

A moderate autoethnography: exploring ACEs, transitions, military service, and teaching

by

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B.S., McPherson College, 2009
B.S., Sterling College, 2011
M.S., Emporia State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

Abstract

“Write straight into the emotional center of things...write toward vulnerability.” – Anne Lamott

“You’re just not college material.” At 17 years old, these words, spoken by my school’s academic counselor, concisely summarized my school experience. As a struggling student with a turbulent home life, this statement launched me on the path from struggling student to Army soldier to veteran transitioning into civilian life to teacher. Through triumphs and tribulations, each of these phases and transitions has significantly shaped who I am today.

This study of personal experience narratives explores my journey through youth, military service, and educator. I will share the intimate struggles that occurred: exposure to abuse, addiction, parent separation, infidelity, divorce, financial strain, homelessness, and mental health battles. The narratives weave in and out of transitional periods and connections to social and cultural experiences. This lens also examines literature, theory, and publication.

To say that this research study has been life changing is an understatement. Never had I thought that I would attempt—let alone complete—this type of work. It truly started with the advice to “just start writing,” which was echoed by Nash and Bradley (2011) who said “to get started writing, you must get your butt in the chair” (p.39). I have always had stories to tell about my unique factors and experiences in my past. What I did not know was what could come out of them once they were analyzed. Writing about the past has been difficult, but applying a methodology, lens, and various frameworks has provided an avenue for some explanation.

Although it may be a research methodology revolved around the power of one, choosing autoethnography, like any other design, takes careful planning (Chang, 2016). I would argue because of the potential vulnerability of the author, and possibly others, more attention to detail

in ethics and validity becomes a virtuous quest in the process. This is not an autobiography, it is an autoethnography, and results that came from it have the potential to be impactful.

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Major Professor
Dr. Todd Goodson

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xii
Acknowledgements	xiii
Dedication	xiv
Chapter 1 - Introduction	1
Connecting Culture	2
Presenting My Experiences	3
Statement of Research Purpose, Problems, and Questions	4
Terms	8
Limitations: Ambiguity and Lucidity	9
Conclusion	11
Chapter 2 - Literature Review	13
ACEs Trauma	14
ACEs Connection to Veterans and Military Members	15
Military Transition	18
Differences in Transition	18
Service-Connected Nostalgia	20
Importance of Finding an Identity and Purpose	21
Gap in Research: ACES + Military + Transition + Veterans Teaching and Finding Purpose .	22
Theoretical Framework	23
Schlossberg's Transition Theory	23
Social Identity Theory	26
Social Cognitive Theory	28
Summary	30
Chapter 3 - Methodology	31
Introduction	31
Background and Methodology Approach	32
Reason for Approach	35
Personal Narrative and Autoethnography Critiques	38

Legitimizing and Incorporating Self and Others	40
Ethics in the Process	46
Methodology planning	47
Sources for Data.....	48
Choosing An Autoethnographic Style and Role	50
Methodology Summarization Statement	52
Analyzing and Organizing	53
Process of Replication	58
Chapter 4 - An Army of One: The Campaign in Life's Battlefield	62
Introduction.....	62
Operation Childhood: Hostile Territory, Contact Expected	63
Birth through Elementary School	63
Secondary School.....	66
O Brother Where Art Thou	68
After Action Review	70
Engagement: Military Service	72
Enlistment	72
Smoke 'em if You Got 'em.....	82
After Action Review	84
Shooting an Azimuth: Destination Transition	86
Tracking to the Civilian World	86
Finding Teaching: New Battle Buddies	91
After Action Report	93
Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion	96
Checkpoint: Mission Continued	96
Goal Execution: Purpose and Questions	96
Reviewing Research Questions.....	98
Vulnerability Assessment: Literature	100
Findings: Report to Command.....	101
Linking Up: Implications	107
Adjust Fire: Future Research	109

Conclusion: Live to Fight Another Day	110
Value Assessment	110
Adding To Theory.....	112
Being Promoted: Transition Wrapped in Theory.....	114
Who I am Now	115
References.....	118

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	26
Figure 2.2	27
Figure 3.1	54
Figure 3.2	56
Figure 3.3	61

List of Tables

Table 3.1	57
Table 4.1	62
Table 4.2	70
Table 4.3	84
Table 4.4. Engagement:	85
Table 4.5	93
Table 4.6	94

Acknowledgements

My thanks begin with Dr. Todd Goodson for taking a chance and hiring me at Kansas State University. I still remember what he told me on the phone when he offered the job. He said, “this is going to be good.” And it has. I also must thank him for pushing me to pursue a PhD, something I would have never thought based on my background and experiences to pursue, be possible, or accomplish, . Lastly, I must acknowledge the doors. Dr. Goodson compares options to doors. “Here are your doors (options). Now once you go through and pick, here are the next doors. But we never turn back and go through those other doors.” I have to laugh as this has become an inside joke and I appreciate his candor. Thank you, sir, for believing in me.

I also must thank the committee members, Dr. Cristy Craft, Dr. Vikki Sherbert, and Dr. Leah McKeeman, for their support and encouragement through this process. The time you have dedicated to read and guide my work is very appreciated. You never made me feel like I could not do this. Sometimes all I needed was, “great job, keep it up.” Sometimes it was just taking 10 minutes for me to bounce an idea off of you.

Lastly, I must acknowledge all the professors with whom I connected or took classes from during this process. You opened my eyes to research, history, and editing. I appreciate your wiliness to help not just me but students in general. Thank you for providing the learning environment for me to gain the skills to complete this work.

Dedication

Writing a dissertation, wow, something I never would have thought I would have done. If 20 years ago someone would have said, “One day you are either going to be a professional snorkeler or you are going to be writing a dissertation for a PhD,” I would have said snorkeler without hesitation. And at times during this process, I wish it would have been that path.

I want to dedicate my dissertation to several people. First, my wife and children. Without their support, love, and understanding, this process would not have been possible. This is something that I wanted to do for myself but also my children. I wanted them to see the possibilities in life, even if you must overcome obstacles and limitations to get there. My family makes me a better person, man, and father. I cannot imagine life without them. I have spent many hours locked away writing and missing life with you. My hope that this process has provided growth and made me address things in my past that I had not. I love you all more than you will ever know.

I also would like to recognize my parents. My mother has had her share of life’s struggles, and my fighting spirit came from her. My father died 5 years ago, and while he had flaws, he also had a big heart. In the last 6 years of his life, he did not drink and made up for a lot of lost time with me and his grandchildren. I miss him every day and wish I could share this accomplishment with him.

Finally, recognition should be acknowledged to the early year influences in my younger years which set me on the path that brought me here. It must be said stated that we each take paths that are our own and that starts from the beginning. These early times were certainly and important part of my story.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify why the topics of transition, military service, education, and purpose are relevant topics for research. Literature on these topics fails to view these subjects through a personal narrative that combines these elements with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma, combat deployment, addiction, divorce, and finding purpose in the field of education.

The process and methodology of writing to produce an autoethnography led me to discoveries that are important to various fields of higher education and veteran/military relations. Additionally, the writing process became an untapped form of therapy, discovery, and revelation that I had never experienced before. When reviewing and analyzing my personal experiences, I relied on Schlossberg's (2011) adult transitional theory, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Viewing and crafting this work through the methodology lens of an autoethnography became vital to producing a scholarly document.

The unique nature of an autoethnography—often referred to as a scholarly personal narrative—allows the researcher some freedom in writing, but with that freedom comes the responsibility to apply rigorous methods when studying self (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Unlike more traditional methods, there is freedom in discovering and presenting a unique individualized lens backed by vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection, creating an emergent experience for the readers (Ellis et al., 2011). I have attempted to view discoveries through theory and previous literature findings. Being that my narratives, experiences, and interpretations are unique to me, I found that this allowed me to write and analyze in an untethered way.

Connecting Culture

While writing and analyzing during the autoethnography process, it is important to identify the interconnectedness with culture and societal organization. I might be identified by others as a White male who did well in school, had a strong family unit, and never served in the military. Based on those assumptions, my interaction with groups unlike me and from differing cultures would have been limited. My perspective is important because I have weaved in and out of various cultures and groups throughout my life which has given me connections to relate to a variety of people's experiences and social networks. In the narratives, I share connections I had throughout my life with cultural groups that had an impact on future decision-making and the creation of a social identity.

There is no exact answer to "where is culture located?" Answers in the anthropology field fall into two groups: One says culture resides outside of the individual; the other suggests culture resides inside a person's mind (Chang, 2016). The main cultural focus in my narratives will revolve around people who have experienced ACEs trauma; military/veteran culture and transition; addiction culture; and educational culture. It is important to recognize that culture can be superorganic and have a life of its own that includes dictating, regulating, and controlling people to maintain the inner group connection (DeMunck, 2000).

Individuals can belong to multiple social and cultural organizations. Thompson (1994) expressed that cultural organizations will have microlevel involvement from the individual while the individual is involved in macrolevel affiliations. For example, an enlisted military person on deployment who is a noncollege graduate, White male, from a small town would have opportunities for multiple connections to multiple social and cultural organizations because he has experienced and has common experience to those groups. Membership to cultural groups can

continue even after members cease to intimately associate with them. On a day-to-day basis, individuals can continue to be affected by certain cultural memberships and communities they no longer are consistently around (Chang, 2016).

Presenting My Experiences

In Chapter 4, self-narratives will outline my lived experiences. The primary focus and motives of self-narratives can vary. Regardless, they hold value to the writer—evoking self-reflection and analysis—and to the reader—comparing their lives with the writer (Chang, 2016). Additionally, I hope that my narratives show the value of studying others and the perspective it may bring the reader in helping others understand themselves.

My military career acts as a connecting point from each end of my personal narratives. I can tell the story forward or backward to land at my time in the military because each end is flanked with a major life transition. Whenever I discuss my time in the military, I always credit it for shaping who I am today. Spiro et al. (2016), concluded that military veterans experience lifelong positive and adverse effects of their service that they always carry, affecting multiple domains throughout their lives. It must be said that not all military service is the same. Rather, it is often extremely varied from person to person. My experiences align with Spiro. I would not change the path I took in joining the military. It is what best served me at that stage of life. And while there were many struggles during and after service, I have experienced positives as well.

I chose to enlist in the military, but I did not choose many of my adverse childhood experiences. Throughout this autoethnography, I seek to explore my experiences with ACEs trauma, military enlistment, and struggles in transition while connecting them to my educational experience and my becoming an educator. Through research, I have discovered that my experience is not uncommon among those with prior or current military service. In fact, these

experiences—specifically the history of ACEs—may drive individuals to enlist into the military to escape adversity (Blosnich et. al., 2014). The military provides structure, purpose, and a sense of pride. However, veterans commonly lose most, if not all, of these key elements of transition and fulfillment. This can lead to negative outcomes, including a failure to successfully transition to a fulfilling civilian life and career. This viewed failure can lead to addiction, mental health problems, and for some, fatal consequences (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). While 47% of veterans who served since Sept. 11, 2001, report that re-entry into civilian life was difficult (Parker et al., 2011), people do transition successfully out of military service every day. The skills and structure that received in service can be beneficial in this transition, and this has been found to be especially true in officers who were college graduates prior to military discharge.

Statement of Research Purpose, Problems, and Questions

“Those who overcome great challenges will be changed, and often in unexpected ways. For our struggles enter our lives as unwelcome guests, but they bring valuable gifts. And once the pain subsides, the gifts remain. These gifts are life’s true treasures, bought at a great price, but cannot be acquired in any other way.” – Steve Goodier

The field of veteran transition in relation to other factors has been an area of interest in recent research. Various theories have aided in attempting to explain, answer questions, and provide best practice on this topic. Schlossberg (2011) provides the 4 S’s in transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Social-identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) discusses the importance of identity. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) identifies that learning happens through life as we weave in and out of social and cultural identities.

Transitions happen throughout life, including schooling, training for work, or transitioning directly to the workforce. We experience these transitions in different settings that

different cultural groups, family, and friends. We also transition psychosocially as modeled in Erik Erikson's (1994) life cycle theory and its proposed revision, the Fibonacci Life-Chart Method (Sacco, 2013). Erickson is known for his work on identity, especially during adolescence. He is considered extremely relevant in the field of social science and offers theories and models to examine birth to adulthood (Kroger, 2007; Sokol, 2009). As seen below in Figure 1.1, Erickson's revised theory matches our periods of life with potential personality attributes and age ranges.

Figure 1.1

Erikson's Re-envisaged Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Period	Personality Attributes	Age
1	Early Infancy	Trust vs. Mistrust	1–2
2	Toddler	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	2–4
3	Early Childhood	Initiative vs. Guilt	4–7
4	Middle Childhood	Industry vs. Inferiority	7–11
5	Adolescence	Identity vs. Identity Confusion	11–18
6	Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation	18–29
7	Middle Adulthood	Generativity vs. Stagnation	29–48
8	Older Adulthood	Integrity vs. Despair	48–78+

Note. Adapted from “Re-envisaging the eight developmental stages of Erik Erikson: the Fibonacci life-chart method (FLCM),” by R. G. Sacco, 2013, *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 3(1), p. 140

The Fibonacci chart shows our various life stages and different personality attributes we exhibit in them. From the beginning, we are attempting to establish trust in our relationships. Early childhood is heavily influenced by the adult and home structure around us. The family unit is the most important and significant part of this period (Erikson, 1994). During the primary

school age range of 6–11, school and neighborhood become an incredibly significant part of our world. The next stage, from ages 11–18, revolves around what we do and not what has been done to us. In this stage, the identity formation and the potential for confusion arise. Identity in Erickson's perspective refers to our contribution to society and who we are as a person (Hoare, 2002). As Sokol, (2009) stated, "identity is what makes one move with direction: it is what gives one reason to be" (p. 142).

These stages are treated differently in the moment that we experience them. Writing about a period while still experiencing it would produce different perspectives and reflections than writing after the fact. In my featured personal narratives, I will focus on early infancy through young adulthood. However, because I am writing this in middle adulthood, I have been removed enough from the previous periods to be able to analyze those experiences through the personal narrative process.

I have reached a point of reflection in the progression of my various transitions in life. As I enter my sixth year as a junior faculty member and PhD candidate, I can look back at my early life experiences and analyze the ebbs and flows of my transitions, pitfalls, bad decisions, and celebrations. As I have looked back and written about the past, I have asked myself: After all that has happened in my life, how did I get here? How could someone with a relatively comparable past do the same in finding a purpose while fighting past and current life stressors and struggles through transitions? Two key choices of my past experiences resulted in a major transition: joining the military at the age of 17 and choosing to become an educator. Although my K–12 education was a less than ideal experience, somehow, I came back to the field.

How I arrived here in my life now can be partially explained by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and expanded social cognitive theory (2001) in learning from self, others, and

experiences. Bandura (2000) explains, “social cognitive theory adopts an agentic perspective in which individuals are producers of experiences and shapers of events” (p. 74). For example, while watching and taking orders from military leadership, I learned how to lead and what not to do. I believe this is where I developed the lens to view leadership, learning, and relationships in an example or nonexample way. This cognitive learning shapes future decisions and experiences. We are products of our environments. We also can be influencers during events that shape our lives, making us producers of our environments (Bandura, 2000).

My military service includes me in many cultures: reservist, active-duty service member, veteran of a foreign war, American Legion member, and a veteran who is a part of the estimated 110,000 military veterans who transitioned into teaching (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Enlisted service members share similar backgrounds that lead to military service, raising the question as to how these backgrounds affect the transition out of military service. They also tend to be more diverse; have unique health needs; have experienced trauma before, during, and after military service; and have experienced struggles to transition to life after military service. Several factors have been hypothesized individually but connecting the veteran’s whole life story and background seems to have no or limited research. The same can be said about publications on finding purpose in the field of education for veterans, despite the positive outcomes for the veteran and the students (Nunnery et al., 2009).

This leads me recognize that the purpose of this study was to explore my own lived experiences and their relationship with ACEs trauma, education, military service, and identity and purpose. This led me to the following research questions:

1. Through analyzed lived experiences, to what extent did my personal educational experiences and serving as an educator provide a sense of purpose and identity for me

- as a nontraditional student attempting to transition to a civilian career after military service?
2. Through analyzed lived experiences, in what ways, if any, did my early life experiences, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), affect my educational experience and life course?

Terms

Active-duty military: A full-time military member who may or may not live on a military base and can be deployed at any time. Reserve or National Guard are not full-time active duty, but they can be deployed at any time (Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2012).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): Potentially traumatic events in childhood from birth through age 17 categorized into three groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Autoethnography: A form of research that centrally involves the author's personal experiences (auto) to examine and interpret (graphy) experiences, interactions, culture, groups, practices, and phenomenon (ethno) (Adams et al., 2017).

Culture: "The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group," "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization," or "the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially in education" (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

Life course: Culturally defined sequence of events that are passed through from birth to death and include roles, age categories, and social contexts (Elder & O'Rand, 1995).

Lived experiences: The events that someone has experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Moderate autoethnography: A moderate and balanced treatment of autoethnography that allows for innovation, imagination, and the representation of a range of voices in qualitative inquiry while also sustaining confidence in the quality, rigor, and usefulness of academic research (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

Personal (self) narrative: A style of writing based in storytelling and self-disclosure, drawing from a variety of nonacademic and academic references and findings (Nash, 2015).

Service member: A member of the “uniformed services that consist of the branches of the armed forces” (Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], n.d.).

Transition: “Any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Anderson, Goodman, Schlossberg, 2011, p. 41).

Transitioning veteran: Active-duty service members who are shifting from military career to the civilian workforce and population. This shift begins within 24 months of retirement or 12 months of separation (Military One Source, n.d.)

Veteran: Under Title 38 of U.S. Code, a person who was honorably discharged or released from service in the active military, naval, or air service (Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, n.d.).

Limitations: Ambiguity and Lucidity

I must recognize the importance of my own lens and bias that limit this work, as I am recreating my past through the lens of a 41-year-old married father of three who serves as junior faculty member of a teacher preparation program. The method for telling the narratives is created

by me; what is included and the resulting themes are ultimately self-controlled. I recognize that had portions of this autoethnography been written before becoming a teacher, my lens would likely have differed. My values and beliefs may be influential and how I view my childhood, military experience, and value in education could differ from others. However, this is why I am relying on and exploring “the power of one,” critically analyzing the narratives and acknowledging the experiences had by the one author, one family, one practitioner (Gibbs, 2013). The methodology of autoethnography, specifically moderate autoethnography, is to combine the power of personal perspective narratives with theory, analysis, previous literature, and self-discovery. While the data collected and its importance was measured from my own lens, I look for the significance of the data within previous literature. The goal being to ensure that the narratives are not just shared but provide beneficial reasons to the research, reader, and self (Sahlke Wall, 2016). As I have been told, “this isn’t an autobiography,” and this work must be more than just sharing the various portions of my life in my first 30 years.

When examining narratives that cover close to 30 years, focus can become difficult. Throughout this process, I have consistently struggled with finding the primary focus. I have had to resist the urge to incorporate a vast number of theories and frameworks that incorporate all the areas and cultures the personal narratives lean into or encounter. While attempts were made to limit and concentrate the area of focus to one theme of my life, I felt that a wider approach was needed, which could limit the deep analysis of a particular area, theory, framework, and literature.

The data collected and the importance it has will be measured from my own lens, however, I look for the significance of the data within previous literature. Additionally, I must recognize that aspects of my narratives are omitted for professional and ethical purposes. Telling

a valid lived experience has its highs and lows, and it can still be told in an authentic way without the deconstruction or reconstruction of another (Gibbs, 2013), which may result in a gap in the storyline for a potential reader. As I seek to answer the research questions, the personal narratives combined with the literature should provide adequate bridges to address these limitations.

Conclusion

Life has many transitions. Veterans—just like their civilian counterparts—come from complex backgrounds, which can include negative and/or traumatic experiences. However, research suggests that a service member's background, when combined with military service, can impact the transition from service member to civilian. (Blosnich et al., 2014; Cabrera et. al, 2007). With my background, I am thankful to have found education. As a former special education teacher, struggling K–12 student, veteran of a foreign war, smoker, divorcee, and ACEs trauma sufferer, I offer perspective through multiple lenses. I always knew that I had unique factors that shaped who I am and help me relate to various groups and cultures with similar experiences and or background.

It was not until I started writing and analyzing these experiences through a researcher lens that I saw the potential for further discovery and scholarship. I have yet to find literature that explores a background similar to mine. Additionally, previous literature presents a gap in finding ethnographic research that involves ACEs, military service, transitional elements, and finding purpose in being an educator.

The process of writing personal narratives and analyzing them through the autoethnography process has been a life-changing opportunity. Self-reflection, closure, and clarification of my lived experiences were never my initial goals, but they have become paths I

have been able to explore. Writing personal narratives has been shown to provide an effective method for trauma survivors to recover from their adverse experience (Sloan et al., 2013).

