectives, create psychologically safe spaces for experimentation and calculated risk-taking, and develop learning cultures that converted failures into institutional knowledge (Randall & Coakley, 2007). Tims et al. (2020) demonstrated that units practicing adaptive leadership principles showed greater operational flexibility during contingency operations and more successful integration of diverse personnel into cohesive teams. This approach proved particularly valuable in addressing systemic barriers facing underrepresented groups in naval leadership, as it explicitly challenged existing power structures and technical solutions that preserved the status quo (Smith & Johnson, 2020). The synthesis of adaptive leadership with naval traditions created a powerful catalyst for both

mission accomplishment and the organizational evolution necessary for building truly inclusive command climates.

Senior Enlisted Leadership Roles

Navy personnel E7-E9 formed the senior enlisted ranks, providing crucial leadership and expertise that bridged officer directives and junior sailor execution. Senior Enlisted served in vital leadership roles such as Command Master Chief (CMC), Chief of the Boat (COB), and Department Leading Chief Petty Officer (DLCPO), where they delivered essential guidance, mentorship, and operational expertise (O'Connor & Chaffin, 2021). The Navy strategically selected these leaders based on consistent strong performance records documented through evaluations (Morales et al., 2022). Women comprised 10.3% of CMCs despite representing 20% of the Navy's enlisted force (Navy Personnel Command (NPC), 2023a). WoC faced even steeper challenges, holding 4% of these senior leadership positions while making up 11% of enlisted personnel (DMDC, 2024).

The Navy pursued people with extensive experience within their rating and who had served in diverse leadership roles across various operational environments to be senior enlisted leaders (Morales et al., 2022). Selection and promotion boards prioritized individuals embodying the Navy's core values of honor, courage, and commitment (U.S. Navy (USN), 2023a). According to the Navy (2023b), leadership traits included integrity, initiative, decisiveness, and the ability to inspire others carried significant weight in advancement decisions. Historical trends showed improvement from past decades when women held virtually no senior enlisted leadership positions before policy changes in the 1970s (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2018). Progress remained slow compared to other military branches, with the Army maintaining nearly double the percentage of women in equivalent senior positions (DoD, 2022b).

The path to senior enlisted leadership demanded more than technical proficiency, requiring candidates to demonstrate exceptional communication skills, strategic thinking, and the capacity to operate effectively in high-pressure environments (USN, 2023a). Traditional promotion metrics often overlooked these competencies, creating barriers for WoC who may have excelled in these domains but remained underrepresented (Jordan, 2020a; O'Connor & Chaffin, 2021). Studies from the 1990s had revealed the deep roots of this problem and documented how implicit bias affected evaluation standards long before formal recognition of the issue (Moskos, 1993b). The Navy's current mentorship programs attempted to address this disparity but suffered from inconsistent implementation across commands (Morales et al., 2022). Command climate surveys between 2018-2023 indicated commands led by diverse senior enlisted teams achieved higher operational readiness scores and retention rates (DMDC, 2024). Johnson (1982) confirmed that leadership diversity correlated directly with mission effectiveness in military organizations.

Institutional barriers persisted despite policy reforms, with promotion boards continuing to favor combat experience in ratings historically limited for women (USN, 2023b). The career progression model established post-Vietnam War still influenced today's advancement patterns, inadvertently perpetuating gender disparities in key warfare communities (Richardson, 1975). Fleet retention statistics demonstrated that women left the service at twice the rate of men before reaching senior enlisted eligibility, creating a diminished candidate pool for top positions (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2018). Leadership development initiatives started in 2021 showed promising early results, with participating commands reporting a 15% increase in female selection to department leadership roles (NPC, 2023b). The fundamental changes needed to achieve parity required systemic reform beyond isolated programs, echoing conclusions from

early military integration studies that predicted decades-long timelines for cultural transformation (DoD, 2022c).

Navy Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture drove employee behavior, emotions, and performance through shared values, beliefs, and norms (Schein, 2010). This influential model categorized culture into three levels: visible artifacts, stated values, and underlying assumptions that guided organizational life. The Competing Values Framework expanded this understanding by classifying organizations into clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market cultures, each fostering distinct structures and experiences (Fathi et al., 2023). When examined through the lens of naval leadership demographics, these frameworks revealed how culture's deep embedding in organizational DNA shaped advancement pathways differently for majority and minority groups. The relationship between cultural typology and leadership inclusion merited further exploration, particularly in the Navy, where hierarchical structures intersected with strong clan elements and traditions dating back centuries. The Navy's culture exhibited remarkable resilience to change despite evolving operational demands, exemplifying how enduring organizational values persisted through generations despite formal policy shifts toward greater inclusivity (Fathi et al., 2023; Schein, 2010).

Organizational climate represented employees' collective perceptions of their work environment, creating a psychological atmosphere shaped by leadership practices, communication patterns, and reward systems (Schneider, 1975). Climate dimensions such as support, innovation, fairness, and clarity significantly impacted employee attitudes and workplace behaviors (Amabile et al., 1996; Colquitt, 2001; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Unlike the deep-rooted nature of culture, climate responded more readily to

organizational interventions and leadership changes (Schulte et al., 2021). This distinction revealed a critical insight for Navy diversification efforts. While changing naval cultural assumptions required generational timeframes, climate interventions at the unit level could have created immediate psychological safety for underrepresented groups like WoC. The contrast between the Navy's stable, tradition-oriented culture and the variability of command climates across ships and installations created strategic leverage points for leaders navigating inclusion challenges in this tradition-bound service branch.

Researchers employed validated measurement instruments to assess organizational culture and climate, with surveys dominating methodological approaches (Schneider et al., 2013). The Organizational Culture Inventory and Denison Organizational Culture Survey (DEOCS) provided systematic frameworks for evaluating cultural attributes across different organizational contexts (Cooke & Lafferty, 1987; Denison, 1990). Climate assessment relied on tools like the Organizational Climate Measure and Job Descriptive Index to capture employees' environmental perceptions (Peterson et al., 2005; Smith et al., 1969). The military context demonstrated specialized applications through the Military DEOCS, which adapted the Denison model to evaluate unit cohesion and operational readiness (Smith, 2023c). Within the Navy specifically, command climate assessments served as critical tools for evaluating inclusion and equal opportunity, yet these instruments often failed to capture the intersectional experiences of sailors with multiple minority identities (CNO, 2021). The synthesis of these measurement approaches revealed a significant methodological gap. While quantitative instruments captured broad patterns across naval commands, they often missed the nuanced lived experiences of organizational minorities, suggesting the need for mixed-method approaches that integrated

quantitative findings with qualitative insights from underrepresented groups (Adams et al., 2023; Buchanan et al., 2022).

Substantial evidence connected organizational culture and climate to critical performance outcomes across multiple domains (Martin, 2003; McCall, 2005). Organizations fostering positive cultures and supportive climates experienced higher employee engagement, enhanced job satisfaction, improved performance metrics, and reduced turnover rates (Hartler et al., 2004; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Shaw et al., 2005). These findings revealed a compelling insight when applied to Navy leadership demographics. The underrepresentation of WoC in senior enlisted leadership potentially created significant operational and readiness costs that extended far beyond equity concerns. While the Navy prided itself on meritocracy and mission focus, the persistent demographic disparities at the senior enlisted level suggested cultural barriers that contradicted these core values (Barbero, 2024; Department of Defense Board of Diversity and Inclusion, 2020). The relationship between positive organizational environments and desirable outcomes appeared robust across different research methodologies and contexts (Fathi et al., 2023). The evidence indicated the Navy may have improved sailor wellbeing and operational effectiveness through thoughtful cultural and climate initiatives that positioned diversity as a warfighting advantage rather than merely a compliance obligation.

Culture and Climate in the U.S. Navy

The U.S. Navy's organizational culture reflected its deep historical roots and operational demands. Naval traditions and clear hierarchical structures established a strong identity, fostered commitment, and maintained discipline throughout the organization (Janowitz, 1960; Jordan, 2020b; Siew & Koh, 2023). Sailors developed a powerful sense of belonging through participation in time-honored rituals that connected them to generations of service members

before them (Bridges et al., 2023a). The rigid command structure created clear lines of authority necessary for complex operations at sea, aligning with classical military sociology frameworks (Huntington, 1957). This traditional framework provided stability in high-stress environments where split-second decisions could determine mission success or failure. Yet, this same rigidity sometimes impeded innovation and transparent communication across ranks, creating tension between established practices and emerging needs in modern warfare contexts (Moskos, 1977; Schein, 2010).

The core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment served as the foundation for naval culture and provided ethical guidance for all personnel (Stouffer et al., 1949; U.S. Navy, n.d.). These principles shaped decision-making processes from the highest command levels to individual sailors' daily actions. Naval operations inherently developed exceptional resilience among service members who faced extended deployments, dangerous conditions, and separation from families (Naval Inspector General (NIG), 2022). The intense mission focus created highly capable teams ready to perform under extreme pressure, reflecting organizational behavior patterns on bureaucratic structures (Merton, 1940). This operational tempo frequently placed individual well-being secondary to mission accomplishment, contributing to elevated stress levels and eventual burnout among sailors (Britt et al., 2022a; Goffman, 1961). The tension between operational readiness and personnel welfare represented an ongoing challenge that required careful balance.

DON (2023a) and TF1N (2021) identified several climate-related challenges within the Navy, including insufficient work-life balance, persistent diversity and inclusion gaps, and inadequate mental health support systems. Naval leadership had responded with multiple initiatives that expanded childcare options for military families, implemented comprehensive

diversity training programs, and improved access to mental health services (Brooks et al., 2021b). These efforts were aimed to create psychological safety and demonstrate leadership commitment to addressing systemic issues (CNO, 2022a; Crenshaw, 1989). Sailors from underrepresented backgrounds often navigated additional complexities within the hierarchical structure while balancing their naval identity with other aspects of their personal identities (Barbero, 2024). Women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ service members frequently reported different experiences within the same organizational environment, highlighting the need for intersectional approaches to cultural improvement efforts (Collins, 2020; Moore, 2017).

The evolution of Navy culture required concrete steps toward greater inclusion, innovation encouragement, and prioritization of sailor well-being to effectively address emerging technological threats, geopolitical complexities, and workforce diversity demands (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Segal, 1986). Future researchers should have evaluated current initiative effectiveness and developed new improvement strategies tailored to various command environments. Naval leadership demonstrated a commitment to cultural transformation through documented policy changes and resource allocation for improvement programs (NIG, 2022). The path forward required maintaining valuable traditions while eliminating practices that no longer served the organization's mission or people, echoing organizational change theories (Burnes, 2020). This cultural evolution benefited from incorporating diverse perspectives from all ranks, specialties, and demographic groups to create a more adaptable force capable of meeting emerging threats and opportunities.

Naval Leadership Assignments

Organizational culture shaped leadership pathways for diverse senior enlisted personnel through established values and practices. Navy cultures that embraced diversity created

supportive environments where underrepresented groups pursued leadership positions with institutional backing (DON, 2023a). This supportive foundation established robust leadership pipelines identifying and cultivating potential among diverse candidates (Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, 2020). Organizations demonstrated inclusion commitment through targeted mentorship programs and growth opportunities for underrepresented personnel (Prichard-Brown, 2023). These initiatives directly countered systemic barriers and created more accessible leadership paths for previously excluded groups (Pruitt, 2025).

Resistant organizational cultures constructed formidable barriers obstructing diverse individuals' career advancement at multiple levels (Schein & Schein, 2017). These barriers restricted access to career-enhancing assignments and discouraged formal mentorship relationships crucial for professional development (Barbero, 2024). Evaluators and promotion boards exhibited subtle yet persistent biases maintaining leadership underrepresentation (Mushi et al., 2025). Unconscious bias significantly distorted perceptions of leadership potential, causing qualified WoC candidates to remain overlooked for key assignments and promotions (Biilimoria et al., 2020). This systematic exclusion reinforced existing inequalities within military hierarchies (Department of Defense Board of Diversity and Inclusion, 2020). The challenge manifested clearly for WoC in the Navy, who remained significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions despite their qualifications (Barbero, 2024).

Ospina and Foldy (2022) and Tims et al. (2020) identified bias impacts across military and civilian organizations with wide-ranging consequences. Homogenous cultures struggled to attract and retain diverse talent, directly hampering innovation and organizational performance (Lorenzo et al., 2022). Within the Navy context, this talent deficit eliminated valuable perspectives crucial for operational effectiveness and strategic decision-making. Bias

manifestations included mentorship deficits, promotion obstacles, and assignment limitations that collectively restricted advancement opportunities (Carli & Eagly, 2023; Johnson & Williams, 2023). These barriers created cumulative disadvantages throughout career trajectories that became increasingly difficult to overcome (Sim & Bierena, 2024). The resulting leadership homogeneity perpetuated existing systems by limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and approaches (Slapakova et al., 2022).

Effective organizations actively dismantled systemic barriers through comprehensive policy reforms and cultural interventions (Karlin, 2023b). Cultivating inclusive environments required implementing targeted leadership training, establishing structured mentorship programs for underrepresented groups, and creating transparent evaluation criteria (Ng & Sears, 2022). The Navy could have implemented specialized mentorship programs pairing senior leaders with WoC, provided mandatory bias training for promotion board members, and established diversity requirements for advancement committees. These approaches addressed both individual biases and structural barriers simultaneously. Karlin (2023b) and Lindsey (2022) supported multipronged strategies targeting different organizational levels to effectively transform entrenched patterns. Implementation required sustained commitment and regular assessment to ensure meaningful progress beyond superficial compliance.

Psychological safety formed the foundation for leadership development across all demographic groups within military hierarchies (Erwin, 2025). Personnel who felt secure expressing opinions, taking calculated risks, and learning from mistakes demonstrated greater leadership initiative and effectiveness (Edmondson, 1999). This safety became crucial for marginalized groups navigating traditionally homogenous environments with established norms. Commands encouraging open dialogue and promptly addressing microaggressions fostered

empowerment among diverse personnel (Willimas & Davis, 2022). Environments demanding rigid conformity actively discouraged innovation and diminished leadership contributions from underrepresented groups (Dwivedi et al., 2025). These restrictive climates reduced overall organizational adaptability while maintaining status quo leadership profiles (Kruse et al., 2020).

