

MEMBERSHIP IN MOTORCYCLE CLUBS: VETERANS, BROTHERHOOD AND
BELONGING

By

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INTRODUCTION

“The media tells you, ‘War is going to fuck you up. You will come back harmed.’ Well, I am here to tell you that war is the most adverse environment you will ever encounter, but you can come back stronger and wiser.”¹ Soldiers and veterans are often thought to be, “emotionally disciplined, self-sacrificing, vigorous, and hardworking.”² For many, there is a common perception that the military provides soldiers with the training and experiences for them to have, “physical discipline that hardens muscles and ... the hard facts of death and evil that the soldier faces down,” to be able to come back from war stronger and wiser.³ However, this is not the case for all veterans.

When I was first writing my thesis I held a lot of common misconceptions about military life and what it means to be a veteran. Before writing my thesis, if you asked me to describe a veteran I would have depicted a changed and trauma-ridden individual who had seen and experienced atrocities that a common person could not describe— someone who is mentally and even physically harmed. I would have never used words like stronger and wiser. For some veterans, war changes them positively as it helps them develop structure and routine. However, for others, it has more negative consequences such as trauma after deployment. Therapeutic and civilian communities even accept the diagnosis of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] as a risk of combat.⁴ However, as I will discuss, the veteran experience differs for every individual; the transition from military life to civilian life for some does not exist and for others the transition can be very difficult and support is needed to get through this new phase of life.

¹ Sarah J. Hautzinger and Jean Scandlyn., *Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress: Homefront Struggles with the Wars on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2016), 37, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315096414>.

² Catherine A. Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 228, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³ Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*, 229.

⁴ Hautzinger and Scandlyn, *Beyond Post-traumatic stress: Homefront Struggles With The Wars on Terror*, 38.

My interest in veterans began during my senior year of high school when I had to write a paper on any topic related to World War II. I read an article on veterans' transition back to civilian life after serving in World War II and the mechanisms these veterans used to help them acclimate. From this research, I learned of the relationship between military veterans and motorcycle clubs which were formed by World War II veterans as a way to cope with military-related trauma.⁵ Originally, when beginning to write my master's thesis I wanted to further analyze how motorcycle clubs could be used as a scope of practice for contemporary military veterans' transition back to civilian life. However, with further research, I found trauma is not synonymous with the veteran experience. For example, post-9/11 veterans are much more likely to be deployed compared to veterans who served in earlier eras. A little more than seventy-five percent of the post-9/11 veteran population was deployed at least once compared to a little over half of veterans who served before 9/11.⁶ This means that post-9/11 veterans are much more likely to experience PTSD compared to those who were never deployed and were stationed at the homefront.⁷ Veteran identity has a range of characteristics and includes various experiences. Therefore, when veterans join motorcycle clubs it can be for a variety of reasons. I was curious to find out what these reasons could be.

My thesis aims to answer the question of why military veterans join motorcycle clubs. To do so my thesis begins by reviewing scholarship to better understand concepts related to motorcycle clubs and their social structure. Furthermore, the veteran identity is analyzed to provide an understanding of one type of population who join motorcycle clubs. Lastly, although

⁵ William L. Dulaney, "A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs," *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005): 4, <https://www.ulyssessa.co.za/eastlondon/EastLondonMarch2014.pdf>

⁶ Kim Parker et al., "Deployment, Combat and Their Consequences," *Pew Research Center* (2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/deployment-combat-and-their-consequences/#:~:text=About%20six%2Din%2Dten%20veterans,their%20time%20in%20the%20military.>

⁷ Ruth Igielnik, "Key Findings About America's Military Veterans," *Pew Research Center* (2019). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>

there is limited literature on why veterans join motorcycle clubs, existing scholarship writes about reasons such as brotherhood/camaraderie, belonging, and purpose, which will also be highlighted in my review of the literature.

I then discuss the qualitative methods I used to answer the question of why military veterans join motorcycle clubs. The qualitative evidence I gathered from interviews and blogs showed that the reasoning for joining a motorcycle club varies depending on the experience of veterans. For some veterans, joining a motorcycle club did help them transition back to civilian life as it aided in how they coped with their military-related trauma. For others, being a veteran is not linked to having trauma, as in their role in the military they did not face combat or deployment. Their reasoning for joining a motorcycle club did not coincide with mental health support, but instead was due to a sense of purpose, brotherhood/camaraderie, or a search for a sense of belonging.