Writers of scholarly personal narratives and autoethnographies are obligated to create meaning and interpret lived experiences for not only themselves but also the readers (Nash & Bradley, 2011). What I did not realize was how truly impactful writing could be on me and that my vulnerability could produce positive results. My hope is to look deeper into my lived experiences in future work to connect with others of relatable backgrounds or those who are looking to gain perspective.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

It's been 4 years since I transitioned out of the military into the civilian world and those years have been hard. Going from a junior leadership role as a staff sergeant to working entry-level labor jobs felt like a major step backwards, and I questioned why I made the decision to leave the military. But now I'm in my third month as a first-year special education teacher, and finally, I'm starting to grasp what my role is. I have a better understanding of school environment and culture, and how I fit into it. I'm really enjoying being around the kids, serving as a positive educational and male influence on them, two things that I didn't consistently have growing up. For the first time since leaving the military, I feel like I can have pride again, an identity, a professional purpose.

Everyone has their own unique life experiences: some positive, some negative, and some are just day-to-day life. The above vignette describes a time during my first year of teaching when I was just trying to take it one day at a time. I did not realize it at the time, but things—including my career as an educator—would get better.

Daily, our experiences shape and reinforce who we are, sending us on our path in life. I recognize that for some, this trajectory seems predetermined in a positive direction. For others—those experiencing a negative childhood experience or those from a marginalized or oppressed group—it is as if they are beginning the race to a productive and purposeful adulthood multiple laps behind. For those who do not meet society's benchmarks or who come from a certain background or culture or group, limitations are placed and pathway options shrink. Some have what would be considered a head start in life because of race or economic status. This “privilege,” determined only by often unwritten rights, boosts them to the front of the line (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.78).

This literature review examines research and discoveries regarding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) trauma as connected to veterans, civilian and military transition, and finding purpose post-transition. Additionally, theoretical models will be described that provide a lens for analyzing and identifying significant elements of the study's personal narratives.

ACEs Trauma

In writing and analyzing these lived personal narratives, discovery was happening. Through my position as a special education teacher, I worked and advocated daily for children who had or were experiencing ACEs. In the United States, 45% of children experience at least one ACE in their lives; 10% of children have experienced three or more (Bartlett & Sacks, 2019). The effects these ACEs have on children are often irreversible and carried into adulthood.

ACEs were developed from the work of Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and other colleagues during a study from 1995–1997 (Felitti et al., 1998/2019). These researchers interviewed adult participants about childhood adversities and placed them into seven categories. They found that the more categories the participants fell in, the worse their physical and mental outcomes (Bartlett & Sacks, 2019). As more work has been done in the field, ACEs trauma studies have included both conventional and expanded ACEs. The Philadelphia ACEs Survey is one such expansion and includes experiencing bullying, witnessing violence, living in an unsafe neighborhood, feeling discrimination, and having a history of living in foster care (Philadelphia ACE Project, 2021; Pachter et. al., 2017).

The conventional ACEs traumatic experiences are categorized into three groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges. They have been shown to result in increased risk for adverse social and health issues in adulthood. This includes negative impact on mental health, increased risk for chronic disease, increased engagement in risky behaviors, and reduced educational and

occupational opportunities. As the number of ACEs experienced rises, the risk for negative outcomes increases (Centers for Disease Control, 2021).

From early findings to follow up research, ACEs has been shown to effect a range of social, emotional, behavior, and cognitive areas, as well as produce negative neurodevelopment results (Felitti et al., 1998/2019; Kendall-Tackett, 2002; Weiss & Wagner, 1998). A strong connection can be made between the disadvantageous effects of ACEs on mental and physical health as well as decision-making and view of a positive future outcome (Bellis et al., 2019). It can be assumed that everyone's experiences with ACEs is different and therefore individuals are affected in varying ways. It can also be inferred that these events do not benefit the development of a young person, with consequences that last a lifetime.

I had never truly explored the impact of ACEs on my own childhood and adult life. I believe that I was so busy dealing with life and eventually helping children within the schools that I never really looked back. When I did take the time to reflect, it was like a map appeared connecting events, decisions, hardships, and triumphs.

ACEs Connection to Veterans and Military Members

When people ask, "What made you decide to join the Army," I never had a great answer. My high school counselor told me I was "not college material," and I simply did not know what else to do. I also was being pressured by a military recruiter whose sole job was to sign people to service. Once I learned what the military offered in terms of financial, physical, and social stability, it did not take long for me to enlist. However, there is one potential factor I never considered. In a study comparing the prevalence of ACEs in participants both with and without military service, Bolsnich et al. (2014) found that men who voluntarily enlist in the U.S military are twice as likely to have experienced some form of childhood trauma than those who did not

serve. While there is a lack of literature in identifying these men and women prior to enlistment, Bolsnich et al. (2014) concluded that “enlistment may serve as an escape from adversity for some individuals, at least among men” (p. 1041). Wong et al. (2019) supported these findings, connecting ACEs and a person’s self-identity, self-confidence, and self-certainty. They found that the more ACEs a person experienced, the greater the negative effect on each of these categories. The prevalence of ACEs can lead individuals to question themselves and it can produce lower identity coherence of self-understanding and self-certainty (Wong et al., 2019). Based on these findings, it can be assumed that some enlisted service members—myself included—are seeking stability, direction, and purpose through military service.

After enlistment, military members are exposed immediately to intense stressors during initial basic and advanced individual training. Those stressors are compounded by potential combat deployments. Cabrera et al. (2007) found that when combining these factors with two or more ACEs, military members showed a higher prevalence of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This raises awareness that portions of our military are entering service with preexisting trauma. Military service, especially combat deployments, could negatively impact mental and physical health. Cabrera et al. (2007) found that the negative impact of ACEs trauma appears to be more significant than the impact of combat exposure but suggested that this could be due to lower reactivity as a result of previous childhood traumas.

The lasting effects of ACEs trauma can be seen among nearly all current and former military members. Veterans who have four or more categories of ACEs are found to be significantly more prone to mental health needs compared to civilian or other veteran populations. The needs of this population may require significant investment in mental health care (Laird & Alexander, 2019), as well as investment from the individual themselves.

Furthering research on the prevalence of ACEs among current military and veterans is in relatively early stages, yet corroborating results are being produced. In the post-draft era, this is important for understanding who is joining voluntarily, their reasons for joining, and any possible connections to previous childhood traumas. In a follow-up study, Blossnich et al. (2021) used a national survey of veterans and nonveterans done by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs incorporating a wider array of ACEs than are typically used in standard ACEs surveys. Results showed that veterans were more likely to experience and have more prevalence of some ACEs than their nonveteran peers. This study also included findings of higher rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among veterans compared to nonveteran peers.

A 2020 publication revealed that half of female and a fourth of male veterans revealed they had exposure to multiple ACEs during their childhood. While the most common experiences were the same for both sexes, females were more likely than males to have four or more ACEs. Females who had one or two ACEs did not show an increase in mental health conditions, and Aronson et al. (2020) suggested that “for some individuals, exposure to ACEs may build, rather than diminish, one’s capacity to cope with difficult circumstances later in life and this may be particularly true for female veterans” (p.704). These findings and results outline the importance of understanding who is enlisting in our military and the extent to which ACEs trauma will affect their time in service and their transition out of the military.

This research is rooted in the psychological and sociological effects that veterans and military members may be dealing with before they enter service. ACEs have been discovered to be more prevalent in military and veteran populations than the civilian workforce. ACEs levels, when combined with combat exposure and high-stress environments may increase negative outcomes, including being twice as likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Aronson et al.,

2020). It is suggested that increased levels of ACEs exposure had a more significant impact on mental and physical health compared to lower levels of combat military exposure, which raises the question as to whether higher levels of ACEs trauma cause more adverse effects than combat military deployments (Aronson et al., 2020, Blosnich et. al., 2014).

Military Transition

Reviewing transitional experiences is key to finding out why some succeed during and after transition and others struggle. Published by Gurkin (2019), according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office approximately 200,000 service members transition from military to civilian life annually, meaning that these people experience a significant change in career, identity, and culture (Gurkin, 2019). As Parker et al. (2019) stated, “The transition from military to civilian life can be challenging for some veterans. While most say readjusting to civilian life was very or somewhat easy, roughly one-in-four say it was at least somewhat difficult” (p.13).

Those numbers increase for veterans who served in combat deployments; 46% report readjusting to civilian life to be difficult. While most veterans reported that the military prepared them for active duty, only half say they were well prepared for the transition back into civilian life (Parker et al., 2019).

Differences in Transition

Everyone experiences transition, and a change in careers serves a common one. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), career changes happen five to seven times throughout working life for a nonmilitary person. Other transitions include marriage; having children; loss of relationships or divorce; and beginning and ending school. During service,

military personnel continue to experience these common life transitions, as well as those unique to the military.

Military personnel first undergo transition with enlistment and initial training. From there, other transitions include promotions, moving assignments or locations, deployment, unit transfer, trainings away from home or current duty station, and more. All this impacts the service members and their families (Pedlar et al., 2019). While in service, however, these transitions come with assistance and support for the military member and family. Post-service, the ability to make transitions successfully falls largely on the veteran and their ability to navigate an often completely foreign environment with little to no connection to their previous identity.

The cultural shift from both enlistment to military service and military service to post-service can be significant (Adler et al., 2011; Keeling, 2018; Pinch, 1980; Sayer et al., 2011). The structure and regimented life that the military provides are unlike most civilian careers. This structure lends itself to a sense of purpose and creates close bonds within the military culture. However, it forces the soldier to detach from previously established social support networks, shifting from self to groups, and furthers the separation from civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015).

Transitional stress does not mean that someone has PTSD, which is a psychological disorder. Transitions stress is not uncommon and happens to many people throughout major changes in life. It is typical for veterans who are leaving or rejoining civilian life, and it is believed that some low-level stress may lead to better preparation for the transition (Patterson, 2022). However, prolonged or extreme transitional stress potentially can affect a person's mental and physical health (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). The stress of returning to civilian life frequently leads to substance abuse. Unfortunately, veterans surpass civilians in substance abuse (National Institute of Drug Abuse, 2019; Patterson, 2022).

Service-Connected Nostalgia

Many military veterans are susceptible to service-connected nostalgia and will heavily rely on nostalgic memories to keep them connected to military service where they were part of a community with a sense of purpose. Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) found that veterans are susceptible to service-connected nostalgia as they struggle to transition to the civilian world in part because they do not identify with a culture outside of the military. This service-connected nostalgia is seen as a protection to enhance positive feelings about oneself whenever the presence of fears, dissatisfaction, worries, and insecurities appear (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Davis, 1979; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). The challenges of shifting from military life to civilian life are significant and can include having to adopt a new identity; shifting to an unstructured environment; missing purpose; under or unemployment; decline in income; relationship and family problems; substance addiction; financial and physical access to health care; and disability (Pedlar et al., 2019). In addition, Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) added

Exiting soldiers often find themselves unprepared for the instability of the initial phases of transition, and how this period may threaten their sense of self and self-worth. During this time they may struggle with any number of inter-related concerns, including unresolved or prolonged grief and bereavement over fallen comrades, loss of their previous military identity, nostalgia for the order and purpose that characterized their service experiences, a sense of moral injury, confusion about military-civilian differences, and changing masculine roles. (p. 139)

Importance of Finding an Identity and Purpose

While everyone's purpose is defined differently, finding a purpose is important in life, especially in the military transition process. I believe that many who enter military service are searching for a purpose. In retrospect I can see that I was looking for something. Upon entering military service, that "something" is provided from the start. Individuals are inundated, overwhelmed, and indoctrinated with values, language, military norms, and standards for fitness, dress, and behavior (Hall, 2012; Olenick et al., 2015).

My transition was no different. I quickly realized that joining the military was unlike anything else and I became different both physically and mentally as a result. I went from a directionless, doing-it-my-way high schooler to a dress right, best shape of my life, proper posture, Army values young man. I knew that I had to keep out of trouble and stay in shape, and I was proud of the difficult training that I had gone through. After joining the military, I had an identity that now people wanted to know about. "How hard was it? How much did you run? How many pushups can you do now? Did they yell a lot?" were all questions I repeatedly heard when I returned from my initial training. My transition out of service more than 8 years later was different. I thought I was ready to get out, and I thought I had a plan. Yet the transition was still a struggle.

Transitioning out of the military is much different because the level of assistance is different. When entering the military, assistance is provided at every step to ensure success in completing training and arriving at a duty station prepared to serve. Upon leaving the military, the level of assistance is fractional, which may be why veterans have difficulties reestablishing and finding meaning and purpose during their orientation to civilian life and culture (Ahern et al., 2015, Shue et al., 2021). It has been reported that military members experience a culture

shock and lose the sense of a communal purpose (Pedlar et al., 2019). One study found that veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts felt as if they no longer belonged in civilian society and had difficulty finding meaning, which resulted in a lack of purpose in the civilian world (Orazem et al., 2015). Shue et al. (2021) found that “Participants whose identities were aligned with military service indicated difficulty defining themselves outside of the military, as well as finding new purpose or meaning” (p. 367).

Based on their findings, Shue et al. (2021) recommended that military personnel should broaden their interests and skill sets as well as engage in a variety of activities while in their military career before transition. Additionally, veterans should inventory the skills they have and explore how those skills translate to civilian roles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

However, for some veterans who have an established military identity and purpose, the transition to civilian world is still a struggle. Veterans may experience grief-like symptoms during their loss of military self, identity, purpose, and lifestyle (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). This grief can effect day-to-day life, resulting in a loss of self-image, esteem, or efficacy (Papa & Maitoza, 2013). Veterans may move from a highly significant job into a menial, lower-level job, causing additional questions about identity and purpose, as well as negatively highlighting differences between their military and civilian lives (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Combined with other support systems that include family, friends, and transitional services, the sense of purpose and identity is vital as veterans change their life roles and get reestablished.

Gap in Research: ACES + Military + Transition + Veterans Teaching and Finding Purpose

Significant research can be found on ACEs, military experiences, transition, and teaching. There is also literature connecting these topics including veterans and military

members who have experienced ACEs, veterans who transition to teaching, and military-to-civilian transitions. The gap that I am studying is one that uses lived experiences to explore ACEs trauma, military service, transitions, and educational experiences, looking for purpose and identity emergence.

Theoretical Framework

Because the study of my lived experiences through personal narratives involves a 30-year period of my life, I can utilize multiple theories as a lens in which to analyze and dissect. Three theories—including Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory, social identity theory (Tajfel et. al, 1979), and Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory—are rooted in previous literature. Each theory stands independently in its field and is considered seminal theoretical work. Although independent, each theory works well in combination, providing a triangulated theoretical lens through which to view and analyze my lived experiences.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

Transition theory is relevant to this study and is being included because of its strong presence in both civilian and military-related literature centered around transition. The value of using Nancy Schlossberg’s transition theory (2011) is that it provides directness in attempting to explain how one experiences transition and how individuals create outcomes during transition and change in life. In transition theory, value is placed on how an individual transitions both psychologically and socially (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and serves as “a framework created to connect adults to the help needed to cope with the ordinary and extraordinary process of living” (Evans et al., 2009, p.213). In this case, the transitions would be those that come when entering military service and the transition to education. During these times, finding and searching for purpose and identity becomes a goal in what is deemed a successful transition. Schlossberg’s

(2011) theory, provides help with establishing what critical aspects were in place and what was lacking.

Transition within the theory is defined by Goodman et al. (2006) as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). While transitions provide opportunity for growth and development, a positive impact cannot always be assumed (Evans et al., 2009). Because all individuals experience transition, this theory has a history of wide use and applications, likely because of how it presents specific category types of transitions and identifies sets of factors that influence a person’s ability to cope with transition.

Schlossberg (2005) identifies three types of transition: anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and nonevents. Anticipated transitions include highlighted life events that may be seen as positive or negative experiences (e.g., graduation, marriage, or separation from career by choice, joining the military, leaving the military, promotions, and moving duty locations). Unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled and may include a sudden change in family dynamic because of death, injury that effects work status, divorce, custody changes of a child, or sudden job loss.

Transition nonevents are aspects that are expected to happen but fail to occur. They are classified as personal, ripple, resultant, and delayed. Personal nonevents are related directly to the individual and what they are aspiring to. Ripple nonevents are felt because of the action/nonevent of someone else (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Resultant nonevents are caused by an event. And delayed nonevents are believing or anticipating that an event might still happen. They could include events such as not being hired at a job, failing to have a certain social status or recognition, or expecting someone else to accomplish something that directly affects your life and it failing to happen (Schlossberg, 2011).

It is important to recognize that the impact level of transitions is relative to who is going through them and when they are going through them. One person's experiences may be expected, for example they may expect to get married someday, while someone else may not have that expectation. Another example is that during transition out of the military, someone may expect to step right into a job, while someone else may understand that this may require additional education. Goodman et al. (2006) gave another example as someone transitioning into retirement and the different outlooks toward this. Some are approaching retirement at a younger age and want to continue to work, be productive, and social, while others may be ready to transition to a different retirement lifestyle. It is how that person approaches and feels about the transition that determines how they will come out on the other side of the change (Goodman et al., 2006).

Accompanying the three transitions within this theory are Schlossberg's four S's that identify how individuals cope with transition. These four S's (Schlossberg, 2011) are:

- Situation – “The person's situation at the time of the transition. Are there other stresses?”
- Self – “Refers to the person's inner strength for coping with the situation. Is the person optimistic, resilient, and able to deal with ambiguity? The power of optimism cannot be understated.”
- Social Support – “The (social) support available at the time of transition is critical to one's well-being.”
- Strategies – Coping strategies that “try to change the situation, those that try to reframe the situation, those that reduce stress” (p.160)

To summarize, the Schlossberg model organizes the transitions experienced by identifying several factors and how we cope during the transition.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel & Turner's (1979) social identity theory provided strong connections to transition and how our social identity may change as we weave in and out of social groups. Social identities are in a constant state of evolution, especially before and after someone experiences a major life transition (Pedlar et al., 2019). Major transitions could include changing from one culture to another—the transition from high school or college to military culture to civilian culture. This theory can also be applied to married, single, or divorced groups; smokers and nonsmokers; college educated and noncollege educated.

Turner & Tajfel (1979) explained that how we identify socially is associated from the social groups that we are or are not members. Assumptions are made that people try to improve their self-esteem and image through their personal accomplishment and identity. Social identity is “a definition and evaluation of oneself in terms of the shared attributes that define membership of the specific groups one belongs to ... personal identity is tied to the personal self; social identity is tied to the collective self” (Hogg & Tindale, 2005, p. 141).

Social Identity Theory identifies stages seen in Figure 2.1. McLeod (2019), stated, “There are three mental processes involved in evaluating others as ‘us’ or ‘them’ (i.e., ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’). These take place in order” (Social Identity Theory Stages section, para. 6).

Figure 2.1

Social Identity Stages



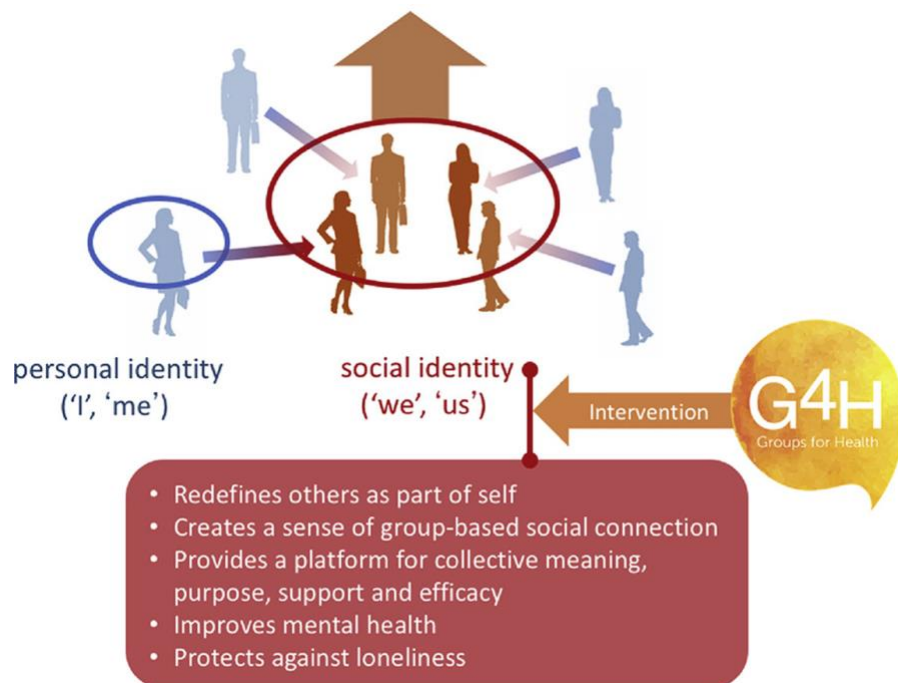
Note. Tajfel & Turner (1979) theory (as cited in McLeod, 2019).