Building inclusive leadership cultures required continuous organizational commitment through integrated policy reforms and cultural interventions (Malott et al., 2021). This commitment manifested through equity-promoting policies, expanded leadership development opportunities, and climate initiatives emphasizing universal value and contribution. The Navy's expanded diversity and inclusion training programs represented critical initial steps toward cultural transformation (DON, 2023b). Regular assessment, feedback incorporation, and program adaptation ensured genuine inclusivity throughout the leadership pipeline (Ashikali et al, 2021; Leon et al., 2020). These efforts should have addressed visible and invisible barriers to advancement while creating sustainable pathways for diverse leadership development. Successful transformation required vertical alignment from senior leadership through all organizational levels with consistent messaging and accountability mechanisms (AlNuaimi et al., 2022).

U.S. Naval Policy and Institutional Frameworks

Strategic principles fundamentally shaped the U.S. Navy's institutional architecture while continuously adapting to emerging national security imperatives. Groundbreaking work established enduring naval strategy tenets prioritizing sea control as a critical element of national power projection (Mahan, 1890). These foundational concepts continued influencing modern naval doctrine despite significant technological transformations and geopolitical realignments over the intervening centuries (CNO, 2022b; Sea Force, 2025; Speller, 2022). Military historians

further developed these ideas, emphasizing the relationship between naval power and national policy objectives (Corbett, 1911). Naval theorists extended this tradition, demonstrating how historical principles adapted to modern warfare realities (Hughes, 1986). These interconnected strategic frameworks provided the intellectual foundation for current naval policy formulation despite radical changes in the security environment.

The Navy actively reconfigured its institutional structures to address unprecedented challenges while maintaining core capabilities that defined naval power (Twomey, 2021). Kirchberger (2022) and Twomey (2021) investigated the Navy's delicate balancing act between traditional maritime dominance roles and emerging threats across cyber, space, and hybrid warfare domains. This multi-domain challenge drove the Navy's emphasis on Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) as an operational concept requiring new technological capabilities and organizational adaptations (Filipoff, 2024; Stackley, 2020). Brodie (1959) highlighted similar institutional adaptation challenges when naval forces first confronted nuclear weapons integration. The Navy continued confronting this tension between historical continuity and necessary innovation across multiple operational domains (Holcomb, 2022). These evolving demands required institutional flexibility while preserving core maritime competencies that defined naval effectiveness.

Rigorous analysis served to continuously refine institutional frameworks by focusing on force structure optimization and resource allocation constraints (Atwood et al., 2023). Research projects provided comprehensive analyses of acquisition processes, technological investment priorities, and organizational structure modifications necessary for future maritime dominance (CNAS, 2023). Huntington (1954) articulated how naval institutions had to align with national strategic objectives through appropriate force structure decisions. Past naval reforms

demonstrated similar institutional adaptation when confronting resource constraints and changing mission requirements (Zumwalt, 1970). Current naval leaders faced comparable challenges that required them to prioritize technological investments while streamlining organizational structures developed during previous strategic eras (CNAS, 2023). This historical pattern revealed institutional adaptation as a constant rather than an exceptional requirement for effective naval forces.

National security imperatives directly drove naval policy evolution through multiple interconnected governance mechanisms affecting resource allocation and mission prioritization (Cancian et al., 2022; O'Rourke & Moodie, 2024). The National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) established overarching guidance that determined the Navy's contribution to broader national objectives across diplomatic, economic, and military domains (Golby, 2022). Intricate assessments were conducted on the civil-military relationships and their influence on defense policy formulation within democratic governance systems (Golby, 2022; Karlin, 2023a). Halperin (1974) explored these complex institutional interactions affecting military policy development. Congressional oversight mechanisms, budgetary processes, and public opinion dynamics created additional layers of complexity affecting naval policy implementation (Karlin, 2023a). These interconnected factors created a multidimensional decision environment requiring naval leaders to simultaneously navigate political, economic, and strategic considerations.

The Navy's institutional and policy architecture continuously transformed through deliberate adaptation processes addressing historical legacies while anticipating future challenges. This transformation required systematic policy review mechanisms identifying both enduring principles and outdated assumptions requiring modification (Golby, 2022). Landmark

studies established the foundational understanding of how complex military organizations made strategic choices within institutional constraints (Allison, 1971). The Navy's current innovation initiatives built upon this tradition while addressing unprecedented technological and geopolitical disruptions affecting maritime operations (Stackely, 2020). Understanding these dynamic adaptation processes proved essential for comprehending the evolution of the Navy's organizational structure and leadership development approaches. Future naval effectiveness may have depended on maintaining this delicate balance between institutional continuity and necessary transformation across all operational domains.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies

The Navy had established institutional frameworks targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in leadership roles, acknowledging these elements as mission-critical assets that enhanced operational effectiveness (DON, 2021). Despite these formal structures, the existing policies failed to adequately address advancement barriers, particularly for WoC in senior enlisted positions (Garcia & Martinez, 2022; Roberts et al., 2021). Garcia and Martinez (2022) and Roberts et al. (2021) both emphasized that military advancement policies often created a façade of equality while failing to address the unique structural barriers that WoC faced in senior enlisted positions. Their research collectively demonstrated the intersection of gender and racial identities created compounded obstacles that existing diversity initiatives failed to recognize, resulting in persistent underrepresentation despite formal policy commitments to inclusion. The Navy's systems continued to produce a disproportionately low representation of intersectional identities in leadership ranks (USN, 2023b). Military leaders designed these structures to acknowledge diversity's value but utilized unidimensional approaches that neglected the complex matrix of intersecting identities that military personnel experienced (Atkins & Bartuska, 2023).

This limitation reflected the traditional military classification systems and created significant advancement gaps for personnel whose experiences spanned multiple underrepresented groups, a phenomenon first identified in groundbreaking work on intersectionality in institutional settings (Crenshaw, 1989). The Navy's current leadership development approach theoretically connected diversity to combat readiness, yet in practice, failed to address how intersecting identities created compounded advancement challenges for WoC pursuing senior enlisted leadership positions (Ellison & Loftin, 2021; Martinez et al., 2022).

The Navy's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan had established formal mechanisms for recruiting, retaining, and promoting personnel from diverse backgrounds. Still, implementation had yielded minimal improvement for those with intersectional identities (CNO, 2023). This framework built upon foundational work regarding organizational diversity advantages yet treated demographic categories as separate policy concerns rather than interrelated dimensions, resulting in continued underrepresentation of WoC in senior enlisted ranks (Adekugbe & Ibeh, 2024). TF1N's evaluation identified certain systemic barriers requiring intervention, but their recommendations approached identity categories discretely, overlooking how race and gender intersected to create unique obstacles for WoC (TF1N, 2021). Though the task force acknowledged the existence of overlapping identities in theory, their policy modifications rarely accounted for practical implications, reflecting limitations in institutional diversity frameworks (Inegbedion et al., 2020). These structures demonstrated theoretical progress but produced minimal practical advancement for WoC in leadership positions, falling significantly short of the integrated approach proposed regarding intersectional invisibility in organizational settings (Morgenroth et al., 2021; Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Executive Order (EO) 14125 (Trump, 2025a) rescinding federal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives highlighted existing pitfalls in the Navy's diversity efforts, disproportionately affecting WoC, who already faced the most significant barriers to advancement (Trump, 2025b). The service had to now navigate even more restrictive regulatory parameters while attempting to address stark representation gaps in senior enlisted leadership (Martinez et al., 2022). This challenge affected personnel at identity intersections most severely (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Despite stated commitments to diversity, naval leadership had failed to implement effective practices that addressed how intersecting identities created compounded challenges for WoC seeking advancement (Fisher & Ramirez, 2023; Pogrebna et al., 2024). Historical patterns in military leadership development had typically approached demographic representation through separate policy streams for race and gender, an approach that created particularly significant barriers for WoC (Rodriguez, 2018). The Navy's current challenge involved acknowledging the failure of existing frameworks while developing more sophisticated approaches that could accommodate intersectional experiences within new regulatory constraints, requiring fundamental reconsideration of how leadership development programs addressed the complex reality of intersecting identities in naval service (Pogrebna et al., 2024; Williams & Davis, 2022). Roberts et al. (2021) revealed that military promotion systems superficially projected equity while neglecting to address the specific institutional obstacles that hindered WoC from attaining senior enlisted leadership roles. Research had consistently demonstrated a critical absence of frameworks addressing multiple social identities, especially marginalized identities, within leadership development programs, leaving intersectional experiences largely unexamined in organizational contexts (Orsini & Sunderman, 2024). Military organizations required an intersectional analysis of their social architecture, as they were

fundamentally designed by the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender, creating stratified ethnogendered identities that determined one's location within the military hierarchy and access to advancement opportunities (Sasson-Levy, 2023).

Policy Effectiveness and Areas for Improvement

The Navy's Strategic Framework for DEI, implemented in 2020, had shown mixed results when measured against its core objectives (DON, 2022). Quantitative assessments revealed modest improvements in overall minority representation (3.7% increase), but disaggregated data exposed persistent intersectional gaps. WoC in senior enlisted ranks increased by only 1.2% during the same period (GAO, 2023). This disparity between general and intersectional outcomes suggested that policies designed for broad demographic categories often failed to address the unique barriers faced by those with multiple marginalized identities. The TF1N recommendations, while comprehensive in addressing racial and gender discrimination separately, rarely accounted for their combined effects, exemplifying what Crenshaw (1989) identified as the inadequacy of single-axis approaches to discrimination (NIG, 2022; Smith & Davis, 2023).

The Navy's command climate survey system demonstrated this single-axis limitation, as it collected data on race and gender but analyzed these categories in isolation rather than examining their intersection (CNO, 2021). A comparative analysis of advancement rates revealed the consequence of this approach. White women and men of color showed improved promotion rates under current policies (7.5% and 6.2% increases respectively since 2020), while WoC's advancement rates had improved by only 2.1% (NPC, 2023a). This stark contrast between single-category and intersectional outcomes revealed that current evaluation metrics

masked the continued marginalization of those with overlapping identities, despite the policy's explicit goal of equitable advancement for all sailors (Rodriguez et al., 2022a).

The Navy's mentorship initiative provided another example of policy that achieved broad success while falling short intersectionally. The program increased mentoring relationships by 34% overall, yet only 12% of WoC reported having mentors who shared their background experiences (Lafuente, 2023). Traditional mentorship programs operated on assumptions of universal experience that failed to account for the distinct professional challenges that WoC navigated, particularly in senior enlisted roles where their representation remained lowest (Jefferson, 2023b). This contrasted with targeted mentorship approaches in the corporate sector, where companies implementing intersectional mentoring had seen 40% higher retention rates for WoC in leadership positions (Gabbin et al., 2022b). The discrepancy between Navy and corporate outcomes highlighted the critical difference between equity policies that recognized demographic characteristics in isolation versus those that acknowledged their compounding effects.

Current recruitment initiatives focused separately on increasing women's participation and racial diversity but rarely addressed their intersection. While these efforts had successfully increased overall demographic diversity in recruitment (diversity increased from 41% to 48% between 2018-2023), retention disparities revealed their limitations—WoC left the Navy at 1.7 times the rate of other demographic groups (NPC, 2023a). This attrition pattern suggested that policies focused on entry points without corresponding attention to career progression and climate factors particularly affecting intersectional identities ultimately failed to create sustainable diversity (Brooks et al., 2021d; Harris & Ford, 2023b).

The constraints of recent executive orders limiting explicit DEI language necessitated innovative approaches to achieving equity goals. These limitations had prompted organizations to explore alternative strategies that could achieve similar outcomes through different means. Rather than abandoning inclusion efforts, successful organizations had pivoted toward competency-based assessment frameworks that inherently reduced bias without explicit diversity framing (Sokolowich, 2025). The Marine Corps' implementation of blind performance review protocols offered an instructive contrast to Navy practices—their system had reduced promotion disparities for WoC by 18% while operating within similar constraints (USMC Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA), 2024). This approach directly addressed the documented tendency for performance evaluations to reflect compounded biases against WoC, where their successes were attributed to external factors while failures were attributed to personal qualities (Saguy & Ward, 2022).

To address these intersectional limitations, the Navy should have implemented multilevel policy reforms. First, assessment metrics should have been redesigned to specifically measure intersectional outcomes rather than aggregate statistics that obscured disparities affecting WoC (Ospina & Foldy, 2022). Second, mentorship programs required restructuring around identity-aware frameworks that acknowledged the unique leadership challenges faced by WoC, potentially modeling programs after the Air Force's targeted sponsorship initiative which had demonstrated 27% higher retention rates for underrepresented groups (Lytell et al., 2023). Third, promotion systems would have benefited from incorporating bias-mitigation technologies that had reduced evaluation disparities in comparable organizations by up to 23% (Kirchberger, 2022).

The contrast between policies that recognized intersectionality and those that treated demographic categories in isolation revealed a fundamental limitation in current Navy DEI approaches. Truly effective policies should have evolved beyond addressing discrimination in siloed categories to confront the complex reality that barriers compounded at the intersection of identities (Morgenroth et al., 2021; Pogrebna et al., 2024). As military operations increasingly demanded diverse perspectives for mission success, addressing these intersectional policy gaps became not merely a social obligation but a strategic imperative for maintaining operational effectiveness (Chong & Burns, 2022; Siew & Koh, 2023). Siew and Koh (2023) found that truly effective military diversity policies had to go beyond simply creating demographic representation to actively leveraging diversity for enhanced mission effectiveness, as the DoD had recognized that "valuing diversity was not simply the right thing to do" but ensured maintaining competitive advantage.

Pogrebna et al. (2024) demonstrated the combined impact of racial and gender discrimination generated distinct challenges for minority women aspiring to leadership roles. This research underscored the importance of organizations adopting holistic strategies that acknowledged and addressed these intersecting aspects of identity. Employing the intersectional framework permitted the analysis of how compounded discrimination operated in real-world organizational contexts, particularly in hierarchically structured institutions like the military. According to the work of Pinto et al. (2024), it was essential to recognize that Black women frequently encountered the overlapping effects of both gender and racial discrimination. Consequently, effective analytical frameworks had to consider the intersectional nature of these identities to understand how they jointly shaped patterns of inequality, rather than examining them in isolation.