My thesis concludes by summarizing how researching and discussing why veterans join motorcycle clubs helps understand the veteran experience, how motorcycle clubs play a role in the veteran experience, and provides context to the relationship between military veterans and motorcycle clubs.

Background/History of Motorcycle Clubs and Veterans

Motorcycling has been in existence since the late 1800s and early 1900s when there was an international diffusion of motorcycles. Motorcycles, at that time, were considered relatively cheap forms of transportation and were also marketed for a variety of uses such as leisurely activities and business delivery.⁸ In March 1903, the first motorcycle club in the world was

⁸ Dulaney, "A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs," 2.

formed in Yonkers, New York called The Yonkers Motorcycle Club.⁹ However, it was not until the end of World War II that the formation of motorcycle clubs in the United States became more prominent. At the end of World War II, many young men returned stateside and had difficulties with transitioning back to civilian life. While overseas, many were trained on how to ride motorcycles, specifically Harleys and Indians, two prominent motorcycle manufacturers.¹⁰

While in combat many World War II veterans formed strong bonds with one another that transcended wartime. These relationships often began in basic training when men were put in stressful situations to create a high degree of interdependence. In combat, men became brothers-in-arms after witnessing and experiencing the loss of members in their units, injury, having to kill enemy soldiers, and many other atrocities brought about by war.¹¹

After returning from their combat missions many soldiers spent their time in drinking establishments as a mechanism to forget the atrocities they lived through while in war and to try and feel “human” again. Many of the World War II servicemen were the average age of twenty-six and often reported, “feelings of restlessness and a general malaise; [as] their pre-war personalities had been forever changed.”¹² These men were likely experiencing what would now be considered post-traumatic stress disorder, though during this time a diagnosis of PTSD did not exist.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is “a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.”¹³ Symptoms can include flashbacks where an individual relives their trauma over and over again, bad dreams, frightening thoughts, and

⁹ “Yonkers MC-NY The Oldest Motorcycle Club in the World,” K.M. Yonkers Motorcycle Club Inc, accessed February 22, 2023. <https://www.yonkersmotorcycleclub.net/copy-of-home>.

¹⁰ Dulaney, “A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs,” 4.

¹¹ Dulaney, “A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs,” 4.

¹² Dulaney, “A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs,” 4.

¹³ “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health, last modified May 2022, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>.

even physical symptoms such as sweating and a fast heartbeat. PTSD can also interfere with an individual's daily life as they may start to avoid certain places and events that trigger them which can impact their relationships and even their work.¹⁴ Evidence suggests that military veterans are especially at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder because of potential stressors often associated with combat and military-related trauma.¹⁵

Studies have found that, for some combat veterans, relief from PTSD can be found by engaging in leisure activities such as motorcycling. Therefore, when veterans returned to their pre-wartime jobs it was no surprise that they began searching for leisure activities to find relief from the residual effects of World War II. They also started seeking out each other to be around kindred spirits and soon enough motorcycles, which provided a similar feeling of adrenaline felt in war, were used and motorcycle clubs were formed.¹⁶

Purpose of the Thesis

I gained information through interviews and blogs about the experiences, opinions, and motivations of military veterans in their choice to join a motorcycle club. The primary purpose of my thesis is to answer the question of why veterans join motorcycle clubs. A secondary purpose of my thesis is to contextualize veteran identity and experience as well as examine the role motorcycle clubs play in a military veteran's transition back to civilian life after service. This study is important in understanding what it means to be a veteran and how to increase the quality of life of military veterans.

¹⁴ "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

¹⁵ Dulaney, "A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs," 4.

¹⁶ Dulaney, "A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs," 4.