The “us vs. them” or “in-group vs. out-group” is how we categorize to understand and arrange our social environment. In social identification, we assume identity into a group, and self-esteem becomes part of the group membership. We use social comparison to maintain our favorability in a group to keep our self-esteem high. Competing identities can occur when competition between groups occur.

Using Social Identity Theory while analyzing my personal narratives, allows me to utilize a theoretical lens to identify at what times I was a part of a specific culture and when I was not. Did I have a social or cultural identity and were others in my group/culture changing their identity? Having a social identity gives people a reason for “interests, attitudes, and behaviors as aligned with those of other members of the groups to which we belong (in-groups) but as different from those of groups to which we do not belong (out-groups)” (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 218). Positive social relationships, as highlighted in Schlossberg’s adult transition theory and identified as identified in social identity theory, play a key role in a person’s life and can be beneficial during times of transition. Strong social connectedness or social identity provides a sense of shared purpose, support, and meaning and has also been recommended as a possible deterrent and treatment for depression (Haslam et al., 2022). In Figure 2.2, Haslam et al. (2022) showed an example of a social-building intervention group that connects personal identity to social identity.

Figure 2.2

Groups 4 Health Intervention Diagram



Note. Haslam, 2022

Social Cognitive Theory

Transition theory and social identity theory complement each other in recognizing that transitions can be hard, depending on the level and time period. Research confirms that social identity plays a big role in pre-, during, and post-life transitions in terms of group and culture. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, later renamed social cognitive theory (2001) so that it could include self-efficacy, incorporates motivational factors and self-regulatory mechanisms, giving a theoretical lens for how we use personal agency to learn and grow to make changes during the course of life course, including transition.

Social cognitive theory is still based on the idea that learning occurs within social context and our personal agency is used as changes or transitions occur in life. Bandura (2001) explained that, "Social cognitive theory distinguishes among three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act on one's behest to secure desired outcomes, and

collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort” (p. 1).

Social cognitive theory considers the factors that make our unique way of learning produce results, actions, and behavior. It purposes that learning occurs because of interaction within in three areas: person, environment, and behavior.

Social cognitive theory’s main purpose is to identify possible new modes of behavior as well as whether the transitional experience was impacted and growth occurred if and when social learning occurred. Bandura (1977) stated, “Virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can offer on a vicarious basis through observation of other people’s behavior and its consequences for them” (p. 145). Additionally, identifying if there was a presence of and exemplary model to observe from, either casually or studied, resulted in further learned outcomes.

It must be said that we are not just floating around, failing to interact with our environment, with others, and with the events that are occurring. We are experiencing life as agents using cerebral systems and senses as tools to accomplish tasks (Bandura, 2001). Social cognitive theory gives an important emphasis on the individual and the environment, recognizing that past experiences and influences shape our behaviors and actions. Social persuasion by peers, teachers, bosses, and others plays a role. Additionally, the importance and presence of self-efficacy in the theory make it a model that can be considered during multiple stages in life transition. Social pervasion by peers, teachers, and leadership can have an impact on self-efficacy resulting in better efforts and outputs. It also considers how much a person’s confidence plays a role in their behavior, with higher confidence resulting in perception of higher skills and perceived success (LaMorte, 2022).

Summary

In many cases, the methodology approach of an autoethnography lends itself to an openness to explore the author's unique life experiences through a magnitude of ways (Custer, 2014). However, this can become overwhelming and create an unconnected approach leading to the inclusion of certain portions unnecessary sections of the personal narratives. This literature review outlines what and how I wanted to approach the use of my personal lived experiences through a moderate autoethnographic methodology. The value of including the current literature, frameworks, and theories ensures that personal perspective is shared but that theory and analysis are used to advance sociological understanding of the topics being covered (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

Every individual has a personal story and lived experiences that shape who they become. For people with military service, that portion of their life often becomes a major part of who they are today. Some experience a known phenomenon such as service nostalgia in which they doubt the success of their transition to a civilian career and have strong thoughts of being back in the military. Some have experienced ACEs trauma before service, which has been shown to be more prevalent in our military members (Laird & Alexander, 2019). While some may never struggle in transition, others may find it difficult to find a purpose before and after military service, and the prevalence of ACEs may be a factor. This can result in questioning one's identity and where they fit in the world, which can have significant negatives effects. It is evident that finding purpose and establishing identity are transition goals that can lead to positive outcomes.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

“Autoethnography should produce an ethical connection to the other’s suffering, a desire to transform the material conditions of the other’s heartbreaking circumstances, increasing the possibility of happiness and a good life.” – Arthur Bochner

“Attach yourself to your passion, but not to your pain. Adversity is your best friend on the path to success.” – Unknown

“Adversity can become your worst enemy when compounded and lead a person to a path of least resistance in their search of relieving the pain.” – Unknown

Introduction

Questions, doubts, and the fear of academia. I had to make a choice about how to start writing about myself. Is my story important enough to be shared? I had a challenging home dynamic as a child. I struggled in school. I joined the Army and deployed to a foreign war. I went back to school. I taught special education. And now I work at a university. Is that interesting? Do people care? Will people want to read my story? Will academics and researchers look down on my choice for dissertation methodology? These questions and doubts surround my work on this study.

Events from my past have always remained top of mind. However, I have never been to therapy or talked to a professional about my past, so it has never been formally revisited, dissected, or put into perspective. What started as a snapshot of my life turned into a review of where it all started.

In discussing where to start and what to focus on within the personal narrative side of the methodology, I was given the advice to “Just write. Write it all out. Tell the story. And then go

back to find out what you have.” Telling my story has been difficult, opening up doors to the past and trying to put events into perspective as a child and now a parent myself. I learned that self-discovery in writing is part of what makes it so powerful. A path in attempting to produce lived personal narratives and combining them with a scholarly approach and methodology had begun.

Background and Methodology Approach

The field of ethnography intrigued me since I was introduced to the methodology in John Creswell’s and Poth’s 2007 book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. I was drawn in by the idea of immersion into the day-to-day lives of groups of people in a culture-sharing group (Crenshaw, 2016). I immediately made a connection to my military service in Iraq and when I spent time on the Kuwaiti border working logistical security and movement control. As a 21-year-old from Kansas, the Muslim culture, beliefs, language, and deep friendships were fascinating and different from anything I had ever seen. An ethnography of that experience and that group is not the purpose here, but the idea of ethnographic research had my attention before I even knew what it was. Deeper into my studies, I learned of another ethnographic methodology, autoethnography, which focuses more on personal narratives, lived experiences, and the identification of self as a perspective in the methodology.

In naturalistic research, a personal ethnography is referred to as an autoethnography where researchers examine their past and lived experiences (Frey et al., 2000). However, creating value and displaying the power of an autoethnography can be a challenge, as a personal narrative may be viewed as valuable only to the writer. Winkler (2017) addressed this challenge, noting that “Putting too much emphasis on the ‘auto,’ hence, personal feelings, impressions, thoughts, attitudes, experiences, and so on, authors may become accused of conducting autobiography, not autoethnography” (p. 236). However, an autoethnography that connects to a

personal, lived experience while also connecting to the reader and scholarly work can have a powerful impact for the writer, reader, and future research.

First mention of the formal term “auto-ethnography” was by anthropologist Karl G. Heider (1975), who deemed self as the informant in the study, not the ethnographer themselves. Twenty years later, the term and method had continued to grow. Reed-Danahay (1998) defined the label of autoethnography, further embracing a wide scope of writings such as native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography. As referenced by Chang (2016), Ellis and Bochner (2000) continued the growth of the term with autoethnographic orientation labels such as auto observation, confessional tales, critical autobiography, experiential texts, and reflexive ethnography.

Ellis and Boucher (2000) group these into three labels, stating “Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and self (auto)” (p. 740), noting “different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes” (p. 740). Chang (2016) added: “Keeping in mind the triadic balance, I argue that autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (p. 48).

Chang (2016) described an autoethnography as “a qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researcher with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others” (p. 36). While Chang (2016) referred to autoethnography as self-narrative writing, the author must not become too self-involved in their writing. Also, the writer must make a point to avoid being seen self-indulgent and self-serving. The goal of this autoethnography is for the reader to connect with the personal struggles encountered as we progress through life, career, and family. For some readers,

it is about understanding the perspective of the person experiencing the life events. For others, a connection to one's own personal life may be made, leading the reader on a path of their own exploration and discovery.

Adams et. al., (2018) splits the word autoethnography into three parts: auto, ethno, and graphy. *Autobiography* entails memoir, personal narratives, and craft of life writing. *Ethno* is the method of doing social science research and studying cultural life. *Graphy* represents an attention to the process of turning work into accessible texts that have quality, ethical considerations, and storytelling. Successful autoethnography is done at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography with an understanding of why the method is being used (Adams et al., 2017).

The autoethnographic approach has roots in postmodern philosophy. It is considered a newer approach—used more frequently in the past 25 years—that challenges expansion of reflexivity (Wall, 2006). Previously, similar work would often be referred to as autobiographic or personal narrative writing. Wall (2006) explains:

I see autoethnography as a research method that is part of, but delineated from, the broader realm of autobiography. By conceptualizing it this way, we can use self in a methodologically rigorous way, but personal stories can coexist with autoethnographic research. (p. 146)

The idea of telling stories and reliving an experience through another's words is not new. This form of sharing has been around since we learned to communicate. Memoirs, journals, diaries, letters, and personal narratives all make excellent artifacts when drafting an autobiographical piece. Even if the authors attempt to remove themselves, many times "all writing are in some ways autobiographical because they reflect authors' perspectives and

preferences in their choices of topic, writing style, direction, and conclusion” (Chang, 2016, p. 35).

In the past 2 decades, writing focused on self has increased significantly. Robert Nash’s (2004) scholarly personal narratives (SPNs) are strongly connected and recognized by the autoethnography realm. Both Nash (2004) and Chang (2016) agreed that the use of autobiographic facts in autoethnographies and SPNs provides for an even deeper understanding of self and others. The value of personal experiences grounded in a metalogical approach makes the content accessible and relatable. The sharing of these narratives and personal facts exhibits the power of stories rather than the pushing of theories.

Reason for Approach

I selected an autoethnography for several reasons. While a discussion with my committee chair and major advisor regarding the struggles in my transition from the Army to special education teach lit the fire, learning more about the autoethnography approach and starting the process of writing stoked the flames.

Writing out the stories led to many discoveries and connections. Using the autoethnographic methodology, I combined the stories from my past with scholarly literature and theory to explore the various pathways, phenomenon, and direction for my personal narratives. This would allow me to feature lived experiences of a low-achieving K–12 student with ACEs trauma in childhood, service in the military, and struggles in transition, purpose, and identity.

Acknowledging the uniqueness of studying the self, Creswell and Poth (2016) recommended that “individuals wanting to study themselves and their own experiences turn to autoethnography...for scholarly procedures in how to conduct their studies” (p. 123). Choosing an autoethnographic lens is not an approach that should be taken lightly; it is a challenge and

could potentially uncover suppressed memories. This path, if done with a learned approach, blends autobiography and ethnography into personal narratives that can branch out and rely on sociocultural areas and situations (Ellis et al., 2011). The strategic blending of telling personal details, connections to others, and scholarly work produces a product that, like other research methodologies, can further discussion and research questions. I will use my past subjective experiences to make connections to identifiable culture and phenomena that can strengthen current research and lead to future questions.

Ellis et al. (2011) stated, “A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography...as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (p. 1). The production of a product is part of my goal in this. Fulfilling certain academic requirements is part of that product, but I believe that connecting to and furthering the methodology of writing an autoethnography can be a moving and therapeutic process, even serving as potential therapy for trauma. Additionally, adding these methods into the transition process could prove to be an effective way for some to discover self-reflection in the transitional stage.

Working within the methodology, autoethnography provides the opportunity for deeper, more meaningful, and holistic approaches to reflecting on a traumatic event or events (McMillian & Ramirez, 2016). No matter my struggle to write or questions about the worth of my story, the work and story have become so incredibly reflective for me. And what kept me in motion was possibility that it could help others in facing their own life events.

An autoethnography changes time and can impact the future, and I view this through the lens of both the reader and writer. If writing or reading launches an internal investigation into why, how, and what now, then an impact has been made. Custer (2014) stated,

“Autoethnography can radically alter an individual’s perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future if they are aware and open to the transformative effects” (p. 2).

While what makes a good autoethnography is a complicated question, Spry (2001) first shared that it is not “a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory” (p. 173). There is still a discipline in the methodology and without the “I,” a sense of anything goes scholarship can devalue the work. Autoethnography is not effective without the audacity to be vulnerable, and it only has credibility when articulated with observance of literary discipline (Spry, 2001). By allowing readers a scholarly view behind the scenes of the writer, a legitimacy to one’s own personal experiences can be made. Ellis et al. (2011) summarized:

When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g., character and plot development), showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice. Thus, the auto-ethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people. (p. 5)

My goal for implementing this methodology is to identify and explain the pathways to my transition into the field of education and the beneficial impact it had. Further, I seek to connect finding successful transition to, and a purpose in, education after experiencing ACEs trauma, military service, and divorce. This will be done through the telling of personal narratives, mapping and timelining trajectories, alternate outcomes, and connections to various forms of

culture. Additionally, I will incorporate transitional theory, including Schlossberg's model known as human adaptation to transition (Goodman et al., 2006), as well as veteran critical theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

Personal Narrative and Autoethnography Critiques

From its beginnings, autoethnography has received critiques. Hayano (1979) explained, "I also acknowledge but disregard studies...which analyze one's own life through procedures of ethnography. These studies are not only autoethnographic, they are self-ethnographic, but it is not immediately shown how they are applicable to other members" (p. 103).

Despite the growing interest in the field, questions of academic rigor and legitimacy of the methodology persist. In writings about self, critics identified that the private and personal approach can become narcissistic or self-indulgent (Holt, 2003; Salzman, 2002, Sparkes, 2000). However, this does not disqualify or prove that the autoethnographic method is faulty (Chang, 2016). While they did not state that it is the best method, Nash and Bradley (2011) articulated the importance and valid method of scholarly personal narrative, which is connected to autoethnography. They observed and addressed the questions and skepticisms, sharing that personal narrative writers cannot attempt to change established research norms or what is deemed academically acceptable.

In terms of identifying the phenomenon, personal narrative writers view themselves as such, writing specifically to their own lives and careers (Ellis et. al., 2007). They create the most controversial versions of autoethnography, especially when they do not adhere to more traditional research connections to scholarly methods and analysis (Ellis et al., 2011), which legitimize these narratives. As the authors connect with cultural context in the stories and the

participants within the narratives, they are inviting the readers to enter the lens of their world and potentially reflect on and possibly understand how it translates to their own lives (Ellis, 2004).

When tapping into our own memories and experiences, selectivity can occur in the process of retelling, shaping what we remember in the continuum of one's own experience (Muncey, 2005). However, Muncey (2005) proposed that "if one wants to tell a complex story in which the disjunctions dictate that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, the method requires some portrayal of this disjunction" (p.70).

Chang (2016) identified the following to avoid pitfalls that may lead to questions within the work of an auto-ethnographer: excessive focus on self; overemphasis on narration; exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and inappropriate application of the label "auto-ethnography." (p. 54). Avoiding these defined pitfalls—focusing on the self without overemphasizing that which may not be fully accurate—becomes a direct challenge to the writer.

I find myself chasing and attempting to create meaning in my work, attempting to assess its impact value and alignment with the methodology along with avoiding the pitfalls. As Richards (2016) suggested, "autoethnography is slippery precisely because of what it does: Adapts, individualizes, blurs boundaries and subverts categories" (p. 164). This also is what creates the power in the methodology but generates some skepticism. Regarding auto-ethnographers, Holman Jones (2005) stated that they "view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better" (p. 764). I understand how a strict quantitative researcher may view the lack of accuracy in lived details. A strict qualitative researcher may question the typically small sample size of an autoethnography, many times a

singular subject. Keeping in mind that if the ethnographic goal is to further research and understanding of groups, cultures, and the individuals who make up these, autoethnographies practice ultimate reflexivity and make up a different point of view and individualized lived approach.

Stalkhe Wall (2016), whose work in autoethnography started in the early 2000s and who has reviewed autoethnographic manuscripts through the years, had become more inclined to steer the methodology to become closer aligned with more traditional elements of scholarly inquiry. This recommendation aligns with the recommendation of Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006) who expressed concerns about the direction autoethnography was going, noting that most work was evocative, or emotional. Anderson specifically believed that the early efforts in autoethnography represented work that had more defined parameters and expectations, as opposed to an open field without identifiable guidelines.

Legitimizing and Incorporating Self and Others

Autoethnography emerges from postmodern thinking and tests traditional thinking. While it challenges more conventional approaches, it is not meant to disparage or critique these methods. Instead, the method proposes that we accept that there are many ways to produce inquiry, and no singular way should be privileged (Wall, 2006). We see similar ways of thinking emerge and produce critical race theory, feminist theory, and veteran critical theory, which has goals that question the *status quo* in assumptions made about modern veterans. The merging of writing or story telling as self-participants gives a direct voice that has the freedom to be unfiltered, deregulated, and without bias from an outside researcher. As Stahlke Wall (2016) stated, “there are marginalized perspectives on certain topics that are given voice through autoethnography” (p. 3).

Choosing a less-than-traditional methodology places the burden of scholarship on me as the author. However, the work of Chang (2016), Ellis (2004), Ellis et. al., (2011), Nash and Bradley (2011), and Wall (2006), Stahlke Wall (2016) helps further validate autoethnography, especially in our postmodern, transitional world.

It cannot be denied that the genre has grown in various disciplines and has evolved into a wide range of ethnographic, narrative, and autobiographical approaches. As a methodology, no official template or approved approach exists for autoethnography. In terms of dissertations, autoethnographies have an extremely wide variety of approaches and personal narratives. I have read autoethnographies from a Native American, a school administrator, a factory worker turned mechanic turned engineer turned university course director, and more, finding connections in each. This is the power of autoethnography as methodology: There are stories out there we must hear. Bochner (2012) shared that “autoethnography should produce an ethical connection to the other’s suffering, a desire to transform the material conditions of the other’s heartbreaking circumstances, increasing the possibility of happiness and a good life” (p. 209).

Furthermore, as a people and scholars, the importance of viewing through different lenses can help us understand why some have certain assumptions of the world: The perceived relevance and pressure to some of being masculine, tough, and suppressing emotions and feelings; the need to feel wanted and rewarded; an explanation of why lifelong learning can change a family’s trajectory. Traditional methodologies can lead to a narrowed and limited way of thinking, sometimes resulting in the author holding back for fear of scholarly disapproval. In contrast, auto-ethnographers have the freedom to view research, writing, and reading as socially justified acts with a goal of producing accessible texts that help us understand and potentially change the world we live in (Holman Jones, 2005).

Autoethnography itself was, and is still to a degree, seen as a marginalized methodology and serves as an appropriate choice for representing marginalized people, groups, or cultures (Wall, 2014). While reviewing the narratives of this autoethnography, marginalized connections include the many assumptions and perceived beliefs about the groups and cultures entwined in my life.

Chang (2016) advocated for this methodology, stating that autoethnographic research has outreaching benefits in multiple fields, including human relations, education, medicine, religion, and outreach. Learning and incorporating lived experience from others is important; connecting to the students' own life and past learning enhances retention and supercharges material to be learned (Willis, 2007). Additionally, learning from others—or in my case students, family, and co-workers—was equally valuable. However, it was not until I dove into autoethnography that I realized just how impactful and beneficial the practices of self-narrative and inquiry could be. Change can occur as both writer and learner. These connections align with why I chose autoethnography as a valid option to produce personal and scholarly benefits. Chang (2016) categorized the benefits of autoethnography into three areas:

- (1) it offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers;
- (2) it enhances cultural understanding of self and others; and
- (3) it has a potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building. (p. 52)

To further explain the three benefits that Chang (2016) identified, the process of writing in one's own unique voice and perspective has the benefit of freeing the writer from some of the traditional writing conventions. The author's voice conveys to the reader the emotions from various relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2002). When writing and sharing about potentially

traumatic or vulnerable parts of one's life, having this freedom to control the narrative and story cannot be understated. Ethnography itself is immensely valuable in sharing the experiences of others, though ultimately a distinguished line remains between researcher and subject or group being researched.