Summary

In chapter two the theoretical foundation was established for understanding the unique challenges women of color (WoC) faced in Navy senior leadership. An in-depth analysis of the intersectionality framework, pioneered by Crenshaw (1989), revealed how the convergence of multiple identities created distinct and compounding barriers. Building upon this, Collins (2022) demonstrated how these intersecting identities actively shaped power dynamics within organizational structures.

Demographic data starkly highlighted these existing barriers. Despite comprising 11% of the enlisted force, WoC held only 4% of senior enlisted positions (DoD, 2022a; Smith & Jones, 2021a). This significant underrepresentation in senior roles, including positions like Command Master Chief (CMC), underscored systemic inequities within the Navy (DMDC, 2024).

A significant challenge for WoC involved navigating the "double bind," where they had to balance assertiveness with societal expectations of femininity, unlike their white male counterparts (Harris & Ford, 2023b; Saguy & Ward, 2022). Traditional leadership theories often failed to account for these complex, intersectional challenges (Bass & Riggio, 2008).

Organizational culture and limited access to crucial networks and mentorship further impeded WoC's advancement; even within inclusive environments, these barriers persisted (Morin et al., 2023; Schein, 2010).

Through existing scholarly work concerning WoC in senior enlisted roles within the Navy, researchers tended to focus on single-axis frameworks, which may not have fully captured the complexities of their experiences (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Maheshwari et al., 2021b). This contrasted with current Navy policies that often-emphasized recruitment, potentially at the expense of sustained retention and advancement for WoC (USN, 2022). To gain a more nuanced

understanding, an intersectionality framework was used in this study to highlight the necessity for research methodologies capable of exploring these critical perspectives in greater depth. Chapter three outlined a methodological approach specifically designed to address this gap through rigorous research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. The United States Navy had made significant strides toward creating a more diverse and inclusive force over recent decades (Atwater & Jones, 2021). This progress built upon a complex historical legacy where women of color (WoC) had faced interlocking barriers stemming from both racial discrimination and gender bias in military service—barriers that had evolved but had not disappeared. Despite policy changes designed to increase diversity, the historical underrepresentation of WoC in leadership positions continued to influence contemporary organizational structures, cultural norms, and advancement opportunities within the Navy (Washington et al., 2022). The findings may provide insights into the barriers and biases they encountered in their career progression. This research was significant not only for addressing a critical gap in military leadership diversity, but also for its potential to enhance the Navy's operational readiness, organizational climate, and talent acquisition by illuminating how intersecting factors of race and gender influenced career advancement opportunities for WoC (May, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021). Chapter three includes a comprehensive description of the research methodology and design, population, sample size, data collection methods, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. It also addresses the underlying assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

The qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it allowed for in-depth exploration of how WoC interpreted advancement barriers, processed experiences of discrimination or bias, and developed their sense of belonging and professional identity within the U.S. Navy. Qualitative research was valuable when exploring complex social phenomena that required rich description rather than numerical measurement, such as the underrepresentation of WoC in the Navy (Patton, 2015). The methodology yielded anecdotal insights about the lived experiences of a group, which may have remained hidden if a quantitative approach were utilized (Vasileiou et al., 2021).

The phenomenology design used in this study corresponded with the qualitative methodology to focus on exploring participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology was the appropriate design to prioritize the voices and perspectives of WoC, illuminating the unique challenges and opportunities they encountered as they navigated careers in a predominantly male and racially homogenous environment (Adams-Harmon, 2024). The phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to investigate factors contributing to WoC's underrepresentation in senior enlisted roles by investigating the interplay of individual experiences, organizational culture, and systemic barriers (Creswell, 2014).

The phenomenological approach aligned well with the intersectionality theoretical framework guiding this study because it allowed for a deep exploration of how multiple, overlapping identities were lived and experienced in specific contexts. By focusing on the essence of participants' lived experiences, phenomenology enabled the researcher to uncover how intersecting aspects of identity, particularly race and gender, were not experienced as separate categories but as simultaneous, mutually constitutive realities that shaped how WoC

navigated their careers in the Navy (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). This approach provided the methodological tools to capture the nuanced ways in which institutional structures, interpersonal dynamics, and individual agency interacted at these intersections, revealing both the unique challenges WoC faced and the resilience strategies they developed in response (Grzanka, 2023).

Two alternative qualitative designs were considered but determined to be less appropriate. Grounded theory is used to generate theoretical frameworks but is less effective for understanding lived experiences within specific contexts (Clarke et al., 2023). The case study design was inappropriate for this study because the focus was on understanding participants' perceptions. For this study, understanding the WoC's lived experiences and perceptions to gain insights into systemic patterns was equally important (Carter & Sims, 2022; Robinson & Burwell, 2023).

The quantitative methodology was inappropriate for this study because numerical data could not adequately represent the complex, lived experiences of WoC in Navy leadership. While the quantitative methodology was used for measuring variables and identifying statistical relationships, it could not adequately be used to reveal the nuanced intersectional realities these servicewomen navigated (Harari & Lee, 2021). The emphasis on numerical representation and statistical significance would deflate the richness of personal narratives and contextual factors that shaped promotion barriers. Also, a quantitative approach would have failed to explore the subtle manifestations of systemic bias, informal mentorship dynamics, and organizational culture that could not be reduced to measurable variables. The complexity of intersectional experiences required a methodological approach that could accommodate ambiguity and contradiction which quantitative methodology, with its positivist underpinnings, was inherently limited in addressing (Grim et al., 2020; Rice & Grabe, 2020).

The current state of the military required employment of qualitative studies to capture diverse experiences (Ospina & Douds, 2022). This was a key factor in deciding to employ a qualitative study to ensure alignment with military expectations. The qualitative phenomenological approach specifically addressed the research questions designed to explore how WoC perceived their career progression, what barriers and biases they encountered, and how their experiences shaped their identity and belonging within the Navy. The findings in this study may have informed interventions and policies promoting diversity and inclusion in the Navy.

Population and Sample

The population in this study was retired U.S. Navy WoC who reached E8 (Senior Chief Petty Officer) or E9 (Master Chief Petty Officer) ranks. Purposive and snowballing sampling were employed to select 10-15 participants for this study. This sample size of 15 participants was appropriate because it aligned with recommended ranges for qualitative research using interviews, and data saturation was achieved at the 10th interview (Guest et al., 2020). This sample size balanced the need for sufficient depth of analysis with practical constraints, while still enabling rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences as WoC in Navy leadership positions (Vasileiou et al., 2021). The eligibility criteria for participation in this study were WoCs with an average of 15 or more years of naval experience across diverse roles, and identify as African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American servicemembers. Their career paths provided crucial insights into navigational strategies through institutional barriers and advancement opportunities. These perspectives were essential given the underrepresentation of WoC in senior military leadership positions across all branches of service.

The population offered valuable insights into leadership development, barrier navigation strategies, and the influence of intersectional factors (Jones & Williams, 2021). By drawing from diverse professional backgrounds and organizational experiences, participants could shed light on the complex interplay between identity and institutional structures. The research questions were designed to specifically examine personal narratives, leadership approaches, and perceptions of organizational culture, making this population ideally suited to provide relevant data.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol (Appendix A) served as the data collection instrument for this study to guide semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility and in-depth exploration of participant experiences while focusing on specific topics relevant to the research questions (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' career aspirations, mentorship, perceived barriers and the impact of race and gender (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before implementation, the interview protocol underwent expert validation by a panel from both academia and industry who reviewed the interview questions. The experts provided comments on clarity of questions, understandability of wording for the target population, shared meaning of terminology across the target population, respectfulness toward the target population, freedom from bias and influence, and relevance of all questions to the research topic and purpose (Dunwoodie et al., 2023; Simon & Goes, 2022). The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom with audio/video recording to ensure accurate data capture and transcription.

The interview protocol featured open-ended questions structured around key themes that encouraged participants to share their narratives, perspectives, and insights about their

experiences as WoC in the U.S. Navy. The themes progressed from early life experiences and motivations for joining the Navy, to leadership development and career advancement opportunities, challenges, and strategies, to perceptions of organizational culture and support for diversity and inclusion, and finally to intersecting factors of race and gender and their influence throughout naval careers. To establish trustworthiness in this qualitative study, data sources were used, including interviews and field notes, to corroborate findings (Amin et al., 2020).

A detailed audit trail was used to document all methodological decisions and changes throughout the research process (Carcary, 2020). A transcript checking procedure was employed to provide participants the opportunity to review interview transcripts and confirm that their experiences had been accurately reflected. These procedures also allowed participants to add context or correct inaccuracies (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview materials were tailored to address the unique requirements of this study. The in-depth interviews captured the richness and complexity of these WoC narratives, providing a holistic understanding essential for developing effective interventions and policies (Lim, 2024).

Study Procedures

Recruitment efforts began after obtaining approval from National University's (NU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). A recruitment flyer (Appendix B) was posted on LinkedIn, Facebook groups for Navy veterans, and military-affiliated online communities. Formal recruitment requests were sent to the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, with snowball sampling employed as an additional recruitment strategy.

Those who expressed interest in the study were contacted via email or social media, followed by a detailed study information letter (Appendix C). Each candidate underwent

screening to ensure they met the study criteria: identifying as a WoC, retired from the U.S. Navy with the rank of E8 or E9, and a willingness to share career experiences. Letters of consent were sent to those who met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study, and informed consent was obtained before proceeding with the interview (Gyure et al., 2014; Klykken, 2022). This consent process ensured that participation was voluntary and based on clear, unambiguous information about what engagement in the research would entail, emphasizing participants' right to withdraw at any time (Nusbaum et al., 2017). This approach ensured maximum reach within the target demographic while maintaining ethical recruitment standards (Goldstein et al., 2024).

Interviews were scheduled to take place via Zoom video conferencing to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality. Informed consent was reviewed with each participant at the start of the interview and verbal consent was obtained. The interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in length guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) containing open-ended questions that allowed for flexibility while ensuring coverage of key themes. Active listening techniques encouraged participants to elaborate on responses and share in-depth experiences, with probing questions employed when participants mentioned relevant experiences but did not elaborate sufficiently (Drabble et al., 2021).

Interviews were audio/video recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate and comprehensive data for analysis. The Zoom transcription tool was used to record interviews verbatim, and the researcher reviewed each transcript against the original recording to ensure accuracy. Field notes were used to document observations, reflections, and initial impressions using a researcher-developed template (Philippi & Lauderdale, 2018). A contingency protocol was used to address technical difficulties, including rescheduling options and alternative communication methods. Participants received their transcript via encrypted email for

verification. Participant feedback was incorporated into final versions. These multiple check points of the transcriptions strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings (Birt et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

NVivo 14 software was used to manage and organize the large volume of qualitative data, allowing for systematic coding and theme development through a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). NVivo's advanced query capabilities and visualization tools facilitated the identification of patterns and relationships across different data sources, strengthening the analytical rigor of the study. Systematic documentation through detailed memos enhanced decoding validity throughout the process (Saldana, 2021).

The centralized database repository facilitated comprehensive analysis of patterns and themes across data sources using qualitative data analysis techniques. Through careful attention to file management and documentation practices, the database supported the analytical rigor and ethical requirements of qualitative research (Briney et al., 2020). The systematic data management approach ensured transparency in the research process and enables potential replication of the study methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The procedures collectively contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings regarding the experiences of WoC in the Navy's senior enlisted leadership positions. This analytical approach was specifically designed to address the research questions guiding this study. Through systematic coding and thematic analysis, this study may have generated findings that directly responded to these questions, illuminating both individual experiences and broader systemic patterns that influenced leadership advancement for WoC.

The review of codes and emergent themes ensured accurate representation of participants' perceptions and lived experiences by refining codes as new insights emerged. This created robust output examining both systemic barriers and how intersecting factors such as race and gender interacted with organizational culture to contribute to underrepresentation. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were cross referenced to enhance trustworthiness.

Transcript checking allowed participants to review preliminary findings, validating interpretations and providing additional insights (Birt et al., 2016). NVivo was used to identify themes regarding intersectionality, leadership development, and military organizational culture. The researcher's role encompassed acknowledgment of positionality, including gender, racial identity, and military service background, which provided both insider understanding and potential biases when examining participants' experiences (Holmes, 2020). This position required continuous reflexivity to ensure interpretations remained faithful to participants' voices while recognizing how personal experiences may have shaped data analysis. Additionally, a reflexive journal was used to document reactions, potential biases, and evolving interpretations throughout the research process (Peterson et al., 2022; Thurairajah, 2019).

Assumptions

Research studies include assumptions as philosophical ideas that inform the research process and shape the researcher's approach to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first assumption was that participants would provide honest accounts of their experiences. Therefore, safe spaces had to be created for open sharing (Tracy, 2019). Another assumption was that the collected data would adequately reflect participants' perspectives on the phenomenon under study, aligning with the constructivist paradigm that reality was subjectively co-constructed through interactions (Ponterotto, 2021).

A methodological assumption was that thematic analysis would yield meaningful insights about WoC experiences in the Navy due to its established rigor and trustworthiness as a qualitative research method (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This approach allowed for the identification of patterns across participants' lived experiences while maintaining sensitivity to the nuanced contexts in which leadership barriers manifested. Transcript checking was used to enhance analytical credibility and minimize researcher bias, directly addressing research questions regarding barriers and intersecting factors contributing to underrepresentation in senior enlisted Navy positions (McGrath & Whitty, 2022).

Limitations

Research limitations are an integral component of scholarly inquiry that acknowledged the boundaries of a study's findings while simultaneously enhancing its credibility through transparent recognition of methodological constraints (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2022). There were several limitations in this study. The sample size of 15 WoC at E8/E9 ranks was adequate for qualitative research but may have limited the transferability of the findings (Palinkas et al., 2015).

To address this limitation, data collection was continued until saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive thematic development despite the relatively small sample size (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Another limitation was the population of the Navy E8/E9 ranks (Senior Chief/Master Chief Petty Officers). While the ranks may have been perceived as a delimitation, it was a limitation in this study as E8 and E9 ranks are the individuals qualified for senior enlisted roles. To mitigate this limitation, cross-verification through multiple data sources, including interviews and archival records, was employed to enhance the depth and breadth of insights gathered from this specific population (Fusch et al., 2021). Finally, the researcher's bias

may have been a limitation since the researcher served in the E9 rank. To address this limitation, the researcher employed strategies such as reflexive journaling to minimize personal influence and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2023).