It is also important to state what this study is *not* about. This study is not an in-depth review of what a motorcycle club is, how they are organized, or the details of motorcycle club rituals and regulations. It is also not a debate on feelings towards the military or reasons for individuals' choice to join the military.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The goal of my literature review is to provide context and understanding of concepts related to motorcycle clubs and military veterans. First, to better understand motorcycle clubs, scholarship on terms such as group, club, and motorcycle club will be evaluated. Next, veteran identity, veteranhood, and veteran culture will be investigated to better understand the population this thesis is focused on. Lastly, themes such as brotherhood and belonging as prominent reasons why veterans join motorcycle clubs will be examined to understand what has been previously studied by scholars.

Background for Understanding Motorcycle Clubs

To first understand motorcycle clubs it is important to understand what a group of people is and the mechanisms at play when people put themselves into groups. Groups will be defined under the discipline of psychology as this relates to the relationship between motorcycle club membership and aspects of veteran psychological distress and support provided by group membership. There is a significant amount of literature in the field of psychology describing groups, as groups are a core aspect of the human experience. Groups play a fundamental role in the “sense of who we are, what we think and feel, and how we should behave.”¹⁷ Although groups can be described it is still a term without a consistent definition among psychologists. One area of debate is the minimum amount of people it takes to make a group. Forsyth, an American social psychologist, defines a group as, “two or more individuals.”¹⁸ Whereas Tasca, a

¹⁷ Michael A. Hogg, Zachary P. Hohman, and Jason E. Rivera, “Why Do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts From Social Psychology,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1269, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00099.x>.

¹⁸ Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2018), 4.

psychologist, defines a group as consisting of three or more people.¹⁹ Psychologists also differ in what a group is as Forsyth describes a group as those, “who are connected by and within social relationships.” For example, “[a] family is a group because the members are connected, not just by blood but also by social and emotional relationships.”²⁰ Tasca also defines a group as people who have come together for a common reason. Motorcycle clubs are considered a group as they are made of more than two to three people who have come together for a love of motorcycle riding. Groups also participate in activities that result in some kind of output.²¹ Each group has to have a purpose it sets to achieve with members interacting and cooperating to achieve this goal.²² For example, a sports team is a group with an aim of scoring a goal. Groups also engage in some form of interpersonal interaction.²³ The Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Clubs have a common goal they state which is, “to educate on the rich history of the 9th and 10th Cavalry of Buffalo Soldiers who served in the U.S. Army from 1866-1944.”²⁴ Motorcycle clubs have specific goals in their purpose, but can also have common goals in the form of community service that they do together. Definitions of the word group are just as varied as groups themselves, but groups share commonalities such as “social relations that link members to one another.”²⁵ To be considered a group there need to be interactions that include more than one person. People need to coordinate their actions to achieve goals that could not be done if acting alone.²⁶

¹⁹ Giorgio A. Tasca, “What Is Group Dynamics?,” *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 24, no. 1 (March 2020): 1, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000115>.

²⁰ Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 4.

²¹ Tasca, “What Is Group Dynamics?,” 1.

²² Susan R. Komives and Wendy Wagner, eds., *Leadership for a Better World: Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 112.

²³ Tasca, “What Is Group Dynamics?,” 1.

²⁴ “About Us” NABSTMC, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.nabstmc.com/>.

²⁵ Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 9.

²⁶ Hogg, Hohman, and Rivera, “Why Do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts From Social Psychology,” 1269.

According to Fafchamps, a club is a type of group and “describe[s] [a] finite, closed grouping...”²⁷ A club involves perfect generalized trust meaning that all of its members trust each other. This perfect generalized trust is usually formed in clubs that do not have an economic purpose. Clubs also have to have leaders. These leaders mobilize their members to achieve a common goal. Lastly, a club’s membership is beneficial to its members and membership cannot be instantaneous.²⁸ Using Fafchamp's definition of a club, a motorcycle club is a club as most do not have an economic purpose, but do have a hierarchical structure meaning leaders and a common goal whether it be charity work or just supporting each other. Joining a club benefits its members and these benefits can vary for each member. Joining a motorcycle club is also not an instantaneous process. To join, every potential member has to go through a prospective period before they become a full-fledged member of a motorcycle club.²⁹

The definition of a motorcycle club ranges, but Barker and Human categorize motorcycle clubs (MCs) as either conventional or deviant. Conventional clubs are made up of members of all races and sexes. They ride motorcycles of all makes including foreign and domestically made motorcycles. They behave according to the norms of society and are based on a shared common interest in motorcycles such as riding for pleasure or companionship. Many of these conventional clubs are a part of the American Motorcycle Association (AMA). Conventional clubs have members from different social strata who act and dress differently than those of deviant clubs. Deviant clubs are oftentimes norm-violating clubs that are not a part of the American Motorcycle Association. They are often made up of one race, sex, and sexual orientation. They are also often

²⁷ Marcel Fafchamps, “Development and Social Capital.” *The Journal of Development Studies* 42, no. 7 (2006): 1183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220380600884126>.