The autoethnography process allowed me to review intersections of my life with various cultures and groups of people—some as close as relatives, and some a part of the culture of a specific group. These intersections, influences, and experiences produced a lived-experience document that, when based on with the autoethnographic methodology, becomes documented work within the scholarly realm. Without the parameters and known limitations of autoethnography and its ethnographic connections, such work leans closer to autobiographical (i.e., as a memoir or journal; Chang, 2007).

Understanding that process requires the author to attempt to write about self while being vulnerable and open to the readers. This process is like being in a boat that can be rowed out to the middle of the lake or hugged closely to the shore. In my writing, there is an urge to test the deeper waters but a comfort in staying safely within reach of land. However, if the idea is to better understand self and others' culture, then truly examining one's own self and implementing self-reflection becomes the key to succeeding (Florio-Ruane & DeTar, 2001). Essentially, to reach the deeper water, we need to explore who we are, which side of the lake we came from, and what direction we might be heading. And it may mean we need to jump out of the boat and just swim.

Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2003), which highlights learning about oneself and others as students, makes connections to learning changes that can occur in the human dimension section of the taxonomy. Fink (2003) writes

When students learn something important about their own Self and/or about Others, it enables them to interact more effectively with themselves or with others. They discover the personal and/or social implications of what they have learned. What they learn or the way in which they learn sometimes gives students a new understanding of themselves (self-image) or a new vision of what they want to become (self-ideal). At other times, they acquire a better understanding of others: How and why others act the way they do, or how the learner can interact more effectively with others. Special Value: This kind of learning informs students about the human significance of what they are learning. (p. 5)

Adding Fink's work to Chang's (2007 & 2016), benefits resulted in examining my own lived experience, weaving it together, and attempting to answer "why" and "how" in learning about oneself. The "others" connection happens in learning about or reliving the other individuals/culture in the narrative as much as "others"—the readers—learning about the authors experience and the lens it is lived through. I find this connection to be one of the highlighted reasons for legitimizing autoethnography in my process. In writing the stories and narratives, I learn about self through my personal accounts. My connection to others comes in two areas: others who had similar experiences and reading others' experiences in their narratives or ethnographies.

In Chang's (2016) last identified benefit, the powerful—and possibly uncomfortable—approach is promoting change through transformation. As Berry (2006) described, what the audience may learn from authors is not always a gift. Readers may not want to engage or respond in the conversation that the writer is attempting to engage them in. This should not be seen as a deterrent to the potential writer, however. As writers, we can provide a lens into the depths of personal stories within a culture, group, or phenomenon. Through this lens, we hope that the

reader reaches internal and external conversations: “I’ve experienced the same, but in this way” or “I had a friend who dealt with this topic. I never knew what they could be going through.” By creating a connection, we hope to transform the readers’ cross-cultural connection to a person or group. There has been some experimentation with co-autoethnography by Taylor and Coia (2006) with undergraduate education students to increase self-reflection and cross-cultural connections. The authors reported that the students experienced broadened cultural and self-awareness, which reflected positive outcomes in the teacher candidates’ practices and philosophies.

Part of the goal for an auto-ethnographer should be to answer “How useful is the story” and “To what uses might the story be put” (Bochner, 2002). Not answering these questions can create the sense that the author is simply telling stories that tug at the heart strings to connect with the reader. Addressing these questions provides a path to scholarly acceptance and validation.

The qualitative inquiry methodology of self-narrative has gained traction and spread from the social sciences to other disciplines. Autoethnography has also gained a larger following because it addresses the ethnographic issue of representing the voice of others (Lapadat, 2017). Understandably, not everyone can sit down and attempt to write a scholarly level autoethnography.

Staying true to the purpose for choosing this methodology was key in continuing to push forward. One important part of this was choosing a path to tell the stories. Using themes would connect the reader to the author’s process of gathering and recalling information and writing about self. To avoid being too self-indulgent and more understandable, thematically organized

scholarly narratives provide more universalized lenses into the author's work (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

For this reason, I have chosen to break down portions of my story in a timeline, highlighting my childhood years (1981–2000), military years (1999–2007), and transition to education years (2007–2012). The stories are in chronological order to create the best opportunities for data collection and connections to current research, theory, and phenomenon. Along with making connections to enhance cultural understanding of children who come from adverse childhood environments, educational culture, and military culture, I have also chosen to use this format to allow the reader to make inference connections to elements in the story that had potential effects on future events and decision-making. It may be that the reader can relate to or knows someone who could relate to the elements of the stories. These connections will be a part of the data analysis done chapters 4 & 5.

Ethics in the Process

My autoethnography will focus on my own self narratives and experiences with the connections to literature. I recognize the possibility that in an autoethnography, other individuals may be present within the narratives as either active participants or as background associates (Richards & Morse, 2012). Written consent from participants directly mentioned within the document was recommended by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board office. If direct interviews or observations were to take place, an IRB approval is recommended. At this time, there will be no IRB needed, only a consent form for anyone directly mentioned or specifically referenced.

Valuing and adhering to ethical standards will still be present. Chang (2016) stressed that even if the work is exempt from an IRB, ethical steps still need to be taken. She recommended developing a code of confidentiality. Below is my code of confidentiality:

1. No participants will be mentioned directly by name, but assumptions of identity need to be considered.
2. Informed consent will be requested after a careful and truthful description of how the participant will be referred to is formed.
3. Any disputed information or recalling will involve direct conversation over remembered facts. If needed, collaborated remembered facts will be incorporated.
4. All efforts will be made to protect any participants from vulnerabilities, present or future.
5. Assume that all individuals with an investment in the text may choose to read it.

This code of ethics is partially aligned with Tolich's (2010) 10 principles of autoethnography. Tolich wrote, "If autoethnography is to advance its ethical considerations, its leading exponents must provide insight into the ethical boundaries between the self and the other that anticipates ethical dilemmas" (p.1605). Tolich's 10 principles can be broken down into three categories: consent, consultation, and vulnerability. I used these three categories to shape my code of confidentiality for this work. Additionally, ensuring that these code items are done proactively, not retrospectively, is key in keeping ethical integrity throughout the process.

Methodology planning

After describing, critiquing, and legitimizing the method of autoethnography, answering research questions becomes the next step. Before that, however, the first objective is making sure that I can answer my own questions and the questions of other scholars. One question to answer

is whether this is an autobiography or an autoethnography. Literature shows that while the two are related, they deviate in multiple ways. O'Hara (2018) compared the two:

It is more than an autobiographical approach. Autoethnographic writing is a scientific method which contextualizes experiences in cultural, social, political, and personal history. Through an evidence-based approach, professionals in academic, practice, and research can bring their past experiences to a place in the present and provide direction for future professionals. (p. 14)

Because of the broadness and scope that an autoethnography can cover, almost any portion of an individual's life and experiences can be a research focus (Chang, 2016). While this is beneficial in terms of the wide range of directions and topics, it also can be overwhelming in selecting portions to focus on to develop a research focus and research questions. Therefore, a plan of action and data sources were needed.

Sources for Data

A characteristic of traditional ethnography often will include data from other participants. These may be field notes, interviews, observations, surveys, documents, and diaries (Mayan, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002). For the most part, an auto-ethnographer can do the same in their work if they choose (Wall, 2008). They may also choose to rely on other forms of data collection. I have chosen to focus on my own narratives.

Choosing what experiences to focus on started with planning and writing out events and parts of my life that I felt would be relevant in what I was ultimately trying to explore. That is, "How did I make it to where I am today, as an educator?" However, I also wanted to explore how cultural and social theory played a part in that journey. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) suggested to "over-include information in the data collection stage of research, which allows you to be

more intentional about what to highlight during the analysis and writing of the story/final presentation” (p. 200). The personal, lived experience narratives included provided the best pathway to exploring the research questions. They also had the most potential to make connections to culture, identity, educational experiences and pursuit, ACEs trauma, and purpose.

Personal, lived memories of life experiences will be my primary source of data, which begs the question “Should personal memories be considered data?” In considering the answer, I offer the following: If an outside ethnographer were to interview me, analyze those interviews, code for potential key words, and write narratives about me, their data would hold validity and be legitimized. Despite the memories being the same as those shared with an outside ethnographer, personal memories shared directly by the writer could be seen as invalid by an outsider. However, personal memories are valid sources of data, and Sanjek (1990) argued that personal memories, or “headnotes,” should be considered more important than primary field notes, at least until the researcher is deceased.

Headnotes and personal, lived experiences will be my primary form of data, however, as I have built the personal narrative, I have investigated other forms of data. These include photos, letters, informal conversations, and official and unofficial documents. Additionally, self-observation data, social maps, social media posts, and interviews may be included.

In the initial writing stages, I found that making deliberate attempts to focus on portions of the story while seeking specific artifacts or data for that portion was most beneficial. Throughout this process, several key questions as identified by Ellis (2004) served as guides in what to share and how to convert personal memories, experiences, and headnotes into writing:

1. Will the story and combined literature help others cope or better understand the world they live in?

2. Did I learn anything new about myself?
3. Is the story useful, and if so, for who?
4. Does the story connect enough to promote dialogue?

After writing the narratives highlighting the various stages of my life up to pursuing a career in education and into the first year of teaching. I found literature that others could reference and refer to or build upon.

Through this process, I learned an immense amount about myself, especially my writing limits. I have also learned that even though I already knew the stories, writing them opened my emotions in reliving and connecting back to them.

Is my story useful? Yes. All our stories are useful. Mine highlights portions of and experiences in my life that others may connect to because they have similar experiences or never knew how such experiences affected people.

I believe that my story can promote dialogue, for instance regarding ACEs trauma, its forms, and the effect it may have on future outcomes. Education and counseling approaches for these students is a necessary dialogue. Choosing to join the military, combat deployment, transitioning home, and eventually transitioning out and into a civilian career is another. Additional dialogue could revolve around addiction, divorce, and finding purpose.

Choosing An Autoethnographic Style and Role

Two opposing autoethnographic styles exist—evocative and analytic—and a combination of the two is beneficial here. The evocative style, which aligns with the work of Ellis et. al., (2011), tends to involve more emotional, confessional, and therapeutic writing styles. Evocative styles fall on the more creative and unconventional side of the autoethnographic style guide. The analytic autoethnographic style is rooted in more traditional and conventional ways of presenting

the information. The analytic side of the methodology found roots with Anderson (2006). Her efforts to infuse theoretical goals into evocative autoethnography resulted in an expansion of style. In response to seeking more descriptive, realistic, and accuracy to academics, she produced the term analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2011). Some will argue that this version allows freedoms of the methodology while appeasing to the strict academics that oppose nontraditional methodologies.

Both styles have benefits. Combining the emotional and therapeutic side of evocative with the theoretical and scholarly side of analytic fits the approach and goals that I am pursuing with my personal narrative autoethnography. This aligns with what Stahlke Wall (2016) referred to as moderate autoethnography. She stated that “a moderate autoethnography would reconcile the best of these ideas and combine the power of the personal perspective with the value of analysis and theory” (p. 8).

I have chosen a personal experience narrative as my autoethnography. My transitional story of my journey provides a vulnerable look into factors—including home, culture, service, and career—that can shape my own life. This autoethnographic role will be accomplished by authoring the stories and analyzing them. Ellis et al., (2011) wrote,

Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co researchers, and invite readers to enter the author’s world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. (p. 279)

Good practice in ethnographic work should have a form of reflexivity by the author. It is almost impossible to remove the “I know, I think, I believe” from our work. In my work, I have made it a goal to be reflexive, which demands focus on the narratives and the others in the story along

with a self-conscious awareness of self-scrutiny. It must be a deliberate goal of the researcher to incorporate and recognize their reflexivity and positioning in the research (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Additionally, in personal experience narrative, the researcher is the object of signification as they and their life experiences are the primary items being studied (Butz & Besio, 2009).

In laying out and writing the timeline of events in my story and transferring them to narrative writing, reflexivity was paramount. I studied and looked for significant disruptions from the norm throughout my life as well as for transitions identified as representing a lower percentile of the population. In other words, I searched to answer whether what I experienced in education, childhood, and life transitions were also happening to a large portion of White and/or male populations. I wanted to identify if there are events or portions of the story that stand out to not only me as the writer and subject but also to the reader. I looked to identify phenomena, social, and cultural significances.

Methodology Summarization Statement

In completion of this research document, I have chosen the methodology of autoethnography in the form of a personal experience narrative that is analyzed to identify data that can drive conversation and be connected to previous research, theory, culture, and phenomenon. The methodology has documented critics and advocates. Unlike many traditional forms of methodology, autoethnography can be represented in many ways—from evocative to analytical. Sufficient discussion and publication validate the autoethnographic approach as scholarly in nature and valuable to the fields in which the methodology may contribute.

The document exhibits the importance of learning about self and others. The connection to self and others is prevalent throughout previous literature on learning, including Fink's taxonomy (2003) and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Additionally, others are identified

as the readers, in hopes they will connect to and learn from my specific personal experience narrative.

The primary source for data is my own experiences and headnotes. However, these headnotes may be assisted by other data sources. I recognize that the point of the ethnography portion of autoethnography is an attempt to gain additional cultural understanding (Chang, 2016). I have sought additional understanding in many areas throughout my story, including childhood trauma, educational trajectory, addiction, divorce, combat military service, and teaching. I have asked what significance they play in person a person's success in life, transition, and finding purpose.

My autoethnography will combine the evocative and analytical sides of the methodology. Meshing these into a moderate approach requires capturing the emotional nature of the included writing and combining it with an ethical approach that collectively moves thinking forward (Stahlke Wall, 2016). My hope is that this moderate approach combines self-analyzation with a balanced approach that is seen as heartfelt, refreshing, and innovative. I also hope that it is seen as a quality work that includes rigor and is useful to the field of academics. Lastly, the subjects discussed and uncovered here can be explored further, by myself or future researchers. I truly view this as just the start.

Analyzing and Organizing

“In your analysis, honor your own voice and what you are seeking to convey. Recognize that stories play a crucial role in meaning-making and will help you interpret your experiences” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 202).

Envisioning what to write, how to organize the writing, and how to analyze what has been written can be overwhelming. Chang (2016) shared, “When a topic appears frequently in

the data, it is likely to signify its importance in your life. Therefore, search for repetition to discover foundational elements of your life” (p.132). The process of creating, gathering, and interpreting data for this study are at the crux of autoethnography. Searching for meaning in a cultural sense and connecting or comparing it with others becomes a central balance of interpreting and disusing the data.

For this study, I used initial coding to first identify which text and portions of my story would be included in Chapter 4 that would feature the personal lived narratives in a moderate autoethnography style. The main purpose of this is to feature narratives that are central to the research questions and overall believed purpose for this study. Additionally, including narratives that may have a tie to culture and provide verisimilitude, but are not too raw in content, are a key part of invoking the reader to inform and or make connections.

Fetterman (2019) shared that “analysis in ethnography is as much a test of the ethnographer as it is a test of the data” (p. 100). This thought is further true in the work of autoethnography, as it shares methods rooted in ethnography research (e.g., a focus on culture, context, the individual and societal issues/events, and holistic analysis; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Analysis of autoethnography can follow the same basic guidelines of basic qualitative research data analysis, which include areas such as analyzing human experiences, descriptive focusing, and identifying subjective meaning-making (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). With these connections, Saldaña (2016), suggested that general, qualitative coding methods such as descriptive coding, in vivo coding, emotional coding, and initial coding can be incorporated in autoethnographic analysis (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Definitions of Coding Methods

Coding Method	Definition
Emotion Coding	Emotion codes label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant.
Descriptive Coding	Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data.
In Vivo Coding	In vivo codes are codes consisting of a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record.
Initial Coding (also called Open Coding)	Initial coding is an open-ended approach to coding data that breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, comparing them for similarities and differences.

Note. Saldaña, 2016

Descriptive coding was used to record findings within the personal narratives and to draw out evidence of trauma, social/cultural connections, positive or negative relationships to education, and evidence of purpose/identity. In addition to descriptive coding, narrative analysis was used because of its connection to autoethnography and narrative research. Narrative thematic analysis will allow for a focus on historical context, use of social theory, and use of coding (Riessman, 2008). During this process I will also rely on suggestions by Gibbs (2018) and Janesick (2010):

- Look for events, experiences, accounts (explanations, excuses)
- Look for thematic ideas
- Highlight emotive language, imagery, and feelings
- Look for major themes with key words, beliefs, and behavior
- Look for points of tension and conflict

This analysis is shared directly after compilations of the personal narratives through sections titled “After Action Reviews.” In these reviews, a lens of purpose, identity, and education are surrounded with psychology-based theories creating a theoretical frame to guide the process (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2

ACEs, Frameworks, and Lens Focus

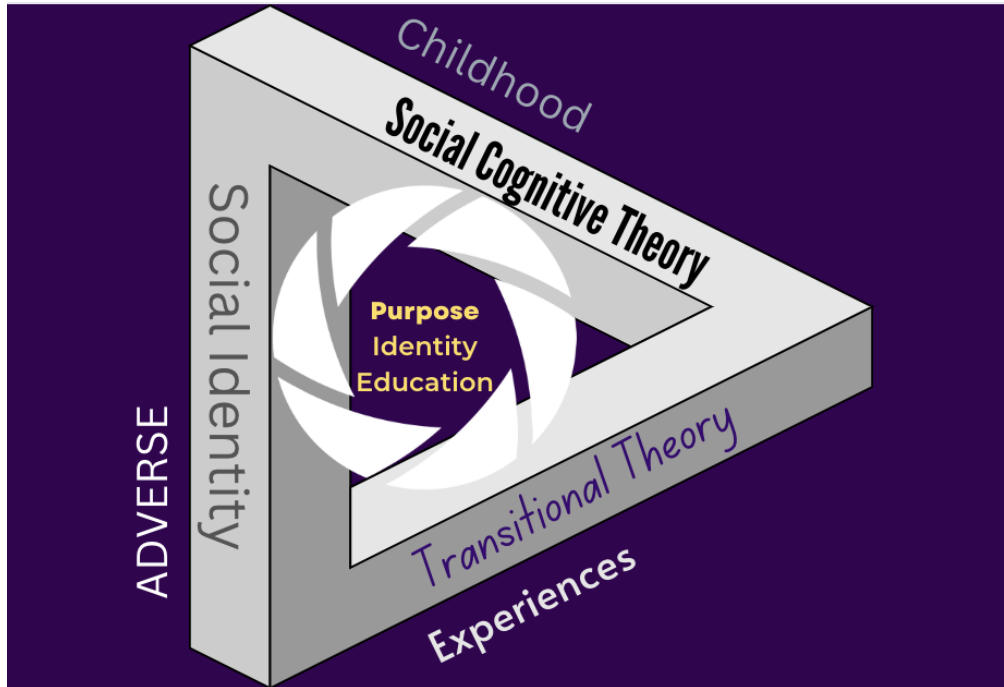


Table 3.1 demonstrates a reflexivity journal or chart used to analyze the lived experiences noted through the personal narrative and moderate autoethnography process. Each experience was examined to identify elements of the three theories being used as framework boundaries. In reviews of the narratives, matching elements of the frameworks position the researcher in scholarly way and aid in replication of the analysis.

The section “Narrative Analysis and Thematic Connections,” provides analysis for the paradoxes found within the narratives. Nash and Bradley (2011) stated, “Writers often discover dominant thematic motifs that occur and reoccur throughout their lives, and these provide a paradoxical bundle of rich potential” (p. 97). In the initial coding, I looked to identify the connection to education, whether it be as a student or teacher and positive or negative. Positive is defined by potential evidence of connection to educators, evidence of increased academic performance, educational self confidence, but does not evaluate extracurricular activities that fall

under culture social organization connection. Seeing that there was an emergence within the narratives, I looked for where and if ACEs or other trauma happened. Because this is an autoethnography, another goal was searching for connections to a culture or a social organization, and lastly, identifying if and when the lived experience was a part of a time when purpose and identity were present. Sections related to the personal narrative in the table are used in Chapter 4 as part of analyzing the narratives and are being referred to as AARs (After Action Reviews). These will be broken into three sections for review: childhood/youth (1981–2000), military (1999–2007), transition to civilian world after military (2007–2013). This allows for the results to have some thematic organization and be more understandable to readers, less about self, more universal (Nash & Bradley, 2011), and easier to replicate. This will also be used to create the results and discussion in Chapter 5.