Delimitations

Delimitations are parameters the researcher set for the study (Saunders et al., 2022). A delimitation in this study was WoC who had achieved E-8 and E-9 ranks in the Navy rather than all military branches or all leadership levels (Goffnett & Bennett, 2022). This delimitation stemmed from the intersectionality framework, which emphasized the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). By focusing on WoC in these senior enlisted roles, the study acknowledged the unique experiences and challenges they faced at the intersection of these identities within a specific organizational context. This delimitation was purposeful, allowing for concentrated analysis of factors for this specific population rather than attempting to capture the broader military leadership landscape.

Another delimitation was choosing to use the qualitative methodology and phenomenology design. The desire to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perspectives drove this study and aligned with the phenomenological nature of the research questions. This approach allowed for rich, nuanced data that captured the complexity of their journeys and the factors contributing to their success (Tracy, 2019). The chosen methodology accounted for the influence of specific contexts and cultures within the Navy on these experiences, with a sample size of 15.

Ethical Assurances

Approval from NU's IRB was obtained before data collection commenced. This process ensured ethical guidelines were followed and protected the rights and well-being of the

participants (Sieber & Tolich, 2021). The ethical assurances established several safeguards to minimize potential harm to participants through a comprehensive informed consent process where participants received clear explanations about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time (Corrigan, 2017). The interviews took place virtually, allowing participants to choose a private location where they could share their thoughts comfortably without worrying about being overheard. All participant data was kept confidential and stored securely throughout the research process on a password protector computer accessible only by the researcher.

The research design incorporated confidentiality protections throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting through encrypted data storage, removal of personal identifiers, restricted committee-only access, and transparent participant disclosure procedures. All transcripts and reports used pseudonyms rather than names or service identifiers. Any potentially identifying information including specific ships, commands, dates, or unique career details that could inadvertently reveal participants' identities was removed or altered. Digital recordings underwent encryption immediately following interviews and before any transmission or storage. The results presented collective themes and carefully selected quotations that aimed to maintain participant anonymity. These measures protected participants from potential professional or personal consequences of sharing their experiences (Johnson, 2024).

All study data remained securely stored per NU IRB requirements and federal data protection guidelines. The research protocol required storing digital data in password-protected files on an encrypted computer with multi-factor authentication, accessible only to authorized individuals (Anabo et al., 2019). Physical documents including consent forms and field notes will remain in a locked filing cabinet within a secure office accessible only by the researcher.

IRB regulations required the retention of all data for three years after the completion of the study. After reaching the retention deadline, secure digital deletion methods and physical shredding would permanently destroy all data documents (Serpico, 2024).

Primary data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted, with acknowledgment of potential influences on these processes. The researcher's background as a WoC and retired Navy E9 may have shaped perspectives during data collection and analysis. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to mitigate these potential biases by documenting reactions, assumptions, and interpretive decisions (Smith, 2020). The data analysis process systematically looked for disconfirming evidence that challenged emerging interpretations. These strategies ensured rigor while addressing the researcher's positionality.

Summary

This study featured phenomenological inquiry with retired Navy WoC E-8/E-9s through purposive sampling, Zoom interviews, NVivo analysis, acknowledged methodological assumptions and limitations, maintained focused delimitations within intersectionality theory, and upheld ethical standards while investigating these underrepresented leaders' experiences. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit 15 participants for semi-structured interviews. To ensure data integrity, audio and video recording and transcript checking procedures were employed. NVivo software was used as the thematic analysis tool to support data management, coding, and identifying thematic relationships, with peer debriefing sessions enhancing analytical rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

All research has inherent assumptions, limitations, and delimitations built into the studies (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2022). The assumptions in this study were participant honesty, data representation, and selected methodology. The limitations included sample size, rank, and

researcher bias. The delimitations were focusing specifically on retired WoC Navy E-8/E-9s within a qualitative phenomenological framework, directly aligning with intersectionality theory to examine how multiple identities interacted within Navy power structures. Ethical considerations encompassed IRB review, informed consent procedures, and participant confidentiality protections through detailed data security protocols for sensitive information. Chapter four included a discussion of how trustworthiness of the study is established. The results of the study were presented representing the key themes from the thematic analysis of the data and rich descriptions from the participants leadership journeys and career experiences.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. Despite formal diversity initiatives and inclusion policies, institutional barriers and cultural dynamics continue to impede the advancement of WoC into leadership positions, creating a significant gap between organizational diversity goals and actual representation at the senior enlisted level.

The results of the study are presented in this chapter including information about the trustworthiness of the data and the results of the data analysis. The analysis revealed key themes and patterns that emerged from the data, providing insights into the barriers and factors contributing to the underrepresentation of WoC in top senior enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. The results of the data analysis were organized by research questions followed by an evaluation of the findings.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies addressing Lincoln and Guba's (2023) four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The criteria served as the foundational framework for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research and were systematically implemented throughout the research process to

enhance the scholarly contribution of the study. This comprehensive approach strengthened the understanding of WoC's experiences in the Navy's senior enlisted leadership positions.

Credibility represents the confidence that can be placed in the truth and accuracy of research findings, constituting a shared quality criterion across qualitative research paradigms that pertains to how research is conducted (Timonen et al., 2024). Credibility was ensured through methodological rigor using multiple data sources including in-depth semi-structured interviews and transcript checking through participant verification of transcripts (Lloyd et al., 2024). Transcript checking allowed for cross-validation of findings and provided participants with the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their statements and the researcher's initial interpretations. In-depth exploration of participant experiences and careful analysis of patterns across interviews enhanced the accuracy of the data collection process.

Transferability refers to the degree to which a study's findings can be transferred to other contexts, settings, or respondents, and constitutes a key quality criterion that can be assessed through three dimensions: applicability, resonance, and theoretical engagement (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed contextual descriptions of participants' backgrounds, organizational settings, historical timeframes, and comprehensive methodology documentation to help readers determine if the findings apply to their own contexts (Ahmed, 2024). Rich, thick descriptions of the Navy's organizational culture, promotion processes, and the specific challenges faced by WoC in senior enlisted positions enable future researchers to assess applicability. Detailed descriptions allow practitioners to determine the relevance of findings to similar military or hierarchical organizational contexts.

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of research findings over time, focusing on transparency of research processes and emphasizing documentation of research

decisions rather than seeking replicable results (Enworo, 2023). Dependability was maintained through comprehensive audit trails documenting all methodological decisions, data collection procedures, coding processes, and analytical steps, allowing for study replication and verification of research processes (Ahmed, 2024). The detailed records included interview protocols, coding schemes, and decision-making rationales that provided transparency in the research process. The comprehensive documentation enabled external auditors to follow the researcher's methodological journey from data collection through final interpretation.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are grounded in the data and are not simply the product of the researcher's own biases or preferences, ensuring that findings are systematically grounded in the data through transparent analytical processes (Enworo, 2023). Confirmability was achieved by adhering to the established data collection process and maintaining reflexive journaling throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias and ensure findings emerged authentically from participant data rather than researcher preconceptions (Ahmed, 2024; Enworo, 2023). The reflexive journal served as a record of the researcher's assumptions, reactions to participant responses, and evolving understanding of the phenomena under investigation. This transparent record demonstrated how personal perspectives were acknowledged and managed to maintain objectivity in data analysis and interpretation (Dado et al., 2023).

Results

A total of 15 individuals participated in the study. The demographics included women who identified as African American (9), Filipino (1), Hispanic (2), Korean (1), Korean-Italian (1), and Nigerian (1). Nine of the participants were retired Master Chief Petty Officers (E9) and the remaining six participants retired as Senior Chief Petty Officers (E8). The participants had

between 21 and 33 years of service and their job specialty ranged from executive leadership, operations and support roles. The diverse representation of racial and ethnic backgrounds among participants provided valuable perspectives on the intersectional experiences of WoC navigating senior enlisted leadership roles within the Navy's hierarchical structure. Their extensive service records, spanning over two decades, offered rich insights into the evolution of policies, practices, and cultural shifts they witnessed and influenced throughout their careers. All the participants eagerly volunteered within days of the flyer being advertised on social media and each were interviewed within one week of verifying they met the research criteria. Table 1 reflects the demographic information self-identified by participants and pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Race	Rank	Years of Service	Job Specialty
P1	African American	E9	30 years	Cryptology Collections
P2	African American	E8	21 years	Cryptology Maintenance
P3	Filipino	E8	26 years	Engineering
P4	Hispanic	E8	26 years	Admin
P5	African American	E9	30 years	Executive Admin
P6	African American	E8	22 years	Culinary Specialist
P7	Korean	E8	22 years	Executive Admin
P8	Nigerian	E9	30 years	Command Master Chief
P9	Korean/Italian	E9	30 years	Hospital Corpman
P10	African American	E8	26 years	Supply
P11	Hispanic	E9	24 years	Navy Inspector
P12	African American	E9	20 years	Air Traffic Controller
P13	African American	E9	31 years	Command Master Chief
P14	African American	E9	30 years	Information Technician
P15	African American	E9	33 years	Command Master Chief

The interview data collected from participants was analyzed using NVivo to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clark, 2021a). This analytical approach involved a six-phase process of familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and final report production (Braun & Clark, 2021a). Through this process, nine distinct themes emerged that directly addressed the research questions concerning the underrepresentation of WoC in the U.S. Navy senior enlisted leadership roles. These themes included discrimination, implicit bias, limited career advancement, organizational culture, coping and resistance strategies, double minority status impact, identity navigation strategies, underrepresentation factors, and visible representation. Each theme was examined for its relevance to understanding the structural bias and barriers and intersectionality experiences faced by WoC in naval leadership contexts. Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of each identified theme, detailing its specific alignment to the research questions and documenting the number of study participants who contributed data to each thematic category. This approach ensured transparency in the analytical process and demonstrated the empirical foundation underlying the development of each theme.

Table 2*Results of Data Analysis*

Theme	Research Question	Contributing Participants
Discrimination	1	7
Implicit Bias	1	10
Limited Career Advancement	1	8
Organizational Culture	1	9
Coping and Resistance Strategies	2	6
Double Minority Status Impact	2	11
Identity Navigation Strategies	2	10
Underrepresentation Factors	2	15
Visible Representation	2	15

Research Question 1

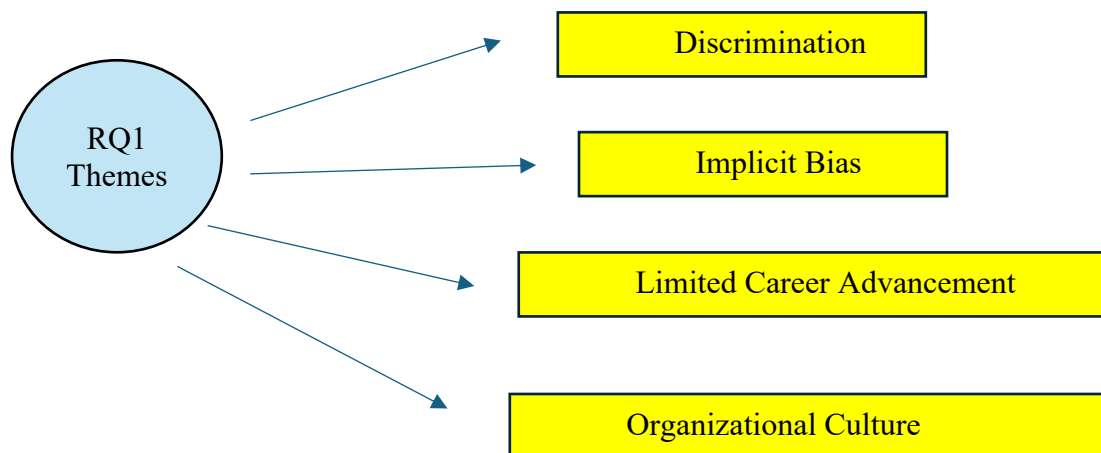
How do systemic barriers and biases impact the career advancement of WoC in the U.S. Navy, particularly those in senior enlisted roles?

The aim of research question one was to identify and analyze the structural, institutional, and cultural obstacles that create differential advancement trajectories for WoC compared to their peers in the naval enlisted hierarchy. This question facilitated exploration of both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that may impede progression to senior enlisted positions such as Senior Chief and Master Chief Petty Officer, Command Senior Chief and Master Chief positions and other high-visibility roles. Also, the research question was designed to better understand how organizational policies, informal networks, mentorship opportunities, and evaluation processes

may inadvertently or deliberately affect WoC. According to the study, experiences created by intersecting identities, where race and gender converge, differ from those faced by white women or men of color in similar roles. Figure 5 was developed on the collected data to illustrate the themes related to research question one: discrimination, implicit bias, limited career advancement, and organizational culture.

Figure 5

Themes Related to Research Question 1



Discrimination. This theme emerged with seven of the 15 participants (47%) describing both overt and subtle forms of discriminatory treatment that intersected with their identities as WoC in naval leadership. Participants described overt forms of discrimination, including explicit questioning of their qualifications based on racial or gender assumptions, exclusion from critical meetings and decision-making processes despite their senior enlisted status, and direct comments that undermined their authority in front of subordinates. P2 described: “there were times when my technical expertise was questioned in ways that my white male peers never experienced. I had to prove myself twice as hard for half the recognition. The subtle comments about my 'angry'

tone when I advocated for my team were particularly frustrating.” Similarly, P3 explained “the assumption that I could not handle certain operational assignments because of my gender and race was infuriating. I had to constantly advocate for challenging assignments to prove I belonged at the senior level.” These experiences were echoed by P12, who noted “the double standard in leadership expectations was exhausting. I had to be firm enough to lead but not ‘intimidating,’ competent but not ‘threatening,’ visible but not ‘attention-seeking.’ White leaders never faced these contradictions.”