Table 3.1

Personal Narratives Connections: Searching for Purpose and Identity

Lived Experiences	Connections to Theoretical Frameworks	Narrative Analysis and Thematic Connections			
		Relationship to Education	ACES or Trauma Impact	Culture/Social Organization Connection	Purpose/Identity Connections
Birth Through Elementary School 1981–1993 Age 0–12					
Secondary School 1994–2000					
O Brother Where Art Thou 1998					
1 st After Action Review					

Enlistment: Getting Squared Away 1998–1999					
Military Service 1999–2007					
Smoke 'em if You Got 'em 2003–2008					
2nd After Action Review					
Tracking to the Civilian World 2007–2011					
Finding New Battle Buddies Teaching 2011–2013					
3rd After Action Review					

Process of Replication

Following the guidelines of autoethnography becomes important in analyzing and writing about the process and reporting the data. When initially considering autoethnography, my writing started with learning about the scholarly personal narrative process (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Before that, however, I had get to the roots of skillful writing practice. For this, I reviewed Clark's *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* (2008) and focused on:

Writing Tool #10: Recognize the Roots of Stories: Recognize the mythic, symbolic, and poetic. Be aware (and beware) that common themes of news writing have deep roots in the culture of storytelling.

Writing Tool #15: Reveal Character Traits: Reveal character traits to the reader through scenes, details, and dialogue.

Writing Tool #21: Quotes and Dialogue: Learn how quotes differ from dialogue.

Writing Tool #24: Name the Big Parts: Seeing the structure of a story is easier if you can identify the main parts

Writing Tool #40: The Broken Line: Use this tool to combine storytelling with reporting.

Writing Tool #41: X-Ray: Reading others' work can help make you a better writer.

Writing Tool #46: Storytellers, Start Your Engines: Good questions drive good stories.

(p. 3–4)

My purpose was to highlight key events, struggles, phenomenon, and culture in my narratives. I discovered through the writing process that I had never done or thought about my life this in-depth, which became intriguing and, at times, hard to put on paper. The fear of becoming an unreliable narrator exists throughout the process of writing these narratives. To alleviate this, it became important to choose an autoethnography style. Chang (2016) outlined four methods: descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotional, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative. My writing style fell into the confessional-emotional way, but I wanted a moderate autoethnography. Incorporating the analytical-interpretive style aided in transitioning my narratives. After writing the heart of the stories (confessional-emotional), I applied and highlighted the essential features that exhibited an interconnectedness with any theories, cultures, phenomenon, and literature (analytical-interpretive).

Ultimately, how the method depends on the author and purpose of the autoethnography. Chang (2016) advised that “you will ultimately have to find your own style to express your interpretation of your life and its connectivity to the world” (p.149). This advice can lead to multiple versions and paths in the process. I found that the narratives should drive the work, staying true to the work that is being done and why it is being written.

Once the rough draft and outline narratives were written, I found it best to review Ellis' (2000) questions to legitimize what was being told: Will it help others? Can I learn? Is it useful? Does the story promote dialogue? Keeping these overarching questions in mind during the

process helped me stay grounded to why this was being done. Getting the draft narratives written before analyzing and shifting them into a specific model, methodology, or framework was paramount in allowing the freedom to write.

My plan for visually guiding the personal narratives before I started writing was to use timelines in chronological order to direct myself—and eventually the reader—in a way that was easily followed and incorporated an additional modality. I ultimately chose to start writing and add the timelines in after. Chang (2016) provided a writing exercise that I found very helpful that highlights timelining. Chronologically list major events including dates and brief accounts, focus on the events that center around the research focus and have cultural self-discovery or interactions with phenomenon, and select each event explain its importance.

Because this outlining and writing process is not all done in one sitting, the author needs a system to track errant ideas. In the Scholarly Personal Narrative process (SPN), which is closely related to autoethnography, Nash & Bradley (2011) suggested an idea notebook. I kept handwritten and electronic notes throughout the process.

I choose to mostly focus on my early years through my first year of teaching. I identified extraordinary events—father abandonment, addiction, separation, childhood trauma, military enlistment, foreign war deployment, marriage, divorce, and becoming a father—as well as transitions such as high school to military to becoming a teacher.

Figure 3.3 outlines how this research was conceptualized, put into action, and analyzed to form a discussion and conclusion. Through this process, I found that I needed to tell more of my story before I could get to the intersections that were created. This resulted in self-discovery through the writing process. With that said, I found that not every detail can be included. I

choose to highlight specific time periods and events that I remember as significant in hopes that the reader could connect potential similar experiences.

Figure 3.3

Outline of Process of Replication



Chapter 4 - An Army of One: The Campaign in Life's Battlefield

Introduction

My lived, personal experiences brought me to the place and person that I am today. There is a purpose to my reflections, and I tell them to outline the path my life took and to spur a discussion regarding why I am the educator.

To maintain the autoethnography style of personal experience narratives and moderate autoethnography, my stories will not be simply the lived experiences told in vignette fashion. My goal is to incorporate previous experiences to offer a unique vantage point that connects to social science but avoids being narcissistic and self-indulgent (Stalke Wall, 2016). In compliance with moderate autoethnography, and to stay true to one of the methodologies purposes, organizing these narratives thematically was key (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

I have chosen to use military language to organize these sections. I feel my military experience was a central point in my life and a true fork in the road. Had I not chosen to enlist, I am not fully confident my life would have turned out well. After Action Reports (AARs) will analyze the narratives to identify connections to the areas listed in Table 3.1. The scope of the data analyzed is outlined in in Table 4.1

Table 4.1

Collected Data: Time Spent to Analyze

Scope of Analyzed Data				
	Personal Memories Written Notes, Timelines, Headnotes	Letters, Report Cards, Military Records Transcripts	Narratives Used	Narratives Not Used
Time Spent	20 hours	7 hours	80 hours	20 hours
Pages Reviewed	N/A	20	28	10

Operation Childhood: Hostile Territory, Contact Expected

Birth through Elementary School

My school experience was simply uninspiring. Once I passed second grade and academics started to advance, I stopped enjoying school. It was at this same age that I started to struggle academically. It is not rare for students to not like school and to show low motivation or effort, especially for those who do not excel academically in the classroom or on high-stakes testing. Roderick and Engel (2001) found that low to no motivation in a student is associated directly with lower-than-average learning gains. For many, school is a safe place where strengths, interests, and unknown talents are discovered and developed. For others, school serves as a significant stressor, with peers and adults who target, pick, and blame instead of support, encourage, and care.

As I progressed through each grade, school became more difficult. My academic struggles took a toll on my motivation. By the time I reached the end of elementary school, I simply had stopped caring. By this time, I had been suspended twice and had several additional negative encounters with teachers. I vividly recall throwing away my homework, not paying attention in class, and attending parent-teacher conferences where teachers were “concerned.” On my annual report cards, teachers made statements such as “Get with it,” “Work not in,” and “Low quiz scores.”

In addition to the stress of struggling academically, I encountered several adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in my home setting from birth through adolescence. ACEs are potentially traumatic events from birth through age 17. These traumatic experiences are categorized into three groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges. They have been shown

to result in increased risk for adverse social and health issues in adulthood, including a negative impact on mental health, increased risk for chronic disease, increased odds that one will engage in risky behaviors, and reduced educational and occupational opportunities. As the number of ACEs encountered rises, the risk for negative outcomes increases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

My parents had a rocky relationship from the start that continued through their marriage. Prior to my birth, my father made it clear that he did not want children. When my mom went into labor, he was living with another woman, and my mother had to drive herself to the hospital. When my father could not be found, my mother gave birth with the support of a neighbor—an unofficial, African American godmother. I had some complications during birth that required my transfer to a different hospital for specialized care. My mother, recovering from an emergency C-section, could not accompany me. The neighbor rode with me in the ambulance and stayed by my side in those early days. She later shared that she urged and pled with my father to go see his son.

While I loved my father very much, he was an alcoholic. When sober, he had a big heart and loving personality. However, he was much like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Typically, he would go to a bar after work instead of coming home. I recall many occasions where my mom would call the bar and put me on the phone to tell him to come home, only to hear him in the background saying “Tell them I’m not here.” He was also unfaithful, and my mom and I were well aware. The nights my father did come home, my parents fought. I have vivid memories of profanity-laced screaming and physical abuse—my father pushing my mother into a chair, my mother throwing things. As an only child, I hid in my room wishing that I had a sibling who could be there with me. Following one particularly escalated fight, I found my mother crying in

the bathroom, where she wiped her tears and told me “Dustin, you just don’t understand how hard it is for me. If it wasn’t for you, I’d swallow this bottle of pills.”

As a child, I exhibited many physical symptoms related to this stress: stomach pains, bed-wetting, nightmares, and excessive clinging to my mother. My mother, assuming it was medical, attempted to treat these with visits to the doctor and medications. A child psychologist recognized my physical symptoms as a manifestation of the stress and anxiety endured from these experiences. He also suggested that my academic struggles were likely connected to my unstable home life and other ACEs physical trauma related to member of a trusted family within my social network that took place from ages 9 to 10.

When I was in the fifth grade, my parents separated. My father moved from Sacramento, CA, to an apartment in Denver, CO, to work for the railroad. At the end of sixth grade, my mom and I moved from Sacramento, CA, a large metro area, to Vermillion, KS, a rural town with less than 100 people. This was a hard transition at first; going from large city to a very small town was a major shift physically and socially. I had a large, diverse group of friends in California, and I relied on them to replace my turbulent home life. I was now the new kid from California placed in a school with people who were either related or knew each other from birth. Additionally, there extracurricular activities were limited. However, I found this environmental and location shift brought freedom: Freedom to explore the small town and surrounding gravel roads; and freedom from the fighting, because my father was living in Denver. Although this was a significant transition, which can have negative effects on a child’s mental health (Morris et al., 2017), our Sacramento neighborhood had become a place for rival gangs and drugs, police helicopters and chases, break-ins, and drive-by shootings. Moving to a safer neighborhood can have major positive impacts, even if services and opportunities are limited.

While both school and home life were difficult, I thrived in extracurriculars. I was involved in sports, church, Boy Scouts, and music lessons. While it was difficult to concentrate in school, I was engaged during these preferred activities. In recent conversations with my mother, she viewed these activities as a way to make up for the instability at home. Looking back, I feel as though these experiences—in a stable, safe environment—helped me begin to develop a well-rounded skill set, particularly because I did not have academic strengths on my side. In extracurriculars, no one asked you to read aloud or called for answers to a math prompt, or judged you based on your handwriting.

Secondary School

By my seventh grade year, my father had not lived with us for 3 years. I would see him about four times a year, and I was no longer making the trip to Denver to stay after an incident with a woman that he was seeing. When he did come visit, it was usually more arguing and drinking. I can vividly remember my mother having a women's club type meeting at our house and in slurred voice him telling her, "I'm going to make this the worst night of your life." Eventually, he moved to Kansas City and would come visit on Tuesdays and Wednesdays each or every other week.

My academic struggles led me to repeat sixth grade when we moved to Kansas. Despite being one of the oldest students in the class, I continued to struggle in the middle school setting. These years were particularly difficult, as school centered around listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and taking notes. Tests were the only method utilized to demonstrate learning. While I continued to be uninterested in education, I had found a passion for football, which served as my sole motivator for academic achievement. If I kept my grades up, I could play on the team. However, in the seventh grade, I broke my collarbone and my football season ended early. My

motivation disappeared and my grades plummeted. As Im et al. (2016) implied, “Extracurricular participation in Grades 7 and 8 or only in Grade 8 in middle school promotes academic motivation and achievement for at-risk youth” (p. 1369). For many students, the extracurriculars not only motivate them for school but also serve to motivate in life. These activities make the other challenges in life more bearable.

Some teachers were always nitpicking my performance in their classes. I wanted to be a good student. I envied those with good grades. It was just hard. I could not comprehend what was being taught at the rate of most of my peers. At the urging of a longtime teacher, my mother conceded to having me tested for special education. For me, I did not really care; in fact, getting to miss class was fine. I remember calling them my “stupid tests.” When I would leave, other students would say, “Oh Dustin is leaving for his stupid test,” and they would be hushed by the teacher as I left. To the shock of the referring teacher, I did not have a learning disability and did not require special education services.

High school continued to be difficult academically. I struggled with every core subject from algebra to language arts. However, I had significantly better grades and relationships with my teachers in my electives and hands-on classes. It is believed that students are more engaged when they are working with others or pursuing an individual task they self-identify as relevant to their lives (Shernoff et al., 2014).

I never struggled socially in school. It took time, but I did establish a friend group. Although I continued to view academics as irrelevant, school became a place for me to hang out with my friends and play sports. My friends played a strong role in my identity: If they drank, I drank; if they smoked, I smoked; if they did crazy stuff; I did the same. Part of my identity was being in the group that drove fast and had fun. For me, it was about not conforming to the norm.

I always worked hard outside of school in jobs, some weeks putting in more than 30 hours, but I also played hard and wanted to be around friends.

What did emerge during this time was my love for cars and restoration. I subscribed to car magazines and adorned my walls with posters and car models. As soon as I was close to driving age, I was looking at cars to buy and work on. This also became a way to connect with my father, as we spent much of our time together working on either cars or the house.

O Brother Where Art Thou

My whole life, I wished I had a sibling by my side during rough times. As an adult, that has not changed. I would have liked to have had someone there during the hard times—when I returned from deployment, went through a divorce, and as my dad went through radiation, chemo, and withered away until his death. My wife teases me for my similarities to Clark Griswold and his antics, but for me, it is the connection family. Wanting them there through the good and the bad. I am very blessed to have three healthy children and a wife who is a true partner in life. However, there is still this yearning for a big family get-together with siblings, cousins, and extended family. I cannot help but feel like I am missing something still to this day.

Throughout much of high school, I worked for a grocery store in a neighboring town. It was close enough that I could drive home for my hour lunch break. One Saturday, as I was eating my lunch, the phone rang and a man asked to speak with my mother. I did not think much of it and told my mother to pick up in the back room. My lunch break was almost over, and I rushed out to finish my shift. When I came home, my mother had something to tell me.

“Dustin, I need to tell you something.” I knew this was serious. My mother told me that I had a brother and that she had been previously married. My brother was 28 years old, 12 years older than me. My mother explained that my brother’s father was not a good guy, she had gone

through a divorce, and that she decided to give the baby up for adoption. I still do not have all the details, but my brother had found her and I was ecstatic. I could not believe that I had a brother.

Not only did I have a brother, but I had a niece and nephew. I was an uncle. How fantastic was this? To go from being and feeling on my own in my family to now having a brother with a family. We soon met in person and had a nice visit. We also talked on the phone a couple of times. Although awkward, it felt great to have a sibling, even though we did not really know each other.

Our relationship did not last though. About a year after that initial call, my brother and my dad had a falling out about an old boat. Dad had called my brother one evening, probably 10 or 12 beers in, insulted him and called him a fraud. My brother took offense. I do not know if he tried to communicate after that day, but according to my mother he did not. It hurt. To this day, 23 years later, I have never spoken to him again in person or on the phone. I am hoping that writing this gives me the courage to reach out and reconnect.

When I was going through my own divorce and custody issue, 13 years later, my mother told me that she in fact had not given my brother up for adoption. According to her, he was taken from the hospital by his father and sold. In her words, she said as she was recovering from a 1969 C-section, that her ex or soon to be ex-husband had come to the hospital and taken the baby. She hired a private investigator and went to the police, but she never found the baby. She would drive around Topeka KS hoping to find him, but never saw him again until 28 years later. I appreciated this moment of being vulnerable by my mother, and I felt sorry for her. I still don't know what the true story is and if I can trust what my mother is telling me about my brother. I could never know.

After Action Review

Table 4.2

Operation Childhood AAR

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Connections to Theoretical Frameworks</u> <u>Transitional, Social Identity, Social Cognitive Theory Connections</u>
Birth through Elementary School 1981–1993 Ages 0–12	<p>Situation complicated by parents' relationship</p> <p>Anticipated transitions happened throughout with the exception of father moving out in the fifth grade to another state, which was unanticipated.</p> <p>Social cultural identity was that of a White male boy with connections to African American godmother and at times care giver. Diverse school environment and friend group.</p> <p>Home environment affecting behavior. Direct and observational learning. Unsure if early self-efficacy was supported through social persuasion. Can assume that because of diverse setting within the school, extracurriculars, neighborhood, and friend group, identity in a group was not present.</p> <p>While low self-efficacy was not mentioned, it can be assumed that it was affected by environment and relationship to education. Personality was most likely also influenced by these; however, extracurriculars and a strong friend group would have had positive impacts.</p> <p>The strongest social cognitive factor is the environment, which is affecting cognition, which in turn influences behavior. Learned behaviors.</p> <p>Transitioned to another state. Large city in CA to very small town in KS has major impact on social identity and social cognitive.</p> <p>Roots to individual cognitive learning could be in affect through learning at home and in school based on interactions with others.</p>
Secondary School 1994–2000	<p>Typical youth transitions can be assumed during this time.</p> <p>Because of earlier school troubles, self-confidence was assumed low. Strategies were not given. Social support through peers and extracurricular activities lost with starting over in new state.</p> <p>Cultural identity as a kid from the city with diverse friend group became outlier among the rural population. New school, one person of color, K–12.</p> <p>Lack of self-efficacy present during this time especially academically. Extracurricular activities limited, but sports emerged and became a motivator. Injury forced a disruption and affected academic motivations. At this stage in education based on low self-efficacy, attempts to succeed in education could no longer be happening.</p> <p>Construction of identity and groups revolved around electives, sports, and peer friend group became important. Evidence of basing identity of group membership through mention of actions with peers.</p>
O Brother Where Art Thou 1998	<p>Major elements of transitional theory not present. However, the hope of support through a sibling could be identified. This element is mentioned.</p> <p>Changing from being an only child to having a sibling with a family made a change in social identity. This created new pathways in identity that were changed again after disassociation. A “us vs. them” created possible resulting in zero contact for decades.</p> <p>The cognitive impact that emerges is not trusting people. This affects personal factors in expectations and attitudes and could have resulted in an increase in self-efficacy.</p>

Table 4.2

Operation Childhood Thematic AAR

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Narrative Analysis</u> <u>Thematic Ideas</u>
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	Relationship to Education	ACEs or Trauma Impact	Culture/Social Organization Connection	Purpose/Identity Connections
Birth through Elementary School 1981–1993 Ages 0–12	Negative “Uninspiring” “By the time I had reached sixth grade I had stopped caring about school.” “Suspended Twice” Negative relationship with teachers	Three or more ACEs factors happening including: Substance abuse, physical trauma from member of trusted social group. Household challenges Living in unsafe neighborhood “a place of rival drug dealers, police helicopters, break-ins, and drive by shooting Reference to other abuse. “Exhibited many physical symptoms” ACEs affecting behavior	Middle-lower class White male only child. Connections to culture and an organization came from nonacademic activities. “I thrived in extracurriculars”. Connections to social organizations such as sports, church, boy scouts, music lessons. Childhood in urban setting, connections to diverse friend group that was a support group to forget about home life. Uprooted in move to small town with completely different contextual factors and environment. Resulted in being the new kid from the city and struggling to connect with peers that had known each other for many years.	Identity forming, not good at school based on performance and teacher comments. Poor performing academic student, self-belief is same. Home life struggles. Mostly single-parent home. Possible purpose found in connection to extracurricular activities and friendships.
Secondary School 1994–2000	Repeated sixth grade because of “academic struggles”. Negative Tested for special education and had to take “stupid tests.” Resulted in doubts about future. Choosing to join the military because of a combination of lack of success in education and giving up on trying. Wanted to do well in school; “envied	Continued tension at home including inconsistent father in home, substance abuse, infidelity. However, the rate at which it was happening was lower because of father not living at home full time. Underage drinking referenced during this period. ACEs having a continued effect on person and behavior.	Connection to other cultures limited due to being in small town. Per Tajfel et. al., (1979), sports teams and culture could be considered as and social group. Extracurriculars have cultures within themselves.	“Eventually I found some purpose in school.” Identity continued as one who struggles in academics and views them as “irrelevant.” Purpose and Identity revolved around friends and playing football. Emergence of interest in cars and working on them, unique to self and not a group.

	those who got good grades.”			
O Brother Where Art Thou 1998	No relationships to education	The affect from the environment is still present in the narrative. Reference is made that, “I wished I had a sibling to be there with me during rough times.” Connection with sibling and niece and nephew is lost not long after because of a factor based in ACEs.	Having a sibling (family) changed. Major social groups remained unchanged	Finding some identity in being a sibling, with extended family, but lost. Purpose in being a brother and uncle. Conflicting social categorization occurs.

Engagement: Military Service

Enlistment

By the middle of my junior year of high school, the topic of college had become a focal point in my high school. My friends and classmates were visiting college campuses or trade schools, applying for scholarships, and enrolling in summer college classes. I still needed to take the ACT. When I met with the academic counselor to discuss my options, I was told that I was not college material. If my own teachers did not think I was cut out for college, then what would I do? Suddenly, my future path was blank. My mom pushed for me to be enrolled in the college-level English class being offered at my high school, but the request was denied based on my academic performance.