Subtle discriminatory treatment proved equally damaging, operating through systemic patterns of marginalization that were often difficult to document but profoundly impactful on participants' career experiences. P7 shared how “comments like ‘you are different from other people like you’ were meant as compliments but reinforced harmful stereotypes. It created pressure to distance myself from my identity to be accepted.” P11 highlighted institutional barriers, stating “the lack of mentorship opportunities for WoC was apparent. Senior leaders did not see themselves in me, so I had to seek guidance outside traditional channels, which limited my access to insider knowledge.” The subtle nature of discrimination was further illustrated by P15, who explained “I was passed over for a senior position and later learned from a colleague that leadership felt I ‘would not be a good cultural fit.’ When I asked for specific feedback, they could not provide concrete examples.”

Seven participants reported being consistently assigned to administrative or support roles rather than operational leadership positions, receiving less constructive feedback during performance evaluations, and experiencing social isolation within professional networks. Participants seven, 11, and 15 described navigating both racial and gender-based bias simultaneously and managing multiple marginalized identities within a predominantly white,

male-dominated institutional culture, focusing on the constant negotiation processes. These participants emphasized that managing these dual identities required continuous adjustments to their communication styles, professional relationships, and self-presentation in workplace settings.

Implicit Bias. This theme emerged from 10 of the 15 participants (67%) who described experiencing unconscious prejudices and assumptions that systematically undermined their professional credibility and leadership potential within naval hierarchies. P6 observed: "Despite identical qualifications and performance metrics, my supervisors consistently rated the leadership potential of my white male peers higher than their female and minority counterparts, citing 'natural authority' and 'executive presence' qualities." P14 explained: "The data revealed a pattern where women and people of color were frequently overlooked for operational assignments or high-visibility projects, with managers unconsciously defaulting to what they perceived as 'safe choices', a phenomenon that disadvantaged women or people of color."

P1 observed that "in mixed meetings, questions would be directed to junior white males instead of me, even when the topic fell directly under my area of responsibility. They seemed to unconsciously assume that the young white sailor had more authority than the senior enlisted WoC." P3 noted that "during briefings, senior leaders would consistently look past me to ask my subordinates for technical details, even though I was the subject matter expert. It was as if they could not reconcile my appearance with expertise in my field." P10 described how "in strategic planning meetings, my ideas would be met with skepticism until a white colleague endorsed them. The same concept would suddenly become brilliant when it came from someone who 'looked like a leader' in their minds."

P5 shared that "when I walked into rooms wearing my senior enlisted insignia, people would still ask me to get coffee or take notes, assuming I was administrative support rather than the senior leader running the meeting. The automatic assumptions about my role were constant, regardless of my visible rank structure." P8 explained how "I was repeatedly assigned to community outreach and diversity roles, regardless of my actual expertise in operations. It seemed automatic that WoC equals diversity coordinator. My technical skills were consistently overlooked for these 'stereotyped' assignments." P3 noted that "despite having advanced degrees in engineering and years of operational experience, I was consistently tapped for 'cultural sensitivity' committees and minority recruitment efforts. They seemed to believe that my primary value was as a representative rather than as a technical expert who happened to be a WoC."

P9 stated: "The assumptions about my communication style were constant. If I was direct and decisive, I was labeled 'difficult to work with' or labeled 'the b.' If I was collaborative, I was seen as 'lacking leadership presence.' White male leaders never faced this scrutiny about their approach." P12 noted that "performance evaluations consistently rated me lower on 'leadership potential' despite measurable results. The feedback was always vague like 'executive presence' or 'cultural fit' terms that seemed to mean I did not match their mental image of a senior leader."

P14 described how "the microaggressions in selection processes were telling. Comments like 'we want to make sure standards are not lowered' when I was considered for competitive assignments revealed their unconscious assumption that my presence meant compromised quality."

Limited Career Advancement. This theme emerged from eight of the 15 participants (53%). P3 stated, "The promotion system in the Navy often relies heavily on informal networks and mentorship relationships that have historically excluded WoC. When advancement depends on mentorship from senior leaders who may not recognize or relate to the experiences of WoC, it

creates an invisible ceiling that limits progression to the highest enlisted ranks, regardless of performance or qualifications." P9 noted, "WoC in senior enlisted positions face a unique double burden they must navigate both gender bias that questions their leadership capabilities and racial bias that can lead to their contributions being overlooked or undervalued. This intersectional disadvantage becomes more pronounced at senior levels where representation dramatically decreases and the stakes for advancement are highest." P12 added "The lack of visible pathways to senior enlisted leadership for WoC creates a cascading effect throughout the ranks. When junior WoC sailors see limited representation in Command Master Chief and other senior enlisted positions, it signals that certain career pinnacles may be unattainable, leading to decreased retention and a loss of diverse talent at precisely the levels where institutional change could be most impactful."

P2 described this predicament: "I was consistently told I needed more operational experience to advance, but when I requested operational billets, I was told they needed me in my current administrative role. It was a catch-22 that kept me from getting the experience required for senior positions." This pattern was echoed by P15, who explained how "I was pigeonholed into diversity and admin roles throughout my career. While important work, it kept me away from the operational leadership experience that was valued for advancement to the highest enlisted positions."

P6 noted that "the informal networks where advancement opportunities were discussed happened in spaces where I was not welcome or comfortable. Golf courses, bars after work, places where career conversations happened but I was not invited to them." Similarly, P12 observed that "every high-profile assignment seemed to go to the 'usual suspects' a network of

leaders who recommended each other. As an outsider to that network, I had to work twice as hard for opportunities that others received through relationships."

P11 explained how "the lack of mentorship was devastating for my career. I had mentors who offered advice, but no one was willing to put their reputation on the line to advocate for me. Without that crucial support, I hit a ceiling I could not break through alone." P8 described: "I watched less qualified white colleagues get fast-tracked through developmental programs while I was repeatedly told to 'wait my turn' or that 'the timing was not right.' The timeline for my advancement always seemed longer than others."

P13 shared that "the feedback I received was always about needing to develop 'leadership presence' or 'executive bearing,' but no one could explain what that meant or how to develop it. It felt like code for 'you do not look like our idea of a leader.'" P10 identified the fundamental issue underlying these barriers: "Senior leaders would praise my work but never connected it to advancement opportunities. I realized they saw me as a great performer in my current role but could not envision me in senior leadership. Their mental model of a senior enlisted leader did not include someone who looked like me."

Organizational Culture. This theme emerged from nine of the 15 participants (60%). P7 explained: "The culture is not just about rules and regulations; it's about who gets invited to the table. We're often seen as an 'add-on' rather than a core part of the team, especially when it comes to promotions and high-visibility assignments." P10 added: "The traditional side of Navy culture is a double-edged sword, it can be a source of strength and unity, but its rigid adherence to historical archetypes can create a labyrinth of unwritten rules and social tests that often exclude those who don't fit the mold."

P1 articulated this experience: "The Navy culture felt like an exclusive club where I was an outsider. The informal gatherings, the shared references, the way decisions were really made it all happened in spaces where I did not belong or was not welcome." This exclusion was reinforced by P5, who explained how "the 'good old boys' network is alive and well. Critical information, opportunities, and support flowed through informal channels that I had no access to. By the time official announcements were made, the real decisions had already been made elsewhere." P12 described the cultural isolation: "The Navy's emphasis on 'one team, one fight' felt hollow when I was consistently excluded from the informal mentoring relationships that actually mattered for advancement. I watched my white male peers get invited to golf outings, fishing trips, and casual conversations within senior leadership spaces where real guidance and career opportunities were shared. No matter how hard I worked or how qualified I was, those doors remained closed to me."

P4 described this burden: "I constantly had to code-switch between my authentic self and what the organization expected." P10 elaborated on how cultural standards were applied differentially: "The emphasis on 'military bearing' and 'professional appearance' often felt like coded language for conforming to white, male standards. My braided hair, my communication style, and my leadership approach. Everything was scrutinized through that lens." P6 noted "there was an unspoken expectation to be grateful for any opportunity rather than advocating for what I deserved. The culture discouraged assertiveness from WoC while rewarding it in white male leaders." P14 explained how cultural norms reinforced exclusion: "There was this unwritten rule about 'fitting in' that really meant assimilating into a very specific cultural mold. When I brought up ideas that reflected different perspectives or challenged traditional approaches, I was labeled as 'not a team player' or 'too aggressive.' The same

suggestions, when presented by my white male colleagues, were seen as innovative leadership. The culture demanded conformity to their standards while punishing authenticity from WoC." P9 described how "when I raised concerns about discriminatory treatment, the culture of 'not rocking the boat' meant I was seen as a troublemaker rather than someone trying to improve the organization. Speaking up came with professional consequences." P8 articulated this dynamic clearly, stating how "the lack of representation at senior levels sent a clear message about who belonged. I rarely saw anyone who looked like me in leadership positions, making it difficult to envision my own future in the organization."

Research Question 2

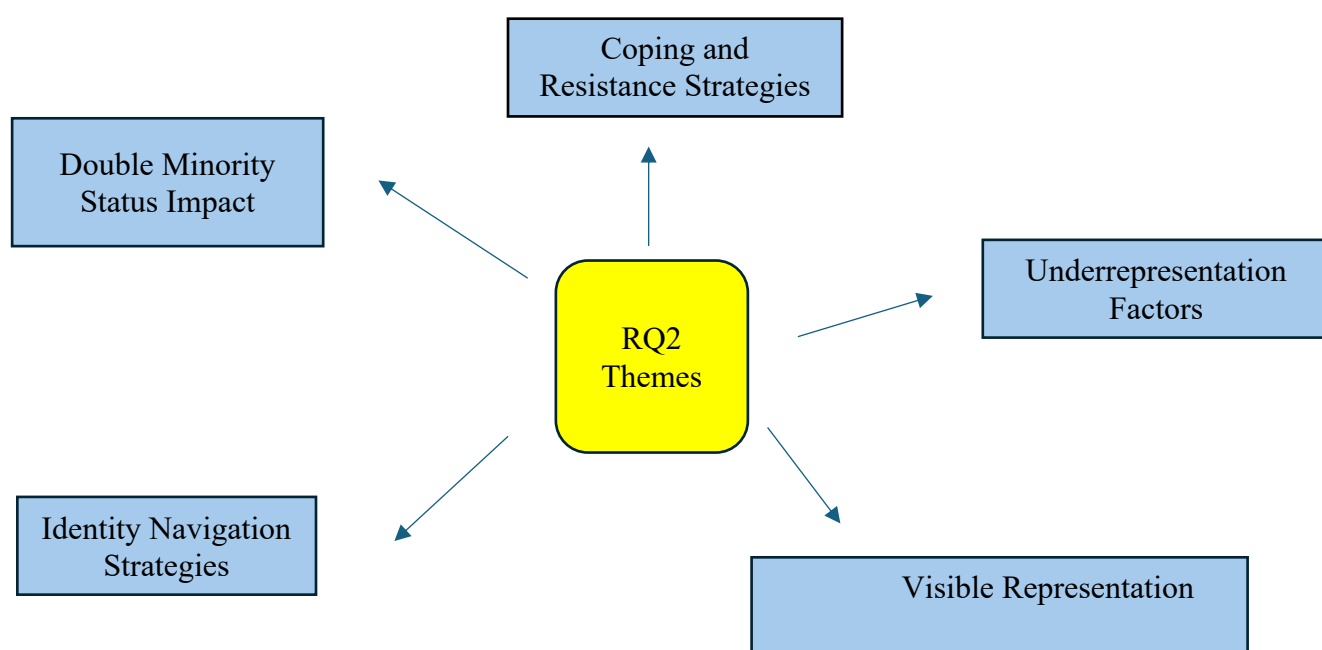
How do intersecting factors of race and gender, organizational culture and policies, contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in top senior enlisted roles within the U.S. Navy?

Research question two was designed to explore the complex matrix of systemic barriers that create compounding challenges for WoC as they navigate their naval careers toward senior leadership positions. This question was designed to identify specific organizational practices, cultural norms, and policy structures that may inadvertently or directly impede advancement opportunities for this demographic group. By exploring the intersectionality of race and gender within the military context, the purpose of the research was to explore how multiple identity factors interact with institutional frameworks to create unique obstacles that differ from those faced by white women or men of color individually. The question was intended to provide insights into the multifaceted nature of underrepresentation, moving beyond surface-level observations to understand the deeper structural and cultural elements that perpetuate disparities in senior enlisted leadership representation within the Navy's hierarchy. Figure 6 was developed

based on the collected data to illustrate the themes related to research question two: coping and resistance strategies, double minority status impact, visible representation, underrepresentation factors, and identity navigation strategies.

Figure 6

Themes Related to Research Question 2



Coping and Resistance Strategies. This theme emerged from six of the 15 participants (33%). P1 said, "I learned early on that I had to be twice as good and work twice as hard just to be considered equal. I developed a system where I would document everything, build strategic alliances with key leaders, and always have a backup plan. It's exhausting, but it's what you have to do to survive and advance in this environment." This was supported by P15, "You have to master the art of code-switching knowing when to speak up and when to stay quiet, how to assert yourself without being labeled as 'aggressive,' and finding mentors who understand the unique

challenges you face as a Black woman in Navy leadership. I call it my 'professional armor'. It protects me but it's heavy to carry every day."

P1 articulated this approach: "I learned early on to document everything and build relationships with allies who could vouch for my work when others tried to diminish my contributions." P5 described her strategy: "My strategy was to be so undeniably excellent that they could not ignore me, while also finding other WoC to support and be supported by." P11 explained her approach: "I had to develop what I call 'selective hearing' knowing when to address issues head-on and when to strategically ignore comments that would drain my energy."

P14 described how "building a network outside the Navy helped me maintain perspective and remember my worth when the institutional environment became overwhelming." P10 said, "My network of Black women professionals became my reality check when the Navy made me question myself. They reminded me that the problem wasn't my performance it was a system not designed for us. That outside validation gave me the strength to keep pushing for advancement despite the barriers." P3 stated, "I had to go outside the Navy to find people who believed in my potential because the institution just wasn't equipped to support WoC leaders." P13 described: "The fact that I needed my external network more than my Navy mentors told me everything about how the system fails women who look like me."

P8 explained: "I learned to speak their language in meetings, but I never lost who I was. I just packaged myself differently depending on the audience." P15 articulated: "I made it my mission to be visible in leadership roles so younger sailors could see someone who looked like them in positions of authority." P4 noted: "We created our own informal networks because the 'good old boys' club was not going to open its doors. We had to build our own table."