At the same time, military recruitment calls had started regularly coming. The recruiter heavily focused on those of us who did not have established college goals or were not considered college material. During my junior year of high school, everyone took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). The ASVAB was first introduced in the late 1960s to screen potential enlistees and eventually to assist in the assignment of a military occupation. The

military has invested significant research into developing aptitude tests that ensure individuals have the skills and abilities to adjust and absorb all aspects of the military. As I took the ASVAB, I had no intention of joining the military. Although my father had previous military experience—serving 4 years after being drafted for Vietnam in 1967, then returning to Vietnam as a civilian contractor—the idea of military service as my occupation was not something I ever considered. In addition to my teacher’s viewpoint that I was not college material, I grew up in a working-class family with parents who did not attend college. College was not expected of me. As I considered my future, I knew my options were limited: have my dad get me a job at the railroad in Kansas City, find something around home, or attend a trade school. None of these had any appeal.

Even though I performed badly on the ASVAB, I started receiving more phone calls from military recruiters in the evenings. Although I said I was not interested in joining the military, one particular Army recruiter was not willing to quit. After several phone conversations, he said he wanted to talk in person with my parents and me. Before I knew it, we were headed to Kansas City’s Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). Looking back, I feel that I was a textbook example for military recruitment, preying on superficial promises. The idea of getting in great physical shape, making good money, never deploying, and, in the recruiter’s words, “impressing girls,” all made an impression on this high school junior with no real future purpose, path, or identity.

I do wonder if the recruiter saw some potential in my background as an Eagle Scout. For every 100 boys who enter scouting, only five will reach the rank of Eagle Scout. A high percentage of these Eagle Scouts go on to lead in the military (Rohm, 2016). Entering into

military service as an Eagle Scout had an advantage: I could enter as a Private Second Class, as opposed to Private, per AR 600-8-19 (Department of the Army, [DA], 2019).

When people ask why I joined the Army, I have never really had a great answer. One potential factor, discussed by Wong et al., (2019), connects ACEs and a person's self-identity, self-confidence, and self-certainty. He finds that the more ACEs a person experiences, the greater the negative effect on each of these categories. The prevalence of ACEs can lead to an individual questioning themselves, while producing lower identity coherence of self-understanding and self-certainty (Wong et. al., 2019). Additionally, a study comparing the prevalence of ACEs in participants both with and without military service suggests that men who voluntarily enlist in the U.S military are twice as likely to have experienced some form of childhood trauma than those who were unwillingly drafted into service (Blosnich et al., 2014). In addition to adverse experiences in my childhood, I joined the military because I lacked a clear path. At the time I was being recruited, I was questioning my identity while being surrounded by peers with clear goals of what they wanted to do, go, and be. For me, a struggling student with adverse experiences in my background, the promises from the recruiter seemed enticing and made me feel as though I had purpose.

The transition from high school student to enlisted military was simple: Take a test to determine what military jobs were available to me, get a physical, and pass a background check. While the process of joining the military was straightforward, my military journey was anything but. In boot camp, what little I knew of my identity was quickly stripped down. The Army has a program that allows you to join at 17 and while you are still in high school. This meant that I would split basic training and advance training so I could join early. In May 1999, bI was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, MO, for 10 weeks of basic training. On the bus ride there, I can remember

fearing what awaited me. After initial processing—including shaving our heads, dressing in uniforms, and getting equipment known as “battle rattle”—we were loaded onto what felt like cattle trucks. With a full duffel bag on my back and a full duffel bag on my front, the orders shouted at us were “heads down, mouth shut.” In this moment, we were all the same. No matter who you were, where you came from, or what color your skin was, we were nothing, nobody privates and the weeding out process had begun. As the truck drove, we military recruits could do nothing but wonder what came next. When the truck and trailer stopped, and chaos began. The truck doors crashed open, and drill sergeants came flying in, flinging recruits out of the trailers. For the next 10 weeks, this was life: Get up early, get yelled at, do physical training, get yelled at, march, shoot, and learn all the basic skills of a soldier. At the conclusion of boot camp, each recruit was replaced with fit, fighting, compliant soldiers with a mindset of “for the good of the Army.” It was truly remarkable, yet terrifying. As a group from all over the country, ethnically diverse, male and female, we would perform in unison simply with a single cue. I was in the best physical condition of my life and filled with newly found self-confidence, a sense of pride, identity, and accomplishment.

This creation of a military identity is nothing new. For centuries, colonies, countries, tribes, and nations have trained soldiers to fight. The military training model used during my experience was rooted in the ideas of homoerotic rituals that are meant to lead to passion for country (Weinstein, 2000). Diplomat, philosopher, historian, and author Niccolò Machiavelli, and later philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, both viewed military service as part of civic responsibility (Weinstein, 2000). Snyder (1999) presented that both Machiavelli and Rousseau expanded on the idea of the importance of armed masculinity. And for Rousseau, the creation of masculinity is created solely by “Channeling of all passion toward the fatherland and the

production of a totalizing civic identity that replaces all others” (p. 45). This certainly lined up with my experience.

Through the indoctrination at boot camp, I returned home a changed man. At the time, I was an Army reservist, so despite my military commitments, I was could resume civilian life to an extent, including a civilian career. I was no longer in search of a path. I had a newfound confidence that created a significant change in my perception of self, confidence that I could pursue college upon graduation. In addition, I now had a way to partially pay for college tuition through the Montgomery GI Bill-Select Reserve (MGIB-SR), which offers 36 months of education and training benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). This college pathway, which had seemed unreachable before enlistment, now seemed legitimate. After graduating from Centralia High School in May 2000, I completed my enlistment requirements by attending Advanced Individual Training (AIT) for 10 weeks to learn my Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). Upon returning home, I immediately started undergraduate classes at Highland Community College.

I successfully completed 2 years at Highland Community College, enjoying the college experience while still meeting the requirements of my position as promoted Private First Class in the U.S. Army Reserves. These military requirements included serving one weekend per month and completing 2-to-3-week trainings in the summers. Upon graduation, I had a high level of self-pride that I had not only finished my associates degree, but I accomplished this with a GPA much higher than the one I graduated high school with. I attribute much of this success to the discipline instilled in me through my military enlistment. I enjoyed my time at Highland, but I knew that I had a responsibility to stay out of trouble and keep my grades up to maintain my military service and benefits.

In 2002, I was accepted to Kansas State University to pursue a degree in natural resource management. Going from not being college material to attending a major university that many of my college-material high school classmates attended, I felt as though I had finally made it. However, following the terrorist attacks on our country on Sept. 11, 2001, my Army Reserve unit had been ramping up operations and training. Afghanistan deployments had begun for other units and branches of the military, and deployment was looming. On Feb. 7, 2003, right at the start of my second semester at K-State, the call came: "Private Meritt, this is your sergeant in charge. We've been activated for duty." I was ordered to drop out of school, get my affairs in order, say my goodbyes, and report to the Reserve center. I was given 3 days.

On March 19, 2003, President George W. Bush authorized the use of military force in Iraq, essentially declaring war. As I transitioned from a 21-year-old citizen soldier college student to full-time soldier serving in war, I had no choice but to grow up. After spending a little over a month and a half training for deployment, my Reserve unit arrived in Kuwait on April 1, 2003, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. After spending 3 nights on the floor of a tent in Camp Arifjan, we headed north into Iraq, using the newly established main supply route Tampa. The heavy reality that this could be a one-way trip started to sink in. Being on edge became the norm.

The next 12 months were both equally intense and extremely boring. I was a part of a 13-man detachment with a no-nonsense captain who volunteered us for whatever was needed. Through our first 8 months, we moved our base of operation six times, oftentimes establishing in uninhabited areas, surviving in living conditions that pushed our limits both physically and mentally. We traversed up and down the main supply route, established small camps and checkpoints, performed armed vehicle and person searches, stood guard at checkpoints, filled

thousands of sandbags, burned our sewage, pounded Constantine wire, and so much more, all while at risk of enemy ambush, Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosions, mortar fire, and capture. I have never been so scared. Yet through it all, I formed close connections with others, including my fellow troop members, several of whom I still talk to today. I also befriended Egyptian interpreters, Kuwaiti border patrol, and civilian contractors. Despite our differences, we were irrevocably linked by the experiences of war.

While on deployment, I was promoted to sergeant. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to lead others. This was certainly not easy. I wanted to perform at a high level, and I expected the same from those alongside me, which was not always well-received.

Physically, my body was beat up. I lost nearly 20 pounds off my already trim frame, surviving off Meals Ready to Eat (MRE). In the summer, I was constantly sweating; we endured temperatures so hot, I watched a mercury thermometer explode. I contracted a bug that made me severely ill, thought at first to be malaria and later referred to as Camel Hoof fever. In pursuit of a suspected hijacker, I tore the meniscus in my knee. I was hit by a semitruck's oversized load as it barreled through the checkpoint I was guarding, leading to ongoing back and neck problems. Additionally, the exposure to burning oil fields, trash, and human waste left lasting effects on my cardiovascular health.

On top of all of that, I had lost my religious faith. While I was not a devout Christian, I did read the Bible, pray, and talk with other Christians to try and explain things. That changed. No longer could I trust in God's plan. I found it hard to believe that Christianity was the right path. I was conflicted and wondering how God could watch as people were losing their lives, being captured, tortured, beheaded. Why would God stand aside while we saw children begging

on the sides of roads for food, but we could not help because they might drop an IED in our lap. I could no longer just blindly believe, and I started to resent those who did.

I had never been exposed much to other religions before deployment. However, during my time there, I had befriended some Muslims with whom I worked. Initially, I had an internal conflict because their God was different than mine. They did not read the Bible as Muslims, instead they read the Quran, which I was given a copy off and told, “this is very important to us.” They worshiped differently, observing Ramadan (sunrise to sunset fasting), which they invited me to take part in. What I learned was good people and bad people exist no matter who they worship, and how you treat them matters. My Muslim friends, including the Kuwaiti border patrol along and our Egyptian interpreters, would invite me for shay in the mornings and lunch on some days. I felt accepted by them and was often tagged by our leadership to talk with them when there was a conflict or disagreement.

Then, like a snap of the fingers, it was over. After 12 months, we got the call that we were returning home. I had never been so happy. After going from being a college-attending, Army Reserve, weekend drills soldier to active-duty soldier fighting in the war in Iraq, returning home seemed to be both a foreign world, yet unchanged at the same time. My friends were the same as when I left, several now preparing to graduate from college. The girlfriend that I had when I deployed had moved on, which was not a surprise given that I had been overseas. Some high school friends and peers had written me while deployed, but for the most part I had lost touch with most of them. I was a different person now.

Not knowing or realizing at the time, I faced several struggles common to soldiers returning from a foreign war. Many soldiers who served during Operation Iraqi Freedom readjusted reasonably quickly; however, others had issues reintegrating into society, connecting

with family and friends, finding and sustaining employment, and returning to school (Denning et al., 2014). We also were among the first to return, and the supports in place were very minimal. I found that I no longer wanted to be around people. Because of my experiences overseas, I had significant anxiety when I was around large groups of people and found myself in a constant state of high alert. I was quick-tempered, which affected my relationships, largely because nobody else could understand what I had just been through. I was still smoking and when I would drink, it would not go well. I was involved in multiple physical altercations and got to a point where in the evenings, I just wanted to be and work alone. I still loved classic cars and I spent a lot of time in my garage working on my 1970 Chevy truck restoration. It provided a safe place where I had confidence and could focus on the task and project. I believe this was a saving grace. This experience is not atypical.

Homecoming theory posits that a traveler such as a military service member is separated from home by space and time. The service member and family members and friends at home have unique experiences during separation. Both the service member and the people and environments at home change during separation, and thus each will be in some ways unknown and unfamiliar to the other upon return. The differences between expectations and reality for the returning veteran and family and friends at home can result in a shock on both sides; navigating homecoming involves reestablishing connections despite these changes.” (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 2)

Before deployment, I had planned to restart school and finish my degree upon my return. However, while on deployment, I learned about the Active Guard Reserve (AGR), which meant being an active-duty soldier. When I returned from deployment, I was approached by an AGR Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO), who saw me as a good candidate for this transition. I started

the initial application process, but at the urging of my mother, I went back to school. My return to Kansas State University lasted approximately 3 weeks. Simply put, deployment had changed me. Despite my physical age, mentally I was not a college kid anymore. I struggled to relate to the college environment and my peers, whose main priorities centered around the opposite sex, parties, and other trivial matters. The large, group classes and clusters of students on campus caused me anxiety. Because I always felt on high alert, I struggled to focus on class lectures. I wanted the stability of a good job and environment I was more comfortable in. I officially applied for active-duty service, was accepted, and began shortly after. My duty station was the Manhattan (KS) Army Reserve Center, where I was given my own office, serving in a junior leadership role. I was then promoted to staff sergeant and attended a school to further hone my leadership skills. While I still struggled with peer relationships, I excelled within the structure of the military system.

My knee injury that I sustained in Iraq continued to worsen, to the point that it became a struggle to run and participate in the required physical fitness training. Eventually, I had to have a meniscectomy, which was done at a local Army hospital. While it was not a complicated surgery, they had to remove a large portion of the cartilage, and the following rehab was not going well. I was told to take Motrin and that I would be issued a profile, something they give to “broke” soldiers who need accommodations for physical fitness. At 25 years old, this profile was not something I felt comfortable with. Only 2 years prior, I had received the Army Physical Fitness Badge for outstanding physical fitness, and now I could barely jog half a mile. I did not want to be known as a “broke soldier.”

At the same time, I was also having anxiety and anger issues at my work in the Reserve Center, continuing to get into verbal and physical confrontations. One incident happened after an

email by a higher-up sergeant resulted in me punching the window of an office door, requiring multiple stitches because of the plate glass. This incident, alongside the urging of my new wife, led me to the decision to move on from military service. I chose not to sign up for another three years of service. As I left the military, I was proud of my service. I took my role as soldier and leader seriously. But as I entered civilian life, I was once again struggling for an identity.

I remember the look on our lieutenant colonel's face when he asked me to be one of the lead sergeants for a detachment on another deployment and I declined because I planned to get out. It was a look of disappointment. Once leadership knows you have chosen to leave, it's like a switch is flipped: I was no longer one of them; I had given up. Because I was still enlisted and under contract, I went to work the same way I always had. I wanted to help the detachment and unit that I had been a part of, but that feeling was hard to maintain because now, "Meritt's getting out." By the last 4 months of my service my attitude had changed to, "screw 'em, I can't wait to get out." Little did I know what struggles were coming.

Smoke 'em if You Got 'em

During my deployment, I was one of many soldiers who became addicted to smoking. In wartime, smoking was a way to deal with stress, engage in camaraderie, stay awake, and pass the time. Upon my return, I continued this habit, and I smoked half a pack a day through most of my military career. I would try to quit, but would find myself having panic attacks in times of high stress or confrontation; seeking smoking for relief was not uncommon (Calhoun et al., 2011).

When stress increases or anxiety levels rise, there is always the thought to turn to smoking to quickly seek comfort and relief. Research has shown that smoking urges increase significantly during stressful thoughts and situations. Evidence supports that in smokers, a change in craving is observed during increased stress that is unrelated to nicotine dependence

(Buchmann & Laucht, 2010). This response in the brain and body makes needing to smoke not just an addiction, but a reaction to heightened stress. This reaction in smokers creates a repetitive cycle: Stress increases, the need to smoke increases.

Once nicotine got its hooks in me, my day began to revolve around my next smoke break. My social interactions were routinely interrupted by the need to step out to smoke. However, smoking also came with its own identity and social interaction. A knock on the office door would be followed up with, “Let’s go blaze up.” It was comforting to have people to take a break from life and smoke with. It was a time to talk and bond. In hindsight, that could have been done without the smoking, but that was the link.

Smoking patterns have also been linked to previous trauma victims. Adults who reported exposure to ACEs such as household disfunction and abuse were found to have a two-to-four-fold increased likelihood to be smokers (Felitti et al, 1998/2019). Felitti (1998/2019) stated that, “behaviors such as smoking, alcohol, or drug use are found to be effective as coping devices, they would tend to be used chronically” (p. 253). This mixture of stress, coping, and addiction can have both lasting and compounding negative effects on a person.

I found that before stressful situations, I would prepare by smoking. After stressful situations, I coped by smoking. It becomes a routine: on the way to work, after eating, driving long distances. I can even remember lighting up after finishing an Army physical fitness test. At the time, many military members were smokers, so there was no negative stigma attached. In fact, smoke breaks often served as social bonding opportunities. However, smoking started to take a negative toll on me.

Being a smoker was part of my identity. And it while it provided connection with others, it also had a negative effect. After a minor health scare and a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD) diagnosis, my doctor urged me to quit smoking. I have now been smoke free for many years, but that urge never seems to fully fade. When stress increases or anxiety levels rise, there is always a thought to turn to smoking for comfort and relief. In fact, I would argue that many times I get so worked up, that if I had that quick relief, it would be healthier than dealing with the trying to shove everything down and lock it up. The fact is, we never lose our demons, we only keep them on a leash. Our past is our past and apart of who we are.

After Action Review

Table 4.3

Engagement: Military Service AAR

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Connections to Theoretical Frameworks</u> <u>Transitional, Social Identity, Social Cognitive Theory Connections</u>
Enlistment: Getting Squared Away 1998–1999	Confidence in self was low because of academic performance and lack of confidence from educational staff. Socially connected peers had plans for after high school. Enlistment in the Army added confidence in self and provided a situational path as well as categorizing into a group that had a plan. Strategies for success in this transition can be assumed to be given indirectly through military training and social cognitive learning. Learning regulation and self-regulation was enhanced through military training. Reinforcement and punishment lens likely des after military enlistment.
Military Service 1999–2007	Enlistment and military training provided every aspect of the four S's in transitional theory. This was evident throughout; the military was the driving factor in “growing up.” Several transitions occur within this narrative. Military training, high school graduation, community college, unenrollment and deployment activation, returning home. Significant social changes happen during this time. Military training and culture impacts each of the social cognitive areas, personal, environmental, and behavior. Major change in learning and growing while also leaning through others. Social identity takes on major changes throughout this narrative. Change in environments, peer groups, diversity, and physical location. A mixture of identity does occur, being a college student, and in the military, then an active-duty member. Choosing to not return to college and stay active duty. Experiencing multiple layers of “us vs. them” mentality. Civilian vs Military, USA vs Iraq, and at the end of service, soldier re-upping for service and those getting out.
Smoke 'em if You Got 'em 2003–2008	Smoking gave a false sense of support. Social influence and modeling impact smoking addiction. Situation and environmental influence because of deployment becomes driving factor in smoking, which affects when, why, and how often to smoke. Social categorizing and identification occur between smokers and nonsmokers.

Table 4.4. Engagement:*Military Service Thematic AAR*

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Narrative Analysis Thematic Ideas</u>			
	Relationship to Education	ACEs or Trauma Impact	Culture/Social Organization Connection	Purpose/Identity Connections
Enlistment 1998–1999	Negative relationship with education continued. High school instructor statement was, “you’re not college material.” This resulted in a “lack of a clear path.”	Major link identified with prevalence ACEs trauma linked to military enlisted members.	A move culturally away from being like other students and peers. Pushed away from peers by their plans and influence by school counselor and other educators.	The promises of the Army recruiter were enticing as it would provide a new identity and added purpose. No confidence in academic future success results in search for other identity.
Military Service 1999–2007	Relationship to education changed, most likely due to self-confidence, efficacy, and increase work ethic for academics. Pursing college became achievable academically and financially. Success felt through getting an associates degree. Education interrupted by deployment activation, didn’t return to school until 4 years later.	The impact of childhood ACEs within military service was partially negated by the regiment and guidelines that are a part of being in the military. Military deployment was a traumatic experience that resulted in lasting effects after returning home.	Full indoctrination through Military training and culture. Be tough, carry on, push yourself mentally and physically. Shove emotions away. Connection again to diversity again through military. New and multiple peer groups and social organizations emerge. Losing touch with previous friends and peers. Loss of religious faith happens and resentment to those who do believe occurs as well. After deployment social, struggles occurred resulting in a want to distance from others. Affected mostly times when not at work. Choose to unenroll from college to go back to stay active duty. Feeling more comfort in military	Identity switch happens. Joining the military while also attending a college and doing well. Purpose is found in the service as well as the education. Earned rank and became an NCO. Attended leadership school. Identity of non-commission officer and purpose of leading and caring for troops. As well as increased job responsibilities. Deployment interrupts education pathway and identity. Upon returning, added identity. Return to working auto restoration gave some comfort and purpose. Shift in identity starts when the decision to leave military service happens.

			culture instead of college. Decided to get out and quickly losing the connection with military and being looked down upon by leadership.	
Smoke 'em if You Got 'em 2003–2008	No relationship to education	ACEs background linked to substance abuse and smoking. Those with trauma in their background tend to smoke more often and seek comfort in the habit.	The culture of smokers. “smoking also came with it’s own identity and social interactions.”	Identifying still as a soldier and it can be assumed there is pride and purpose. However, also identifying as a smoker, even though this identity was not wanted.

Shooting an Azimuth: Destination Transition

Tracking to the Civilian World

The transition into the military was simple: Be healthy; do not be in trouble with the law; be minimally competent academically. The transition out is a different process. While the military has organizations to help, the transition from military service can take many paths, which places many veterans in an insecure place. Among other options, veterans can choose to enter directly into the workforce, retire if eligible, return to school or vocational training, or stay unemployed. According to a 2021 update from the Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.), approximately 200,000 service members transition to civilian life each year. While transitioning from the military is not a unique experience, each veteran has their own experience filled with successes, failures, or both.

Significant work in the field of transition has been done, including Schlossberg’s model known as human adaptation to transition (Goodman et al., 2006). This model of transition, known as the 4S model, breaks the process into four parts: situation, support, self, and strategies

Successful transitions happen regularly. For many veterans, the move from soldier to civilian is smooth. To help in the transition, there is a process in place that was perceived to be

beneficial. One such factor is family support, which has been shown to impact those who are transitioning in careers in a positive manner. Another is avoiding negative financial impact long-term (Eby & Buch, 1995; Perone & Civileto, 2004). In my transition, I had a mixture of support and questioning. Many fellow soldiers who had become dear friends urged me to stay in. My captain tried to explain that I could retire at 40. My wife at the time did not want to be a military spouse and move frequently, so she supported the decision to leave the military. My mother could not understand why I would willingly give up a good job and benefits. Financially, I did not have a great plan.

When I joined the military and went through initial training, 150 others in the battalion were doing the same. When I transitioned out of the military, I was alone for that 3-month process. I was excited to be moving on and getting out, but it was a lonely experience and I had real doubts that I was making the right choice. Looking back, I did not realize that the identity and structure of being in the military is what pulled and propelled me out of the small town where I was the kid who was not college material. To say I was unprepared for the struggles that would come would be an understatement.

Regardless of how or where a military member spent their career (e.g., abroad or state-side, combat or noncombat), they may go through a period of culture shock in their postmilitary career (Robertson, 2010; Wolpert, 2000). Additionally, the military member's confidence contributes to their ability to manage that change and loss in identity. If they believe in their transition and have minimal regrets, then the process out of the military begins in a positive light. However, for those who are forced out of the military because of early retirement, injury, or other reasons, the transition process is not as smooth.

I knew that a college degree was important, and I wanted to prove that I could get one. I began my transition from active duty in July 2007. This meant that I could start the fall semester at a college. Because auto restoration and working on old cars had been therapeutic for me, I decided to pursue a degree in restoration management from McPherson College. Prior to military service, I had found an identity and relationship with my father while working on cars. I was reaching back to that in hopes of filling the missing military affiliation. While pursuing this path seemed logical, the transition from full-time Army staff sergeant to full-time college student was harder than I anticipated.

I had to find a way to financially support myself. I found a job at a local factory in the small town that I moved to. I was now going from a junior leadership role and an 8-year Army career with great pay and benefits to pounding out and washing barrels at a honey factory, my new part-time job. This was tough and felt demeaning. No one cared that I was a veteran, served overseas, and was trying to now transition back to civilian life. It was: “Do you want the job? Can you physically do the job? Will you show up?”

The small town I had moved to was very religious, and their beliefs in military service were negative. It was also a town that did not welcome outsiders who did not participate in the church with open arms. This was a sharp contrast from the Fort Riley/Manhattan area. It was rare or nonexistent to meet another veteran, I missed Manhattan and the friends that I had there.

School was going OK; it was tough being a nontraditional student and being around college-aged students. I was also the only veteran in the program and the school did not have a veteran’s group at the time. I can remember getting agitated at another student for falling asleep in class. I slammed the table and yelled, “Wake up and go stand in the back of the room,” a strategy used by Army drill sergeants and instructors. I was also burning the candle at both ends.

Most mornings started at 4:30 a.m. and went from working out, to work, to class, and back to work.

After finishing 2 years of classes, graduation approached and I was extremely proud of completing a bachelor's degree, something I thought was never attainable. I could now identify as a college graduate. Unfortunately, the job market for auto restoration had been hit hard by the financial crisis of 2007–2008. Places had gone out of business, weren't hiring, or simply could not guarantee a job that paid in a timely manner. This was extremely disappointing and stressful. It had me saying, "I got the degree like I was supposed to, now what?" I did not have the financial capital or confidence to open my own business. Once again, I was unsure of my path with no clear sense of purpose, and I was questioning my decision to leave the military. I missed being someone, being around others like me with similar experiences, and leading people. And frankly, I missed the pay and benefits.

Finding purpose for a veteran in transition and reintegration in life is extremely valuable and essential. Once a part of the greater good with sayings like "mission first," military veterans may find themselves searching for their new purpose after their transition. The loss of purpose can create a situation in which the veteran goes into a spiral that they may never recover from, propelling them into unhealthy behaviors and loss of hope in the future to the point of taking their own lives. When purpose of life is bolstered, the risk of severely unhealthy behavior may be mitigated (Straus et al., 2019). Here I was again, questioning my value to society and my life's direction. I began slowly smoking again. It was a way to handle the stress and to connect with others once again.

I decided to pursue full-time work at the honey factory while enrolling in a teacher education program. Early mornings of doing homework at 4:00 am before heading to the factory

were the norm. Teaching as a profession was one that I had always considered but did not have the confidence to believe I could do because of my own school experiences. When given the opportunity in the military, I enjoyed instructing and teaching, and found this was a strength when it came to teaching others about vehicle restoration. At this time in my life, becoming a teacher seemed logical, and I was not alone in this career transition from military service to teaching. A 2021 report estimated that since 1993, more than 21,000 veterans have successfully transitioned to a career in education (Absher, 2021).

As a veteran, I wondered if I would find purpose again in teaching as a career path. My hope was that teaching could provide the life satisfaction I was seeking. According to Robertson and Brott (2013), having some control and confidence in a career path is important part of transitioning from veteran to civilian. Now the hope was that I would find a teaching job after graduation.

When veterans who had made a midlife transition into the field of education were asked an open-ended question about life satisfaction and transition, the following themes emerged: (a) helping and serving others, (b) accomplishments, (c) contentment versus struggle, (d) disagreement, and (e) advice (Robertson & Brott, 2014). In connecting these themes to previous literature, Robertson and Brott (2014) suggested that, “Male veterans can demonstrate more control in dealing with the loss of their military career when their values and meanings are used as transition resources.” Finding the value in a possible teaching career felt like the beacon of light that I needed to finally make a full transition out of the military. Teaching was a respected profession and brought with it the hope to be seen as somebody again.

Finding Teaching: New Battle Buddies

I began teaching in late July 2011. First-year teachers start earlier than the other teachers to be indoctrinated into the district, much like the military but without the yelling and push-ups. I was excited to start in a career that I would once again be proud to tell people about. And the medical insurance and steady paycheck was a bonus. Having a career purpose once again was exciting and fulfilling, providing a bright light to what had been a long journey in my transition into civilian life. However, as Robertson and Brott (2013) states, “While individuals may have already secured a teaching job, it does not necessarily imply that they have successfully adapted to the transition.”

The start of the school year quickly became overwhelming, much like it is for many first-year teachers. In addition to the challenges of first-year teaching, I was teaching special education on a wavier, which is not uncommon because of the shortage of special education teachers. In 2020, the Kansas School Board issued 274 wavier/limited apprenticeship licenses for special and elementary education teachers seeking to fill vacancies. Despite these waivers, 157 special education positions remained unfilled (Kansas Association of School Boards, 2020). To teach on a wavier, I was required to immediately begin coursework toward a certification in special education. Unfortunately, this became an additional hurdle in my transition because of my current financial situation and the need to pay graduate level tuition. The school district subsidized a portion of the classes. I also took on some extra duties and work outside of school to earn supplemental pay.

Beginning a teaching career in special education presented unique challenges. In my teacher preparation program, I had only one introductory course on teaching students with disabilities, and I had no field experiences within a special education classroom. The intricacies

of teaching special education are much different than that of a general education K–12 teacher. In addition to teaching responsibilities, I was responsible for managing a staff of paraprofessionals; coordinating with general education teachers; working directly with related service providers such as social workers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, outside consultants, and administration; and completing what felt like mounds of paperwork, each with very specific legal requirements and ramifications. Coming in with no training in these areas, I was very fortunate to have a knowledgeable teaching partner through my first year. As a long-time teacher in special education, she was supportive of me, assisting me as I learned my new position. The school and administration also were supportive, and it was a great environment to begin my teaching career.

I had now been out of service for a while. Another significant adjustment to the teaching field was understanding the environment that I was in compared to where I had come from. Daily military culture, language, personnel, and environment was drastically different than an elementary school. Additionally, I was coming from a male-dominated career field; according to the Department of Defense (2019), the military is 83% male. At the elementary level, education is a female-dominated field, with 80% of educators identifying as female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). As I pursued my degree after the Army, my job in the factory matched these statistics and was heavily male-dominated. Conversations, disagreements, and daily banter differed significantly in the school environment compared to the military and factory environments, requiring me to adapt.

Despite the challenges, I felt as if I had found purpose again in my daily work with students. These were students who struggled with academics, behavior, and social skills. They had labels ranging from learning disabilities to intellectually disabled to autistic. Some were

from struggling homes; others had very supportive families. The struggles of my students reminded me of my struggles, and I saw how some teachers quickly gave up on them. Quite simply, I was not willing to do that. It did not take long to bond with my students, and I wanted to protect them. As a teacher, I was there to help and support them, but in a way, they were doing the same for me. I was once again excited to come to work early and see my students.

Supervising a team of paraprofessionals brought back a leadership role I had been missing since leaving the Army. I had high expectations of my paraprofessionals, and I wanted to be a good leader for them.

Unfortunately, while I was finding success in teaching, I was also dealing with another transition. I was going through a divorce shortly after becoming father. While this was a tough time in my life and I experienced some significant lows, having the resilient background formed by previous trauma and the military helped me through. Additionally, having a career that made me proud and a supportive environment gave me purpose and something to put my mind into. It felt like a decade had passed, but finally the pieces were coming together, and I could be considered a veteran who successfully transitioned. I had stability and what felt like an upward trajectory, something that had been greatly missed.

After Action Report

Table 4.5

Shooting an Azimuth: Destination Transition AAR

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Connections to Theoretical Frameworks</u> <u>Transitional, Social Identity, Social Cognitive Theory Connections</u>
Tracking to the Civilian World 2007–2011	Transition out of the military lacked the needed elements of transitional theory. There were some supports in place but lacking confidence in self was evident. Varied support from family, military peers urged to not get out. No evidence of specific strategies to use in transition were present. Had a plan go back to school, but school did not have a veteran's outreach program.

	<p>Learning from others in the transitional process was limited; much of the process was done as an individual. Self-efficacy effected by lack of knowledge of the transitional process and overall confidence in moving to life after the military.</p> <p>Situationally, the college provided the classes and structure to complete the degree programs. The factory provided a way to help financially.</p> <p>Social identification growing and adding/changing groups. In this narrative we see a shift from Army sergeant to college student and factory worker, then college graduate. Social comparison observed in the narrative by conflicting social groups (college student vs. factory work vs. veteran).</p>
Finding New Battle Buddies Teaching 2011–2013	<p>All elements of transitional theory present. Strategies through training in an educator preparation program, confidence in self, support in place through mentors, situation of going to a supportive school environment.</p> <p>Modeling by other educators and mentor was provided key learning opportunities and examples during this time and propelled additional self-learning and behavior.</p> <p>Social identity became that of an educator advocating for students and working with other educators.</p> <p>Social categorization shifted naturally as teaching became a full-time job. Social identification as an educator was adopted and the identity was assumed. Social comparison in this section would be linking previous military career and teaching career as being desired.</p>

Table 4.6

Shooting an Azimuth: Destination Transition Thematic AAR

<u>Personal Narrative Lived Experiences</u>	<u>Narrative Analysis Thematic Ideas</u>			
	Relationship to Education	ACEs or Trauma Impact	Culture/Social Organization Connection	Purpose/Identity Connections
Tracking to the Civilian World 2007–2011	<p>Relationship to education was positive in transition out of military.</p> <p>Failing to find a job after graduation resulted in questing pursuing a degree.</p> <p>Second degree in teaching was pursued.</p> <p>Relationship with the field of education had come full circle.</p> <p>Education had provided a path.</p>	<p>Falling back to smoking because of stressful situation.</p> <p>Connection with the smoking culture and feeling accepted.</p>	<p>Some evidence of service nostalgia through statements such as, “I missed being someone, around others like me, with similar experiences.”</p> <p>Moving from a familiar setting to one that was not very welcoming halted connections socially and culturally in a civilian sense.</p> <p>Multiple weaving in and out of groups and culture. Leaving the military culture and peer group.</p> <p>Becoming a college student. Going back to a predominately White small town</p>	<p>Loss of identity and purpose occurs.</p> <p>Shift from being someone who had pride in their job to moving to a less desirable job. Never adapted fully to being a college student.</p> <p>Graduation brought new identity as a college graduate and questions of leaving service due to not finding a job.</p> <p>Questions of self-image occur during this time.</p>

			and working in a factory. Changes from military life and diversity. Moving from noncollege graduate to degree holder greats a potential change in social economic stats and associated groups.	
Finding New Battle Buddies Teaching 2011–2013	Positive relationship with education and wanting to advocate for those who struggled in education. Began pursuing a master's degree because it was a requirement to take classes for the wavier.	Linking back to wanting to help those who may be going through or have previous struggles with trauma.	New connections with the culture of an educator. Major shift from previous job and culture. Education and working in schools provided a way to be an individual while also working for a team. Moved from a male-dominated setting to a mainly female-dominated setting. This required changing personal and professional connections and identity.	Being a teacher and working in education were major factors in regaining of purpose, identity, and leadership. It became about the kids and how to help and do right by them.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

Checkpoint: Mission Continued

“We write to discover who we are” (Cooper, 2013, p. 40).

My original purpose for choosing and writing this autoethnography was because I thought an autoethnography would be a unique choice for a dissertation. As I learned about autoethnography and began writing the narratives, I realized these personal, lived experiences of a veteran-turned-educator who experienced ACEs, weaved through various cultures had potential to be impactful. Originally, I thought the impact would be for others. Only when writing did I realize the impact was on me as well.

This chapter will examine the findings of the After Action Reviews from Chapter 4 and search for what the personal, lived experiences revealed based on the themes uncovered in the initial coding. It also reviews the purpose of the study and responds to the research questions. My hope is to add to the educational, social, and transitioning research that has been done regarding ACEs, veterans, and purpose/identity. Additionally, identifying any critiques or limitations of the personal narratives, implications, limitations, and conclusion will be presented.

Goal Execution: Purpose and Questions

My life experiences shaped who I am now. Great care was taken during this this autoethnographic process to transcend potential criticism of the methodology from bleeding into the importance of the narratives. My goals became to not only write and analyze my experiences for me—to finally revisit my past—and share it with readers in hopes of helping others. WE all have our own life experiences, and while most may not connect with mine in a direct way, they might have similar or relatable personal experiences. Ellis (2004) guided my work in writing that

the stories needed to be useful narratives combined with literature to help others understand the lens and world being described as well as to promote dialogue.

The methodology of autoethnography was my choice; it is self-focused and blurs art and science. It does this to the point that auto-ethnographers, in the role of social scientists, may face pressure to defend the methodology (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). For this study, blending analytic and evocative styles would help support my goals. This brought me to an ethical, self-focused, analytical approach referred to as moderate autoethnography (Stalke Wall, 2016). This would provide validity and elements of scholarly rigor to the personal narratives being shared and the analysis that followed.

Connection to culture and social organizations cannot be overlooked during the autoethnography process; failure to do so could bring critical limitations to the work. For this study, cultural connection happens on multiple levels—race, social-economic status, friendship, addiction, military service, occupation, and college. In response to critics of autoethnography who question connection to culture, Winkler (2018) offered that, “critical stance toward autoethnography may neglect the circumstance that culture flows through all of us” (p. 243). I believe that to be true. We can look at the past and the present to connect where we aligned in cultural settings and social organizations. We carry much of our past and these connections with us as we move in and out of these arenas. Some stay with us forever. For example, I was born a White male and will die one. I recognize the privilege in that. I also recognize that I am a person who experienced three or more ACEs trauma, dealt with addiction, am a veteran of a foreign war, divorced, and struggle academically.

Reviewing Research Questions

Throughout this autoethnography, I have presented vulnerable and detailed personal, lived experiences starting with my birth and the family dynamic even before that. Fortunately, autoethnography provides the canvas to present equal parts autobiography, personal narratives, stories, and memoirs (Holman Jones, 2005) and an approach to research and write for systematically analyzing cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). After initially starting my writing with my transition after the military to education, I realized that I needed to explore my military experience. I then saw how connected my poor educational experience was to my military enlistment, and then how my ACEs trauma impacted my childhood and likely led to a poor educational experience. This domino effect meant I had no choice but to start at the beginning of these lived experiences in the development of these research questions.

1. Through analyzed lived experiences, to what extent did my personal educational experiences and serving as an educator provide a sense of purpose and identity for me as a nontraditional student attempting to transition to a civilian career after military service?
2. Through analyzed lived experiences, in what ways, if any, did my early life experiences, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), affect my educational experience and life course?

The findings based on these questions reveal some anticipated discoveries, but they also unearth some unexpected ones. Having lived the experiences, I obviously knew the outcomes. I knew that pursuing and serving as an educator was a sound life decision that resulted in a new career path. What I never realized was how a positive educational experience and educational career aided in what can be called a successful transition to full civilian job world. As the

analyzed results viewed through the theoretical framework reveal, the sense of purpose, identity, and social grouping were either conflicting, nonexistent, and or fractured during times of negative educational experiences and transitions that lacked connection with the four S's (Schlossberg, 2011). My personal experience were the equation and education became the answer.

In this work I have ascertained further that you never lose your past, your experiences, what you have done and what has been done to you. As social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) outlines, we never fully lose the connections, membership, and influences of the groups we weave in and out of, the stick with us good or bad. My early life experience without a doubt had a major effect on my educational experiences and life course. The ACE's trauma experienced gave a perfect road for poor educational experiences to ride upon. The analyzed lived experiences identify key points in home and educational experience that became compounding factors to eventually choosing military service. An intervention that strongly encouraged and created a different life trajectory. It cannot be assumed that another life changing trajectory moment could have occurred, but in the case of this study, the negative impact of ACEs and relationship with education most definingly lead to a decision to join the military.

My hope through this research is that conversations continue regarding the connections of military experience and transitions, the educational field, purpose, and identity. Furthermore, I hope that this work adds to the knowledge base regarding who is joining our the military, what military service can do for their life, and who they will be after their service, understanding that purpose and identity play a major role in positive life outcomes.

Vulnerability Assessment: Literature

When their impact is viewed individually, ACEs, educational struggles, military transitions, and deployment can leave a person struggling in life. There is an abundance of research on each topic individually; some researchers have even paired certain topics. Anderson and Goodman (2014) applied transitional theory to military members exiting service. Laird and Alexander (2019) combined and connected the prevalence of ACEs among the veteran community. Adler et al. (2011) used a psychology lens to explain what happens during the transition after deployment. Nunnery et al. (2009) tied the benefits of veterans working in education. Pedlar et al. (2019) combined military transition and social theory. All are impactful works that further the conversations about the topics and their connectedness.

Transitional theories such as Schlossberg's Transitional Theory (2011) have been used in many forms research into veterans. To a lesser extent, so have social cognitive and identity-like theories (Bandura, 1977; Tajfel et. al., 1979). To my knowledge, the three have not been used to provide a theoretical framework in an autoethnographic account. In autoethnographic work, theories can guide the researcher as they process the data, organize and analyze it, and present the results for interpretation (Chang, 2016) Combining the found research on the thematic discoveries and the guiding framework provided a lens to view culture, identity, and purpose during the analyzation portion of the study.

For validity purposes and to establish a deeper lens, it was important to view the impact that social settings and connection to culture had on these personal, lived experiences. It is important to realize that social identities are consistently evolving through major life transitions and as we move thorough life and age. We obtain memberships and social identities that we carry with us (Pedlar et al., 2019).

Where the research lacks is coalescing all these topics in an autoethnographic account. It is my belief after initial coding and analyzation of the narratives, ACEs, military service, social/cultural connections, and education played individual roles but ultimately are more connected than I thought throughout my journey. This work would have been incomplete had the social, cultural, and search for identity and purpose not been used to analyze how the phenomena and lived experiences connected.