P11 demonstrated this cognitive resistance: "Every time someone doubted my abilities because of who I was, it just made me work harder to prove them wrong. Their doubt became my fuel." P12 explained: "I used my different perspective as an asset, showing how diversity of thought made us stronger as a unit. I was not just fitting in; I was showing them what they were missing." P7 described: "Once I got to the table, I made sure to speak up about issues affecting all sailors, not just people who looked like me. But I definitely made sure those voices were heard."

Double Minority Status Impact. This theme emerged from 11 of the 15 participants (73%). This was supported by P6: "Being both Black and a woman meant I was either 'too aggressive' or 'not assertive enough' there was literally no way to win in their eyes." P11 stated: "I faced double scrutiny because I had to prove myself worthy as both a woman in a male-dominated field and as a Hispanic person in a predominantly white institution."

P2 articulated this fundamental challenge: "Being a Black woman in the Navy means I am constantly fighting two battles. Proving I belong as a woman and proving I am capable as a person of color. It is exhausting." This dual burden was intensified by heightened visibility and scrutiny, as P4 explained: "I feel like I am under a microscope all the time. Any mistakes I make reflects not just on me, but on all women and all Latinas in the service."

P6 described this predicament: "The isolation is real. White women do not always understand the racial aspects of my experience, and Black men do not always get the gender challenges I face." P8 explained how "I have been told I am 'too aggressive' for being assertive as a woman but then criticized for being 'too soft' when I do not fit the stereotype of a strong Black woman." P11 described how "colleagues would openly question whether I earned my position or

if it was just handed to me because of my race and gender, which undermined my credibility despite my proven track record."

P12 explained how "I find myself code-switching constantly adjusting my behavior depending on whether I am in a room full of white officers or trying to connect with junior enlisted sailors of color." P13 articulated this weight: "The burden of representation is heavy. I know that younger sailors are watching me, and I feel responsible for opening doors for the next generation." P14 reflected, "Sometimes I wonder if I would have advanced faster if I were just dealing with gender bias or just racial bias, instead of both compounding each other."

Identity Navigation Strategies. This theme emerged from 10 of the 15 participants (67%). P1 described: "I'm constantly reading the room to decide which version of myself is safe to show the professional Navy leader or the authentic Black woman." P7 shared: "Every meeting, every interaction, I have to calculate whether being my full self will help or hurt my chances of advancing in this system."

P1 described this adaptive capability: "I've become an expert at assessing who's in the room and what version of myself will be most successful. It's exhausting but necessary for survival in this environment." P7 elaborated on this constant vigilance: "You're always scanning, always calculating; can I speak up here, do I need to tone down my personality, will my natural leadership style be seen as aggressive? It's like having a second job that never ends." P9 described the strategic thinking involved: "Before I even walk into a space, I'm already three moves ahead. What are the power dynamics, who are the allies, how do I position myself to be heard without being labeled as difficult or angry?"

P5 explained her approach: "I developed what I call my 'professional mask' maintaining my core values while adapting my communication style to what would be heard and respected in

different settings." P8 described a similar strategy: "I've learned to package my authentic self in ways that don't threaten the status quo. Same message, different delivery depending on whether I'm talking to peers, subordinates, or senior leadership."

P2 described the delicate balance required: "There's an art to being the voice for change without becoming the angry Black woman who's always complaining I have to be strategic about my reputation while still pushing for progress." P4 described her strategic positioning: "I frame diversity conversations in terms of mission readiness and operational effectiveness. I've learned that talking about fairness gets you labeled as complainers, but talking about winning gets their attention." P7 described her calculated approach: "I became very strategic about when to bring up issues of diversity and inclusion, timing these conversations when leadership was most receptive to hearing different perspectives."

P3 characterized her selective cultural expression: "I choose my moments carefully - during heritage months or diversity events, I can be more openly cultural, but day-to-day I focus on universal values from my background that align with Navy core values." P8 explained how "I found ways to honor my cultural background while still fitting into Navy traditions like incorporating elements of my heritage into command events when appropriate." P14 described her role as cultural connector: "I've become skilled at finding common ground between my cultural values and military traditions. Showing how concepts like honor, courage, and commitment exist in both worlds, just expressed differently."

P9 articulated this challenge: "I had to learn to separate my personal identity from my professional identity without losing sight of who I am at my core; it is a delicate balance." P10 explained her protective strategy: "I've learned to keep my core self in a safe space that the

institution can't touch. They can dictate my behavior and even my words, but my values, my sense of self-worth, my cultural pride, that stays mine."

P4 explained her distinctive role: "My lived experience as both a woman and a person of color gives me insights that others don't have. I can see blind spots in leadership decisions and help them understand how policies will actually impact different communities within our ranks."

P11 described her strategic positioning: "I positioned myself as a bridge between different groups, helping translate cultural differences and facilitating better understanding across racial and gender lines."

Underrepresentation Factors. This theme emerged from 100% of participants. P2 explained how "the informal networks that really drive advancement opportunities are still dominated by white males who tend to support people who look like them." P3 observed how "I have seen qualified WoC passed over for high-visibility assignments that are crucial for promotion to senior leadership roles."

P5 described how "there is an unwritten expectation that you have to conform to a very specific leadership style that does not always align with how WoC naturally lead." P8 noted that "the evaluation system is supposed to be objective, but there is so much subjectivity in leadership assessments that bias inevitably creeps in." P9 explained how "when you are one of the few or the only WoC in leadership spaces, you do not have the same access to informal mentorship and guidance." P10 observed how "when WoC speak up or advocate for themselves, they are often labeled as 'difficult' or 'not team players' in ways that men are not."

P11 described how "the lack of representation creates a vicious cycle young sailors do not see people who look like them in senior roles, so they do not envision themselves there." P12 explained "There is still this underlying assumption that the 'natural' leader is a white male, and

everyone else has to prove they can measure up to that standard." P14 noted how "diversity initiatives often focus on getting WoC in the door, but they do not address the cultural barriers that prevent us from advancing once we are there."

P15 described experiencing "situations where my competence was questioned in ways that would not happen to my white male peers with similar or even less experience." P1 echoed similar concerns, noting "The barriers are so embedded in the culture that even well-intentioned policies cannot overcome them without deeper systemic change." P4 added, "We are constantly having to prove ourselves in ways that others do not, and that takes energy away from actually leading." P6 reflected on how "The system was not designed for people like us, and that shows in every aspect of advancement." P7 observed, "Even when policies change on paper, the informal culture that really determines who gets ahead stays the same." P13 explained, "There is this expectation that we should be grateful for any opportunity, while others see opportunities as their right."

Visible Representation. This theme emerged from 100% of participants. P4 explained "When I made Chief, a young Latina sailor told me she never thought she could reach that level until she saw me do it. That moment changed how I view my role." P5 reflected: "The first time I saw a Black woman as a Command Master Chief, it literally shifted my entire perspective on what was possible for my career." P6 described this burden: "I feel this constant pressure to be perfect because I know I am being watched not just as a leader, but as a WoC in a position of authority." P8 explained how "representation is not just about being present it is about being authentically yourself and showing that there are different ways to lead successfully."

P9 noted: "I have had junior sailors tell me they joined the Navy because they saw women who looked like them in leadership roles during recruiting events." P10 articulated this

challenge: "The lack of visible representation makes it hard to envision your future in the organization; you cannot be what you cannot see." P11 described her intentional approach: "I make it a point to be visible at community events and mentorship programs because I know how important it is for young WoC to see possibilities." P12 reflected on this responsibility: "Sometimes I feel like I am carrying the hopes and dreams of every WoC who wants to advance in the Navy it is both inspiring and overwhelming."

P13 described observing this validation during speaking engagements: "When I speak at leadership forums, I can see the impact on the faces of young sailors who never expected to hear their experiences reflected in senior leadership." P15 emphasized this limitation: "Visible representation has to be paired with creating inclusive environments. It is not enough to just have diverse faces if the culture does not support authentic leadership styles." P1 shared a similar perspective: "Being visible is just the first step you have to create pathways for others to follow." P2 noted, "Every time I walk into a room, I am conscious that someone is watching and learning what is possible." P3 described how "representation means showing up authentically and demonstrating that our leadership styles have value." P7 reflected, "I have had sailors reach out years later to tell me how seeing me in leadership changed their career trajectory." P14 emphasized, "Visibility comes with responsibility; you are not just representing yourself; you are opening doors for the next generation." P15 said, "When junior sailors see me in this role, it gives them hope, but I also feel the weight of knowing I can't mess up because I'm representing all Brown and Black women." P9 described: "I have to stay true to who I am while also being the change I want to see in the Navy. It's exhausting being both yourself and a symbol at the same time."

Evaluation of the Findings

This section presents a comprehensive evaluation of the study's findings in relation to the two primary research questions, demonstrating how the emergent themes provided empirical validation of intersectionality theory within the specific context of U.S. Navy organizational structures. The analysis revealed how participants lived experiences aligned with and extended existing theoretical frameworks, particularly regarding the unique challenges faced by WoC navigating multiple marginalized identities in military leadership positions. The synthesis of the nine identified themes illustrated the complex interplay between systemic barriers, organizational culture, and intersectional identity factors that continued to impede the advancement of WoC into senior enlisted leadership roles despite formal diversity initiatives.

Research Question 1: How do systemic barriers and biases impact the career advancement of WoC in the U.S. Navy, particularly those in senior enlisted roles?

The findings from research question one demonstrated strong alignment with intersectionality theory as the guiding theoretical framework, providing empirical validation of foundational work within the specific context of military organizational structures (Crenshaw,1989). The four emergent themes of discrimination, implicit bias, limited career advancement, and organizational culture directly supported intersectionality theory, which posits that individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience unique forms of discrimination that cannot be understood by examining race or gender separately. This intersectional lens proved essential for understanding how participants navigated the complex interplay of racial and gender marginalization within Navy hierarchical structures.

The discrimination theme validated the core tenet of invisibility of intersectional theory when participants described experiencing both overt and subtle forms of bias that specifically

targeted their dual identity as women and people of color (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These findings aligned with intersectional research on the "double jeopardy" phenomenon, where WoC face compounded disadvantages in leadership contexts that differ qualitatively from those experienced by white women or men of color (Smith & Jones, 2021b). Through an intersectional framework, the participants' experiences of having their expertise questioned and authority undermined aligned with Smith and Stewart's (2021) findings on how intersecting identities create unique vulnerabilities in male-dominated organizational environments.

The implicit bias theme corroborated the emphasis in intersectionality theory on how multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously through organizational processes, supporting Moskos (1993a) and Reskin's (2003) seminal work on unconscious stereotypes in performance evaluations. An intersectional analysis revealed how participants' descriptions of differential treatment in assignment selection and performance reviews reflected the compounding effects of both racial and gender bias, aligning with research on how organizational processes perpetuate intersectional discrimination through seemingly neutral procedures (Jones & Williams, 2021). The "impossible double-bind" described by participants being perceived as either "too aggressive" or "not assertive enough" exemplified intersectional theory's prediction of unique stereotypical constraints, directly mirroring findings from intersectional leadership perception research (Settles, 2021b).

The limited career advancement theme supported intersectionality for understanding how multiple marginalized identities create complex barriers, extending beyond the "labyrinth" metaphor to encompass the intersectional maze that WoC navigate (Carli & Eagly, 2023). Through an intersectional lens, participants' experiences of exclusion from informal networks and high-visibility assignments validated research on how intersecting identities compound

barriers to accessing mentors and developmental opportunities critical for leadership advancement (Ely & Thomas, 2001). The systematic channeling of participants into administrative rather than operational roles reflected intersectional patterns documented in military gender integration research, where WoC face distinct barriers that differ from those experienced by other demographic groups (Rutherford & Miller, 2022).

Research Question 2: How do intersecting factors of race and gender, organizational culture and policies, contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in top senior enlisted roles within the U.S. Navy?

The findings from research question two provided robust empirical support for intersectionality theory while extending understanding of how multiple marginalized identities operate within military organizational contexts. The five themes of coping and resistance strategies, double minority status impact, identity navigation strategies, underrepresentation factors, and visible representation collectively validated and expanded upon existing theoretical frameworks. These findings demonstrated that the experiences of WoC in naval leadership positions were both consistent with existing intersectionality research and uniquely shaped by the hierarchical and masculine-coded culture of military institutions (Rutherford & Miller, 2022).

The double minority status impact theme directly supported Harris and Ford's (2023a) research on additive versus intersectional effects of multiple marginalized identities. Participants' descriptions of experiencing "intersectional invisibility" confirmed theoretical predictions about how individuals with multiple subordinate identities are often overlooked by policies designed to address single-axis discrimination (Jones & Williams, 2021). The heightened scrutiny and burden of representation described by participants aligned with research on the psychological costs of tokenism (Kanter, 1977).

The theme of identity navigation strategies validated work on "shifting" as a coping mechanism for WoC in professional settings (Cho et al., 2020; Grzanka, 2023). Participants' descriptions of "cultural code-switching" and "strategic authenticity" supported Jones and Kang's (2022) theoretical framework on identity performance in organizational contexts. These findings extended existing research by documenting specific navigation strategies within military hierarchical structures.

The theme of coping and resistance strategies aligned with the Black feminist thought framework, which emphasizes agency and resistance alongside oppression (Collins, 2020). Participants' development of support networks and mentorship relationships reflected research by Nirmul and Cabrejo (2025) on collective coping strategies among WoC leaders. The visible representation theme validated findings on the importance of role models while highlighting the additional burden experienced by visible minorities in leadership positions (Sims & Carter, 2022).

The theme of underrepresentation factors corroborated institutional discrimination research by demonstrating how formal inclusion policies can coexist with informal exclusionary practices (Fisher & Ramírez, 2023; Martinez et al., 2022). These findings supported work on how organizational cultures can undermine diversity initiatives through persistent informal networks and biased evaluation processes (Ely & Thomas, 2020). The participants' experiences validated research on military organizational culture by Rutherford and Miller (2022) regarding the persistence of masculine-coded leadership expectations despite formal gender integration policies.