Findings: Report to Command

The findings for this work are reported from the After Action Reviews from Chapter 4 that were used to analyze the personal, lived experiences. The findings also consider what was stated and references in the personal, lived narratives from the chapter. These findings represent the analyzation of a form of personal scholarly narratives written and edited to align with the moderate autoethnography approach that meshes the evocative and analytical approaches. These findings also represent my exploration of the past factors of my life that impacted who I am today and my feelings then.

The personal, lived narratives start with “Operation Childhood,” which outlines the family dynamic from birth. Clear connection with ACEs immerses early and often throughout childhood. This direct and observational learning affected my behavior, mostly in school. Self-efficacy in education would have been low and influenced by poor in-class performance and a poor home environment. This resulted in a relationship with education that was negative and uninspiring, causing a negative attitude.

A strong peer group, extracurricular activities, and a diverse environment within the school and neighborhood can be assumed to have had a positive impact on childhood and social factors. However, the effect of ACEs and an unsafe neighborhood created an imbalance and

negative effect during this time. Two major transitions happened: me moving from diverse, urban California to predominately White, rural Kansas; and my father moving to another state and visiting a few times a year. These transitions influenced social identity, cultural connections, and identity formation.

Struggles in elementary schools were compounded by ACEs-related incidents. Despite the change in family structure with the divorce of my parents and my father moving to another state, negative effects were carried into secondary school. Also, a change in cultural identity and influence happened with the move. Going from a strong, diverse friend group in an urban setting to an outlier in a new rural setting took time. Establishing a friend group was very important in early years for support. A friend group was reestablished, but it was not diverse. While extracurricular activities continued after the move, they were limited. Academics remained an issue.

Multiple identities emerged and conflicted—a good work ethic in sports, electives, and high school jobs; a poor student trying to socially integrate by mirroring other peer's actions and interests. Discovering an unknown sibling and developing a connection as an uncle only to quickly lose the connection would be hard alone. Combining that with lasting ACEs trauma created unique challenges for a 17-year-old, especially one who identified as outlier during typical youth transitions. The relationship between these can be assumed to have resulted in identity conflicts and influence. These displayed behaviors, personality, and environment aligned with connections to Bandura (1977) and exhibit Tajfel's et. al (1979) social identification stage.

In the section “Engagement: Military Service” confidence entering the military was low based on childhood and school experiences. Being surrounded by peers with a plan for life after

high school resulted in low self-esteem and intensified conflict. Additionally, previous ACEs trauma links directly to a higher prevalence of enlisted military members who join the military (Bolsnich et al., 2014). Connection to social cognitive theory (i.e., low confidence in educational future success) is seen through the environment and the influential role that the school counselor and education staff played. An outside-group source, the army recruiter, came at an opportune time: the intersection of divergence from current social identification group, low self-esteem, and impact felt by ACEs. Enlistment promised three of the factors of transitional theory: support, situation, and strategies. Self-confidence was presumed to be adequate because of success in extracurricular activities and employment outside of school. The enlistment portion of the narratives resulted in a major change in purpose and identity and continued through the military service section.

During military service, the relationship to education changes. It is plausible that being removed from the previous educational setting, excelling in another form of education through military training, and learning new skills resulted in an increase of self-esteem. Military training completion aligned with the self portion of Schlossberg's Transitional Theory (2011). Military service impacted cultural and social organizations strongly by moving away from following student peers to a different, unique pathway. It also resulted in reconnecting with more diverse peers and leaders.

However, for the first time in the narratives, a purpose and an identity that is not based on following others emerges. Life as an Army Reserve soldier provided purpose in service and purpose in education. Being a part of the military provided the boost necessary to build skills to face future adversity and find a new pathway to success. Seemingly, the path to higher education would have not been achievable financially or confidently without joining the military.

At this time in the narratives, I exhibited confidence in myself academically, physically, and mentally. Military training and service encouraged a tough and carry-on mindset; being a part of it and surviving it became an identity. However, it also resulted in the creation of a tough exterior leading me to bury my emotions. This played a role during and after deployment. Deployment caused interruption in identity again by halting my educational pathway and introducing additional trauma experiences. A full shift into military identity and culture happened during the 12-month deployment and the following 3 years of active-duty service. Identity within the military changes as well with training and the assumption of a leadership position. Purpose as a full-time leader in the Army is evident, and confidence in being educated and trained are high. Connection to peers from childhood identity was likely not influential. The connection in the cultural or organizational sense is limited.

During deployment, a connection to ACEs trauma emerged again with the development of a smoking habit. Presumably, ACEs played a role as smokers exhibited two to four times the exposure to ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998/2019). It is also suggested that post-traumatic stress disorder and exposure to forms of trauma are associated with smoking (Fu et al., 2007). Smoking became a way to seek comfort and connection. Being a smoker added an identity and a peer group of smokers was developed.

In “Shooting an Azimuth: Destination Transition,” another major transition occurred resulting in additional interruptions and changes. Because of the lack of support from peers and family during the transition process, identity and purpose seemingly are lost quickly. A social identity conflict began to emerge from being looked down upon for leaving the military. It is legitimate to think that this caused a resentment toward service and the military. The transition from active-duty military was met with a horde of factors that resulted in struggling to adapt.

Lacking positive transitional factors included minimal support from the military, void of strategies to rely upon, and an unclear future path. It can be assumed that self-confidence was still intact. Self-efficacy was negatively affected by lack of knowledge in the transitional process and overall confidence in life after the military. Negative outcomes during this time—worries, fears, and insecurities—could be described as service nostalgia (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Davis, 1979; Sedikides & Gregg, 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1995).

Questions of self-image were brought into question and may have been a factor earlier in life as well. While attempting to transition out of the military into a new civilian career, the discussion of the impact of self-image along with the battle between identities occur. Self-image can be a product of previous learning, childhood influences, and experiences with others in society (Nickerson, 2022).

It cannot be denied that moving during this transition had an unforeseen affect. Multiple compounding social and cultural impacts came together. These included a move from a more diverse town and job setting to an all-White, heavily religious, small-town community. This environment played a large role, as did changing social status. Going from a staff sergeant in the Army to washing barrels at a factory regressed the sense purpose in a career and any identity as a leader and military member.

The importance of finishing a college degree was emphasized and likely became a driving factor in pushing through this time. Converging environments and behaviors were in action during this time. Being a college student had one identity; being a factory laborer had another. The connections to cultural organizations also were mixed. Being in college in a restoration program allowed for the previous identity of being a “car guy” to remain and be fostered. It is mentioned that being a college student was an identity that was never fully

adopted. This can be explained by the fact that current and previous groups were combining during the social categorization process causing conflicting group choice.

It is possible that wanted in-group favoritism (veteran, car guy, college student/graduate) over out-groups (factory worker, small-town resident, lack of diversity) produced comparisons between the two and a desire to remain separate from the out-group (Wilder, 1986). This could be happening to produce a set of desirable dispositions that aligned closer to previous social status and career. It can be assumed, however, that during the social identification process of being a college graduate and distancing self from being a factory worker boosted self-esteem (McLeod, 2019).

This time of being a factory worker and college student after leaving the military was an anticipated transition, but it was also a major transition. After losing the identity of a soldier and never fully adopting the college student identity, self-esteem presumably was affected. Graduating from college was impactful and added to positive self-image. However, the nonevent transition of failing to find a quality job after graduation retriggered questions about the choice to leave the military and produced added connection to service nostalgia and negative connection to education. Connections to ACEs through seeking comfort in smoking occurred again during this time.

Connection to education and its value was strong enough to pursue a second degree, being on in education. It can be hypothesized that the idea of being a teacher and the identity it brought was subconsciously viewed as a way to increase self-image and be the ideal self. Identity as a factory worker continued during this time, however, hope in the future is shown. Knowing that current identity and group affiliation were not stagnant certainly provided a positive impact on purpose and identity.

The pathway to teaching provided all elements of the transitional theory process and was an anticipated transition. Strategies were given through training as an educator during the educator preparation program. Mentors were assigned to provide support. Spending time with instructors and in schools provided an environment that enhanced positive personal affects and behavior. No evidence in a lack of self-confidence was presented. The importance of knowing this anticipated transition, the positive impact of a new career, motivation to succeed, and having the four S's resulted in a successful transition to teaching (Schlossberg, 2011).

It can be accepted that the teacher education process, mentor support, and a strong school environment with good leadership also led to a positive transition. This intervention of proper training, support, culture, and identity change, and self-confidence resulted in a change in life trajectory. There were major changes in connections to culture as well as social organizations; working in a school is much different than military service or factory work. The connections to students and the desire to advocate for them could be linked to my personal ACEs and negative school experiences.

Linking Up: Implications

Both the military and the field of education have ties to careers that support positive social identity and connectiveness. Neither are perfect and all experiences will vary. A strong link to positive outcomes from transitions into both fields exists. Not unlike the military, a school has a “we’re all in this together” mindset where everyone looks out for each other and spends time on common goals. In a good school setting, teachers can bond with others who may teach other grades or specialties, but everyone is working for the students and promoting their success. I believe that with a well-designed educator preparation program combined with the proper transitional coping aids, a transition from the miliary is one that others like myself could make.

Those working within these programs can view this work as a story about one person's experience. However, I suggest that a broader view of those effected be used. I believe that educator preparation programs view themselves as an integral part of a military members successful transition to education, because without the positive educational experiences found in this study, successful transition may not have happened. Educator preparation programs influence can be connected to social identity and connectivity-based theories because of their own cultures and groups that they represent. Programs can also have heavy ties to transitional theories and the success of those in transition.

Implications of this work should also be reflected and reviewed by those who are working with students, veterans, and people in transition that came from a similar background. It is important to understand the perspectives, consequences, and experiences that have or are happening in their life. It is especially important for those in education, career transition, counseling, and those looking to hire veterans. This group of people comes from a unique background, and many have ties to ACEs trauma. Their transition out of the military could change them in multiple ways.

No other story will be the same as this work or be analyzed in an identical fashion. However, I do believe that similar style research can be executed for different purposes. For educators, this work could be used as a model to implement writing about self as a form of self-discovery and healing. It's possible that writing is metaphorical and it's the storing telling that becomes an outlet for individuals. The point being that the theorist can also be the practitioner.

Lastly, I would encourage others to not be intimidated or afraid to start an autoethnography and to choose a vulnerable approach as a methodology. This process has been equally challenging and rewarding. All experiences should be valued and the unique lens that

each of us provides could be the one that connects with another. In this personal writing, I have begun to crack the egg that has been my life and discover what is inside with an eagle eye view. In this exploration, I realized I had never taken the time to truly look back, dissect, and digest my first 41 years and the triumphs and tribulations that have brought me to where I am today. The hope is to seize the opportunity to discover new life by seeing my old life through a new perspective (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Adjust Fire: Future Research

Being an auto-ethnographer involves exploration into the social sciences. The interconnectedness of the social, transitional, and trauma theories/phenomena was eye opening. Additionally, seeing the effects that experiences in education can have has provided a greater lens into how K–12 learning can change a life.

Future work could employ an ethnographic style to study participants who found education, whether they had a similar or different experience than this author. The goal would be to add to the idea that working in education after childhood trauma and military service should be promoted as an effective path for those in career and life transition. Learning more about veterans preparing to or already working in education would be vital to this work. It may also lead to increased awareness in how to best serve this population of future students and educators.

Additional future research could also include why a transition to the educational field fails. Participants could include those who sought the field of education and found that it did not provide purpose and identity. I recognize that the field of education is not perfect and promoting it as such would be unethical. Therefore, it is important to find out why veterans choose to leave education.

A deeper exploration of this work would study who typically chooses to transition into education after military service. This could provide a lens into how rank, social-economic status, previous educational experiences, time served, and past trauma impact transition to education. Further exploration and tracking of success and pitfalls would be valuable.

I would be remiss if I did not pursue more connections to the power of writing about self as a form of therapy and discovery. For veterans on a college campus, Ott (2020) stated, “Expressive writing for veterans offers an opportunity to sort through details, emotions, memories, and to make meaning of one’s experiences in a safe environment. Writing without fear of judgment allows veterans to take risks in sharing these experiences” (p. 82). Writing my personal, lived narrative has been extremely powerful and has allowed me to contextualize and make sense of events in my past. I believe other veterans, especially those transitioning to new careers, can benefit from a type of expressive writing where they visit and come face to face with their past.

Further examination into how race played a role is needed. It can be assumed that being a White male has resulted in some sense of privilege (Nentwich & Keller, 2021). It can also be assumed that influences by White parents played a role in social identity and cultural connections. This effect was most likely felt after leaving a diverse area and moving to a rural one but could have also played a role in military promotion, success in school, and additional societal factors.

Conclusion: Live to Fight Another Day

Value Assessment

All research brings with it limitations. Any conclusions must be met with a skeptical eye. While this study has limitations, it is difficult to find literature to contradict the statement that

having purpose, value, and identity in life is positive. This work emphasizes that we are in a constant battle between stability and instability. When people feel they have a sense of purpose in life, they are happier, have more connections to others, have fewer mental health and addiction issues, and are less likely to commit suicide. This is specifically true for military veterans, especially during times of transition (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). Many veterans may view a normal civilian life as alien; they will have disconnected from people who have not served.

In the case of this autoethnography and connecting to other veterans, I found truth in Schlossberg's (2011) statement:

The process of leaving one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions and establishing new ones takes time. For some, the process happens easily and quickly; however, there are many people floundering, looking for the right niche, even after years. (p. 160)

Elements of Schlossberg's transition method were identified in this work as being key to dealing with transitions, both anticipated and unanticipated. Social impact also plays a role in effective transition. Strong evidence continues to suggest that humans need to establish and maintain effective social relationships to survive and thrive in society. This is especially true during transitions. People need to reestablish themselves and redefine how they relate to others in potentially new social settings (Pedlar et al., 2019).

Based on this autoethnography, choosing to join the military can be assumed to be positive with some confidence. It is clear that military enlistment came at a turning point in life for me. Military training and service provided the structure, confidence, and the mental and physical grit to carry on through tough situations. It also clearly provided a sense of purpose,

pride, and identity. Military intervention gave me access and changed my perception of education to a positive one.

Ultimately, I found my way. My path from the military to education took longer than planned, but I believe that finding education—and teaching special education—was undoubtably what led to reestablishing my life path. The combination of reestablishing a sense of pride and identity pair extremely well with the change to a school culture that revolves around serving and doing the right thing for others. As opposed to the “I” of personal identity, the sense of “we” was reestablished, a common mission to provide a positive educational experience for the students.

Adding To Theory

During this work, I’ve discovered a wide range of literature that references Schlossberg’s (2011) transitional theory. The fields of military, education, and business all have research connecting with this theory, which provided validity in deciding to use this theory as part of the framework for this research. After reviewing previous literature and what I’ve done with this autoethnography, I believe another S could be added to the current four S’s of situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011), that the theory uses now. I propose a fifth S of service be added to the theory’s original four.

In terms of role-identity, service has been positively linked to a person’s salience, self-esteem, and satisfaction in life (Thoits, 2012). The four S’s represent a guide or checklist to transition focusing on what needs to be in place for the person in transition. I believe that to further aid in the transition process, it could be beneficial for the person to incorporate service into their process of transitioning. Similar to a taxonomy, it could be a final check in a progression of first being helped, then helping self, and finally helping others. It also could provide an added step in success in continuing education.

Selznick's theory of social participation (1992) and transitional theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) are linked in work done by Marks & Jones (2004). Using the theories, it was discovered that students who engaged in and continued a form of service through transitions had expectations of obtaining a masters or PhD, compared to those that did not participate in service. They also found that those who did service were more likely to be involved in multiple social groups. Lastly, linking personal background did not play a role in whether a student continued in choosing to do service. They did recommend that service be a choice and not mandated.

I've recognized the importance and benefit of service to others. It could be that someone needs help with something in their life, yet will still benefit from being involved in service. I saw this often with special education students that I worked with. They were always being assisted, and never assisting. When they were given a chance to help others, for example, having a 5th grade student help out in the kindergarten room, I would see a sense of pride and boost in self-esteem.

I believe that in the personal lived experiences analyzed in this autoethnography, there are links to service that played a role in successful transition. I also believe that service, be it major like the military or teaching, aided in producing higher self-confidence and a positive identity while also helping counteract the negative effects of previous educational experiences and ACEs trauma. Integrating service into transitional theory could benefit those going through the process of transition.

Based on the results of this study some consideration could be made to include service under the category of strategies. For example, one in transition could use completing service as a strategy to expand their social network/groupings which could lead to an increase in the S area of support. Completing service as a strategy may also lead to the well-being of the individual in an

attempt to provide a sub transitional identity resulting in positive feelings towards another S in self. Combined with other strategies, completing service may aid others in developing positive self-image and identity.

However, based on the data that was analyzed during this work the importance of service in terms of the affect it ultimately had on life trajectory was immense and compounding. Military service during the transition out of high school provided a lifeline and major change in identity and sense of purpose. The next major transition resulted in removing the service component, at which time negative outcomes occurred including, loss of purpose, substance abuse, and questioned identity occurred. Service in education, combined with the four S's, proved to again make a difference in a successful transition to another career. Therefore, adding service as a fifth S's would emphasize the importance of its addition and instead of it being a choice under strategies, it would take its place as equally important within the theories framework. Further work will need to be done to determine if completing a form of service during transition would equal the impact of entering a career that centers around serves.

Being Promoted: Transition Wrapped in Theory

From Dustin, to SSG Meritt, to factory worker and college student, to Mr. Meritt, the analyzed personal narratives represented major life transitions. It cannot be understated that social growth and learning observed and analyzed in the personal narratives are directly tied to what Bandura (1977) describes as “learning phenomena”, and these influences shaped behaviors and actions. What could be described as a domino effect, or action then consequence, happened throughout. Learning and growth also occurred as an individual during these environmental experiences. A timeline of these events would start with experiencing ACEs and struggling in school, which resulted in searching for identity and purpose and break from social status. A

boost in social identity occurred with enlistment, deployment, and overall success in military service. Regression in social status, identity, and loss of purpose happened with leaving the military and returning to school, connecting to low self-confidence with a void in strategies in transition, which Schlossberg (2011) identified as “Self” and “Strategies” in the four S’s of transitional theory.

However, the educational experience after service and attaining a degree was different and can be deemed as positive, with the exception of finding employment. Also, socially there were still ties and nostalgia for the military partially because the transitional process took multiple years. Ultimately, ties to the military faded as new identity emerged. Working at the factory provided a humbling experience, but teacher training and a potential better future and social identity provided a light at the end of the tunnel. Social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1979), and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) inform us that our personal and social identity are connected and remain connected by the experiences, groups, and individuals that we weave in and out of throughout our life. Knowing that we never lose our past experiences and identity, finding education was a transition that positively aligned with successful elements of transition and provided the purpose and identity missing after a military career. The value of having or not having purpose is seen throughout the narratives and was directly connected to the social realms. Throughout, pursuing the path of service and being involved in service added exponentially to positive transition, social well-being, and identity.

Who I am Now

Connecting the present with the past is a strategy that helps an auto-ethnographer discover the link between thoughts and behaviors they currently exhibit and how they are rooted or connected with the past (Chang, 2016). I realized somewhere in writing Chapter 3, during a

moment of self-doubt, that I would never finish if I retained my victim's mindset. I told myself something my father told me a long time ago: "If it was easy, everyone would do it." I developed a mantra in the military: Count on yourself to get you through; the more you walk away from accountability the weaker you become.

I found that my social identity changed throughout transitions as I entered into, out of, and maintained social groupings. However, there were also signs of adaptation and a constant state of evolution (Pedlar et al., 2019) occurring during and after each major transition.

In analyzing the personal narratives, I realized the importance of having a shared purpose and expanding upon Haslem (2022), idea that without purpose we can become lost. I still believe this true today, whether it be in sports, the military, service, building cars, or being a father and husband, purpose and identity are extremely important.

Today, I am busy with my three boys. I am working at a research 1 institution, and I rely on my past experiences in life daily. Currently, I chair the military initiatives at Kansas State University's College of Education and also associate direct for the state of Kansas the Troops to Teacher program, as well as chair a military topical action group for a higher education organization. I have the opportunity now not only to help veterans who are choosing the field of education but to promote education to those transitioning out of the military. I can be a positive link in the transition and be a part of the support that helps others make a transition similar to the one that I made. My hope is that through expanded programs and continued connections, the field of education can be a trusted choice for veterans after service.

Lastly, I'm back into working on old cars, when I have the time. I've been resurrecting my father's 1966 Mercedes 230, and I have to say, I'm really enjoying it. I don't know where life

will take me in the coming years, but I know that I'll carry my past with pride and continue to push forward.

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Appendix A -