Summary

The findings in this study represented a culmination of the lived experiences of 15 women of color (WoC) who achieved senior enlisted leadership positions (E8-E9) in the U.S. Navy, representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The trustworthiness of the data was established through rigorous application of Lincoln and Guba's (2023) four criteria: credibility through prolonged engagement and member checking, dependability through comprehensive audit trails, confirmability through reflexive journaling, and transferability through thick descriptions of participants and contexts. These methodological safeguards ensured that the research findings authentically represented participants' voices while maintaining the highest standards of qualitative research rigor.

Through thematic analysis using NVivo, nine distinct themes emerged addressing two research questions. The first research question focused on systemic barriers and biases, revealing four critical themes: discrimination, implicit bias, limited career advancement and organizational culture. The second research question addressed the intersectional impact of race and gender, revealing five additional themes: coping and resistance strategies, double minority status, identity navigation strategies, underrepresentation factors and visible representation.

An evaluation of the findings demonstrated that despite comprehensive formal diversity initiatives, institutional barriers and cultural dynamics continued to impede the advancement of WoC into senior enlisted leadership positions. The results validated existing research on intersectionality while revealing Navy-specific challenges that created a significant gap between organizational diversity goals and actual representation. Chapter five presented the implications, recommendations for practice and research, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent underrepresentation of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted roles, which undermined the Navy's efforts to achieve full diversity and inclusion (Bridges et al., 2023b; Coleman et al., 2019). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of WoC, specifically African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American servicemembers, in the top enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy. The findings revealed a complex paradox wherein formal inclusion efforts coexisted with deeply entrenched cultural barriers, including masculine organizational culture, informal networks, unwritten rules, and belonging uncertainty that collectively marginalized WoC and limited their access to senior leadership positions. While this study provided valuable insights into the mechanisms of exclusion within naval leadership structures, limitations included the scope of participants and the specific focus on the Navy as a single military branch. This chapter included key findings and broader implications for naval leadership and military diversity initiatives, presented actionable recommendations for policy and practice, and concluded with suggestions for future research that could further advance equity and representation in military leadership.

Implications

Research Question 1: How do systemic barriers and biases impact the career advancement of WoC in the U.S. Navy, particularly those in senior enlisted roles?

This study revealed that despite formal diversity policies, entrenched masculine cultural norms, exclusionary informal networks, and code-switching requirements systematically disadvantaged WoC pursuing senior leadership positions. These barriers created structural impediments that limited individual careers and deprived the Navy of diverse perspectives essential for effective decision-making. The systematic disadvantaging of WoC through cultural norms and exclusionary networks was consistent with research documenting how structural barriers hindered WoC advancement and aligned with findings on how WoC in the military experienced authority-undermining stereotypes and exclusionary practices (Brooks et al., 2021d; Jones & Williams, 2021). These findings build upon Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory and extend the military research that demonstrated how these theoretical frameworks manifested in the specific context of Navy senior enlisted leadership (Dansby & Kamarck, 2019).

Younger WoC cohorts experienced specific barriers with equal or greater intensity than their predecessors, challenging assumptions that generational turnover naturally reduces organizational discrimination. This result aligned with findings documented in the literature review showing that despite policy changes in the 1970s, progress remained slow compared to other military branches, and cultural biases persisted despite legal advancements (Herbert, 2022a). The literature demonstrated that legal changes alone did not guarantee cultural change within hierarchical organizations, and systemic biases continued to affect WoC advancement despite formal diversity initiatives (Rodriguez et al., 2022a; TF1N, 2021).

The implications were significant and interconnected. High attrition rates were likely to reduce representation at senior levels within the next decade. This reduction in representation created a damaging cycle consistent with the theory of tokenism where fewer WoC in leadership positions intensified exclusion for those who remained, as numerical underrepresentation increased isolation and performance pressures (Kanter, 1977). This pattern of exclusion undermined the Navy's diversity commitment and created credibility gaps that negatively impacted recruitment efforts aligning with findings that organizational diversity climate significantly affected recruitment success among underrepresented groups (Avery & McKay, 2006). The result is reduced effectiveness and compromised operational readiness at a time when an increasingly complex global environment demands diverse leadership perspectives. Potential legal challenges to promotion processes and recruitment difficulties could emerge as underrepresented community networks shared negative experiences. These challenges ultimately threatened to weaken the institution's capacity to fulfill its national security mission.

Research Question 2: How do intersecting factors of race and gender, organizational culture and policies, contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of WoC in top senior enlisted roles within the U.S. Navy?

Results indicated that discrimination against WoC in Navy leadership involved intersecting rather than cumulative effects, empirically supporting a matrix of domination within military hierarchies (Collins, 2020). The results demonstrated why traditional diversity strategies addressing race or gender separately had failed to advance WoC into senior enlisted leadership. The findings of this study revealed how unwritten cultural norms consistently worked against formal inclusion initiatives contradicting previous research that suggested merely having diversity policies on paper was sufficient. This aligned with findings by Siew and Koh (2022),

who reported that truly effective military diversity policies must go beyond simply creating demographic representation to actively leverage diversity for enhanced mission effectiveness actively. The literature review documented similar patterns where the Navy's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan established formal mechanisms, but implementation yielded minimal improvement for those with intersectional identities. Policies designed for broad demographic categories often failed to address the unique barriers faced by those with multiple marginalized identities (CNO, 2023; GAO, 2023). Additionally, Herbert (2022a) demonstrated that legal advancements did not eliminate cultural biases and institutional barriers, showing that legal changes alone cannot guarantee cultural change within hierarchical organizations.

Contrary to expectations based on institutional change theories, recent policy reforms increased rather than decreased the psychological burden on WoC, as participants reported feeling greater pressure to represent their demographic groups while navigating unchanged informal cultural dynamics. This finding challenged linear assumptions about policy implementation effectiveness and suggested that partial reforms created additional stressors (Brooks et al., 2021b). This result contrasted with findings by the Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion (2020), which reported that targeted mentorship programs and growth opportunities for underrepresented personnel would directly counter systemic barriers and create more accessible leadership paths for previously excluded groups. The findings also diverged from Prichard-Brown (2023), who documented that organizations demonstrating inclusion commitment through such initiatives would reduce rather than amplify psychological pressures on minority personnel.

The intersectional barriers facing WoC in Navy leadership imposed distinct psychological and professional costs that extended beyond simple exclusion. Study participants

described developing context-dependent survival strategies depending on whether they confronted gender discrimination alone, racial discrimination alone, or the compounded effects of both simultaneously. This constant strategic adaptation created sustained cognitive and emotional labor that diverted energy from professional development—consistent with Collins' (2020) "matrix of domination" where intersecting systems of oppression create compounding burdens (Collins, 2020, 2022; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989). Participants reported that WoC paid an "invisible tax" their majority counterparts never experienced, exhausting resources on workplace navigation rather than leadership growth (Flores & Chesney-Lind, 2021; Nadel & Haynes, 2021; Smith & Jones, 2021b). This finding corroborates research demonstrating heightened psychological strain among WoC navigating intersectional stereotypes in military leadership (Cooper & Moore, 2023a; Harris & Ford, 2023a; Jefferson, 2023b). The necessity of maintaining multiple strategic approaches increased attrition risk and reinforced the very barriers that formal diversity policies aimed to eliminate, contradicting assumptions about Navy DEI initiative efficacy and representing a probable operational cost that limits access to diverse perspectives essential for modern maritime operations (CNO, 2023; Fisher & Ramirez, 2023; Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Results indicated that some WoC developed resistance strategies that enabled individual success while inadvertently reinforcing systemic barriers for others, a paradoxical outcome not anticipated in existing workplace navigation literature. These findings suggested that underrepresentation was likely to persist or worsen over the next decade without comprehensive intervention. The research on multiplicative discrimination effects demonstrated that incremental changes cannot overcome entrenched barriers, leading to continued talent loss and decreased organizational effectiveness (Pogrebna et al., 2024; Sim & Bierema, 2025).

Recommendations for Practice

Significant disparities persist in the representation of WoC at senior enlisted leadership levels despite the Navy's formal commitment to diversity and inclusion. The findings from this study suggest that current approaches fail to address the deeper cultural and structural factors perpetuating exclusion. Targeted interventions based on these findings are essential to ensure the Navy was inclusive of WoC in senior enlisted leadership roles.

Recommendation 1: Implement Comprehensive Cultural Transformation Initiatives

The Navy should develop comprehensive cultural transformation initiatives that include leadership accountability mechanisms, where senior leaders are evaluated and promoted based on demonstrated commitment to inclusive leadership practices. This recommendation directly addresses the finding that unwritten cultural norms consistently undermined formal diversity initiatives, revealing how existing leadership evaluation systems failed to recognize or address intersectional barriers faced by WoC. This finding aligned with the Navy's Strategic Framework for DEI that showed mixed results. The policies designed for broad demographic categories often failed to address the unique challenges faced by those with multiple marginalized identities (GAO, 2023). Current evaluation metrics mask the continued marginalization of individuals with overlapping identities despite explicit organizational goals of equitable advancement (Rodriguez et al., 2022a). This recommendation extends beyond traditional awareness training, including systematic revision of leadership competency models, performance evaluation criteria, and promotion board guidelines. These revisions could explicitly value collaborative, empathetic, and inclusive leadership behaviors that challenge existing power structures by targeting what identifies as the hegemonic domain of power; specifically, the cultural narratives perpetuating male-dominated leadership paradigms (Allen, 2025). Literature supporting this approach

documented how subjective elements within the Navy's advancement evaluation process created inequities for WoC through implicit bias in performance documentation and assessment narratives (Kirchberger, 2022). Richards and Thompson (2021) further demonstrated that promotion systems benefited from incorporating bias-mitigation technologies that had successfully reduced evaluation disparities in comparable organizations. Schein and Schein (2017) emphasized that sustainable transformation required alignment between espoused values and actual practices, particularly in reward and recognition systems. Implementing these cultural transformation initiatives could create measurable accountability for inclusive leadership while addressing the structural barriers preventing WoC from advancing to senior enlisted positions.

Recommendation 2: Restructure Informal Network Access and Mentorship Systems

The Navy should implement unified, inclusive networking programs that create intentional opportunities for WoC to build relationships with senior leaders while educating all personnel about the importance of inclusive networking practices. This recommendation directly addresses the finding that formal mentorship programs sometimes reinforced rather than dismantled barriers. Participants reported mentors lacked intersectional understanding. This research finding aligned with the literature documenting that senior enlisted WoC received less substantive mentorship from senior leadership compared to white male counterparts, particularly in specialized ratings with low female representation (Washington et al., 2022). Traditional mentorship programs operate on assumptions of universal experience that failed to account for the distinct professional challenges that WoC navigated (Lafuente, 2023). The literature review further revealed that resistant organizational cultures constructed formidable barriers that restricted access to career-enhancing assignments and discouraged formal mentorship relationships crucial for professional development (Barbero, 2024). Implementing this

recommendation could include establishing formal mentoring programs specifically designed to bridge racial and gender gaps and creating cross-functional project teams that promote diverse collaboration. The Navy could additionally implement transparency requirements for informal leadership development opportunities to address research findings that evaluators and promotion boards exhibited subtle yet persistent biases maintaining leadership underrepresentation (Mushi et al., 2025). These structured programs could democratize access to career-enhancing relationships and level the playing field by countering systems that favored individuals who shared cultural and social characteristics with existing leadership (Callander et al., 2025). This recommendation drew on research demonstrating how social capital operated differently for various demographic groups, requiring intentional intervention to ensure equitable access to career-enhancing relationships (Shier et al., 2024).

Recommendation 3: Develop Culturally Responsive Leadership Development Programs

The Navy should create leadership development programs that explicitly recognize and value diverse leadership approaches while providing all leaders with cultural competency skills to work effectively across differences. This recommendation directly addresses the study's finding that WoC performed extensive emotional labor and code-switching to navigate white, male-dominated spaces, risking emotional strain and inauthenticity. This finding aligned with Jones and Kang (2022) who demonstrated how organizational environments often compelled marginalized leaders to adapt their authentic selves to fit dominant cultural norms. The research also showed that WoC balanced conflicting gender and leadership expectations, leading to significant stress (Brooks et al., 2021b). The literature review further revealed that deeply ingrained stereotypes about gender and race influenced leader perception where women were seen as lacking assertiveness while leaders of color faced competence assumptions creating

hurdles for WoC who had to overcome biased perceptions (Lytell et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022a). The program curriculum should emphasize the value of different communication styles, decision-making approaches, and conflict resolution methods that WoC could bring to leadership roles. These programs should help white male leaders recognize their cultural perspectives as one approach among many rather than the universal standard. This approach could reduce the psychological toll on WoC who engage in extensive cultural code-switching, which aligned with research on "shifting" behaviors among WoC in professional settings (McCluney et al., 2021). This recommendation is grounded in multicultural organizational development theory which emphasized the importance of creating organizational cultures that valued rather than merely tolerated diversity (Sue & Sue, 2019). Implementing culturally responsive leadership development could create an environment where diverse leadership styles are recognized as organizational assets rather than deviations from established norms.

Recommendation 4: Create Comprehensive Support Systems for Belonging and Inclusion

The Navy could establish comprehensive support systems that include employee resource groups specifically for WoC. This recommendation directly addresses the finding that WoC experienced belonging uncertainty and isolation within traditional naval culture, which created additional psychological burdens that diverted energy from leadership performance. These findings were consistent with the literature documenting that microaggressions and exclusion hindered WoC leaders, fostering hostility and isolation (Belkin et al., 2021a). McMillian et al. (2023) further showed that WoC faced a critical absence of relatable role models and mentors, which impeded emerging leaders' ability to envision viable leadership pathways. The literature review revealed that the Navy's command climate survey system collected data on race and gender but analyzed these categories in isolation rather than examining their intersection (CNO,

2021). Current assessment metrics masked the continued marginalization of those with overlapping identities despite explicit goals of equitable advancement (Rodriguez et al., 2022a).

Implementation could include several key components. First, the Navy could establish resource groups alongside inclusive leadership training for all personnel and regular climate assessments that measure belonging and inclusion rather than just demographic representation. Second, the Navy could create safe spaces for WoC to discuss their experiences and establish ombudsperson roles specifically trained in issues of intersectional discrimination. Third, the Navy could implement intervention protocols when exclusionary behaviors are identified.

These comprehensive support systems could address belonging uncertainty that diverted cognitive and emotional resources away from leadership performance and mission focus, thereby eliminating competitive disadvantages that undermined both individual potential and organizational effectiveness. This approach is grounded in research on psychological safety and its importance for organizational effectiveness, particularly for members of underrepresented groups (Edmondson, 2019).

Recommendation 5: Implement Systematic Bias Interruption in Personnel Processes

The Navy could implement bias interruption protocols throughout personnel processes. This recommendation directly addresses the study's finding that WoC faced systematic biases in performance evaluations where their successes were attributed to external factors while failures were attributed to internal factors, creating unequal advancement standards. These findings aligned with the literature documenting that subjective elements within the Navy's advancement evaluation process created inequities for WoC through implicit prejudice in performance documentation and assessment narratives (Richards & Thompson, 2021). Rodriguez et al. (2022b) further demonstrated that evaluators perceived WoC as less competent and deserving of

leadership than white male counterparts with equivalent qualifications. The literature review revealed additional evidence that external factors often received credit for WoC's successes, while internal factors received blame for failures (Saguy & Ward, 2022). Supervisors and evaluators consistently applied this attributional bias, hindering WoC's recognition and advancement opportunities despite strong performance (Miller, 2023c). Implementing bias interruption protocols could include structured interview processes, standardized evaluation criteria, and bias training for all personnel involved in advancement decisions. The Navy could establish diverse promotion boards, implement blind review processes where appropriate, and create accountability mechanisms for ensuring equitable treatment across demographic groups. These systematic interventions could address the biases that created unequal playing fields where WoC must consistently exceed expectations while their counterparts advanced with standard performance, thereby upholding the military's commitment to merit-based advancement and equal opportunity. This recommendation is grounded in research in organizational psychology on unconscious bias and evidence-based approaches to bias interruption in personnel decisions (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided a foundation for understanding how WoC navigated structural barriers in the U.S. Navy for senior enlisted leadership roles. The results revealed barriers of how institutional discrimination operated alongside and often undermined the Navy's diversity initiatives. A key insight was the urgent need for expanded research that addressed current limitations while exploring new dimensions of intersectional experiences within military hierarchies. Future researchers could conduct comparative studies across military branches to

examine how different organizational cultures impacted advancement opportunities for WoC to reveal which barriers are service-specific versus broader military institutional challenges.

Building on this study's intersectionality framework, future researchers could examine other multiply marginalized groups within military leadership through mixed-methods approaches that combined qualitative insights with quantitative analyses of promotion data, performance evaluations, and organizational climate assessments. These comprehensive studies should incorporate perspectives from white male leaders, white female leaders, and male leaders of color to understand how different groups contributed to organizational dynamics that created barriers for WoC. Longitudinal studies could reveal how these barriers evolved as individuals advanced and organizational cultures shifted, while military-specific measurement instruments should be developed to assess belonging, inclusion, and cultural code-switching experiences within hierarchical organizations.

Another recommendation for further research involves designing and evaluating targeted interventions through randomized controlled trials. These studies could include examination of bias interruption training, structured mentoring programs, and cultural transformation initiatives, with particular attention to the sustainability of organizational changes. A final recommendation is the development of frameworks, specifically addressing intersectionality within hierarchical, mission-focused organizations, to examine the broader implications of military diversity for national security. Investigating how inclusive leadership practices enhanced unit cohesion and mission readiness could reveal quantifiable benefits that supported both equity goals and operational effectiveness. These recommendations could demonstrate how integrating WoC into senior leadership roles strengthened organizational capabilities, provided equity and operational excellence in the military that reinforced objectives rather than competing priorities.

Conclusion

The U.S. Navy is positioned at a critical crossroads where its commitment to diversity collides with the harsh reality of institutional barriers that systematically excluded Women of Color (WoC) from senior enlisted leadership. This research revealed a troubling paradox. The Navy endorsed inclusion through formal policies and programs, but beneath these efforts lay an entrenched masculine organizational culture that operated like an invisible fortress. WoC found themselves forced to navigate exclusionary networks, unwritten rules, and traditional hierarchical structures within a labyrinth never designed for their success. The burden of breaking through these barriers fell inequitably on the shoulders of those already marginalized, forcing extraordinary navigation strategies that should never be prerequisites for advancement. These systemic obstacles represented a profound injustice and squandered invaluable human capital precisely when military effectiveness depended on diverse perspectives and inclusive leadership capabilities. The cost extends beyond individual careers to compromise organizational excellence and ultimately, national security itself.

This study held significance for the broader fields of diversity and inclusion. By examining the experiences of WoC in the Navy, this research contributed to a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups in various organizational settings. The findings in this study may inform the development of more targeted and impactful diversity initiatives, not only within the military but also in other sectors striving to create more inclusive and equitable workplaces (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). The purpose of this study was ultimately to contribute to the dismantling of systemic barriers and the creation of a more just and equitable environment for all service members, regardless of their race or gender.

It is time for the Navy to move beyond celebrating isolated success stories and confront the institutional culture that made such navigation necessary in the first place. This research demonstrated that WoC possessed remarkable resilience and sophisticated strategies for overcoming discrimination, yet their extraordinary efforts illuminated the depth of systemic failures rather than validating current approaches. True organizational transformation requires shifting responsibility from marginalized individuals to the leaders and systems that perpetuated exclusion, demanding comprehensive cultural change that interrupted bias at its roots and created genuinely inclusive environments. For practice, the Navy should implement comprehensive cultural transformation initiatives with leadership accountability mechanisms, establish unified inclusive networking programs, create leadership development programs that value diverse approaches, develop comprehensive support systems including employee resource groups for WoC, and implement bias interruption protocols throughout personnel processes. For further research, scholars should conduct longitudinal studies examining the long-term effectiveness of intersectional leadership development programs, investigate the specific mechanisms through which organizational culture perpetuated intersectional barriers, and explore how different military branches successfully integrated inclusive leadership practices while maintaining operational effectiveness. The Navy's future effectiveness depends not on asking WoC to adapt to exclusionary systems, but on fundamentally redesigning those systems to harness the full potential of all service members. The Navy can only achieve its stated values of honor, courage, and commitment through such systemic transformation while securing the diverse leadership essential for 21st-century military challenges.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Introduction to the study

- Introduce myself and my role
- Explain the purpose and scope of the research
- Review the consent form, emphasizing:
 - Voluntary participation
 - Right to skip questions or withdraw
 - Confidentiality measures
 - Data management procedures
- Obtain consent for participation and audio recording
- Address any questions or concerns

Main Interview

Opening Questions

1. "What initially interested you in participating in this study?"

Key Theme 1: Early Life Experiences and Motivations for Joining the Navy

1. "What influenced your decision to join the Navy specifically?"

Key Theme 2: Experiences with Leadership Development and Career Advancement

1. "Describe any instances where you had to navigate barriers to advancement that others might not have faced?"

Key Theme 3: Perceptions of Organizational Culture and Support

1. "What organizational changes would most effectively enhance support systems for women of color serving in senior enlisted leadership positions?"

Key Theme 4: Intersecting Factors of Race and Gender

1. "In what ways, if any, do you feel the intersection of your race and gender shaped your naval career differently from others?"

Concluding Questions

1. "What other aspects of your experiences with the underrepresentation of women of color in senior enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy do you feel are important that we haven't yet discussed?"

Post-Interview

Debriefing

- Thank the participant for their time and insights
- Explain next steps in the research process
- Provide information on how findings will be shared
- Ensure the participant has contact information for follow-up questions

Immediate Post-Interview Documentation

- Record interview end time
- Note any significant non-verbal observations
- Document any technical issues or interruptions
- Record initial reflections on key themes or insights

Appendix B

Social Media Flyer

My name is Dee Allen, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to explore the underrepresentation of women of color in top senior enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

- Recognized as a woman of color
- Retired from the U.S. Navy
- Reached the senior enlisted ranks of E8/E9 (Senior Chief Petty Officer or Master Chief Petty Officer).
- A willingness to share career experiences.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

- Complete a consent form before commencing any research activities.
- Participate in a 1:1 interview via Zoom for approximately 45-60 minutes. Please note that this session will be recorded.
- Review of your interview transcript via email to ensure accuracy.

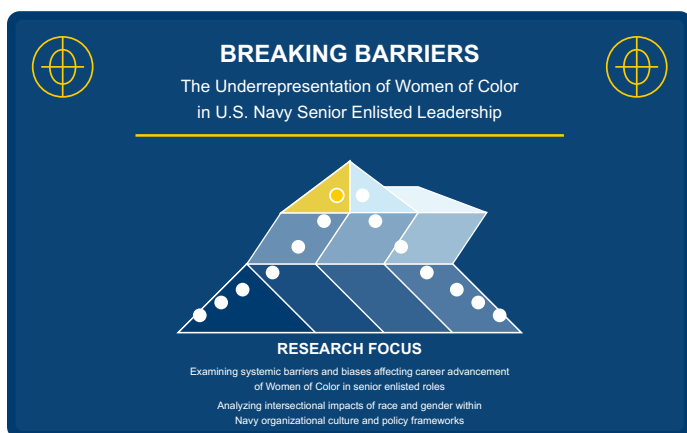
During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your early life experiences and motivations for joining the U.S. Navy.
- Your career progression and experiences with leadership development in the Navy.
- Challenges and barriers you faced during advancement to senior enlisted ranks.
- Specific instances where you may have experienced discrimination, bias, or differential treatment based on race, gender, or their intersection.
- Times when you may have been overlooked for advancement opportunities or recognition.
- Your observations about the Navy's organizational culture regarding diversity and inclusion.
- Support systems (formal and informal) that helped you navigate your career.
- How the intersection of your racial and gender identities shaped your experiences in the Navy.
- Your perceptions about systemic factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women of color in senior enlisted roles.
- Your strategies for overcoming barriers and challenges throughout your naval career.
- Your perspective on changes in Navy policies and practices regarding diversity over time.
- Your recommendations for addressing underrepresentation issues in the future.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or have questions, please contact me at

d.allen7561@o365.neu.edu

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!
Dee Allen



BREAKING BARRIERS
The Underrepresentation of Women of Color
in U.S. Navy Senior Enlisted Leadership

RESEARCH FOCUS
Examining systemic barriers and biases affecting career advancement
of Women of Color in senior enlisted roles
Analyzing intersectional impacts of race and gender within
Navy organizational culture and policy frameworks

Appendix C

Study Information Letter

My name is Dee Allen, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the limited presence of women of color serving in senior enlisted positions within the U.S. Navy. The name of this research is "Exploring the Underrepresentation of Women of Color in Top Senior Enlisted Roles in the U.S. Navy."

This form will give you information about the research to help you decide whether you would like to participate and/or your data to be used. Please read this form and ask any questions you have.

What will happen during the research?

If you agree to participate in the research, you will do the following things:

- Complete a consent form before commencing any research activities.
- Participate in a 1:1 interview via Zoom for approximately 60 minutes. Please note that this session will be recorded.
- Review of your interview transcript via email to ensure accuracy.

Why is this research being done?

- The purpose of this research is to investigate factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women of color in senior enlisted roles in the U.S. Navy.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a woman of color who has served in the U.S. Navy and reached the senior enlisted ranks of E8/E9 (Senior Chief Petty Officer or Master Chief Petty Officer).
- A willingness to share career experiences.

How many people will take part?

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 10-15 participants taking part in this research.

What are the potential risks of taking part in the research?

While participating in the research, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts include:

1. Experiencing emotional discomfort when discussing challenging experiences related to discrimination, bias, or barriers faced during your naval career.
2. Potentially recalling difficult or stressful memories related to instances when you may have been overlooked for advancement opportunities.
3. Feeling frustration when reflecting on systemic issues that may have impacted your career progression.
4. Possible anxiety about discussing sensitive workplace experiences related to race and gender.
5. Concern about potential identification despite confidentiality measures, particularly given the small population of women of color in senior enlisted Navy.

What are the potential benefits of taking part in the research?

The benefits to participation in the research that are reasonable to expect include:

1. Contributing to understanding and addressing barriers facing women of color in the Navy.
2. Sharing your experiences to help future generations of servicewomen.
3. Potential personal satisfaction from reflecting on your career journey.
4. Helping to inform potential policy changes that could create more equitable advancement opportunities.

This research will help understand the systemic factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women of color in senior enlisted Navy roles and identify potential interventions to create more inclusive pathways to leadership positions.

Taking part in the research is voluntary. You may choose for your data not to be included in the research. If you do not want your data used for this research, please let me know via email at d.allen7561@o365.ncu.edu

How will my information be protected?

I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential:

- Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law.
- No information that could identify you will be shared in publications about this research and databases where results may be stored.
- The people who will have access to your information are: myself, my dissertation chair, and my dissertation committee.
- I will secure your information with these steps:
 - Assigning pseudonyms to all participants immediately upon data collection.
 - Storing all digital interview recordings and transcripts on a password-protected computer.
 - Encrypting all files containing personally identifiable information.
 - Keeping consent forms and demographic questionnaires in a locked cabinet in a private office.
 - Storing the key linking pseudonyms to identities in a separate secure location from other research materials.
 - Conducting all transcription personally rather than using third-party services.
 - Removing all identifying details (names, specific units, unique career details) from transcripts.
 - Backing up encrypted data on a password-protected external hard drive kept in a locked location.
 - Limiting access to raw data to only myself and my dissertation committee members.
 - Using secure, encrypted communication methods when sharing any research materials electronically.

- After 3 years, all data will be destroyed.

Will my information be used for research in the future?

Information collected from you for this research may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research. If this happens, information that could identify you will be removed before sharing any information. All data about you will be de-identified.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to you for taking part in this research.

Who should I call with questions or problems?

For questions about the research, contact the researcher, Dee Allen at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher by email at [REDACTED].

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or research concerns, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the NU Institutional Review Board at irb@nu.edu.

Can I withdraw from the research?

If you decide for your data to be included in this research, you can change your mind and decide to remove your data from the research at any time in the future. Please let me know that you no longer wish for your data to be included, and I will delete all data collected from you.

Opt-Out

If you want to "opt out" of your data from this research, please contact Dee Allen at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

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