²⁸ Fafchamps, “Development and Social Capital,” 1189.

²⁹ William L. Dulaney, “Over the Edge and Into the Abyss: The Communication of Organizational Identity in an Outlaw Motorcycle Club” (PhD diss., The Florida State University, 2006), 25, http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses/submitted/etd-11132006-154601/unrestricted/WLD_Dissertation.pdf.

labeled as outlaw motorcycle clubs (OMCs). Deviant clubs represent a very small percentage of motorcycle clubs but are the clubs that get the most publicity and attention.³⁰ These clubs are often what first comes to mind when thinking of a stereotypical motorcycle club. However, these two categories are still quite ambiguous and do not offer much in-depth detail about the diversity of motorcycle clubs themselves.³¹ According to Quinn and Forsyth, motorcycle clubs have strict and idiosyncratic membership criteria.³² Therefore, defining motorcycle clubs as deviant or conventional is limiting. Motorcycle clubs can have conventional qualities even if they are made up of members of one race or sex. For example, a motorcycle club made up of all black members or all male members can still be conventional even if these are considered deviant qualities. It can be argued that motorcycle clubs are diverse and constantly evolving. To constrict them under labels of either deviant or conventional does not show the diversity of motorcycle clubs in their purpose, goals, and structure.³³ Furthermore, motorcycle clubs cannot just be limited based on race or sex. There are also motorcycle clubs based on other aspects of identity such as an individual's job. For example, the Wind & Fire MC is a motorcycle club that unites firefighters together.³⁴ There are other motorcycle clubs specifically geared toward veterans. The Warrior Brotherhood MC is a motorcycle club that is made up of veterans with the goal of helping other veterans.³⁵ The terms conventional and deviant do not consider other aspects of motorcycle clubs such as shared experience in their membership criteria.

³⁰ Thomas Barker and Kelly M. Human, "Crimes of the Big Four Motorcycle Gangs," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no. 2 (2009): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.02.005>.

³¹ Rebecca A. Medina, "Motorcycle Club Experiences & Motivations" (MSW thesis., California State University, Sacramento, 2012), 33, <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/4t64gn26f>.

³² James F. Quinn and Craig J. Forsyth, "Leathers and Rolexes: The Symbolism and Values of the Motorcycle Club," *Deviant Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2009): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639620802168700>.

³³ Medina, "Motorcycle Club Experiences & Motivations," 33.

³⁴ "Welcome To The Home Of Wind & Fire MC," Wind & Fire MC, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://windandfiremc.net/>.

³⁵ "Who is the Warrior Brotherhood?," Warrior Brotherhood MC, last modified July 22, 2021, <https://warriorbrotherhoodmc.com/>.

Background for Understanding Veteranness

The United States has faced many wars throughout history producing veterans with a range of experiences. Therefore, it is first important to identify the veteran population this thesis focuses on. Contemporary veteran experiences are often considered to be post-9/11 veterans. Veterans who served in the military during the time the U.S. was involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Afghanistan being the longest in United States history, was fought by the smallest percentage of the American population.³⁶ However, veterans are not just limited to these wars as there are veterans who served in the Vietnam war, which produced the most veterans, and the Persian Gulf War.³⁷ There is much literature on the contemporary veteran as these veterans are the most recent to be studied and often dominate the narrative when discussing veteranness.

According to Harada, veteran identity describes a veteran's self-concept as it relates to their military experience.³⁸ Veteranness furthers the concept of veteran identity and includes the veteran's identity, behavior, and purpose.³⁹ Hinton describes veteranness as the, “myriad, actualized personal and sociocultural aspects of veteran identity,” which are their lived experiences.⁴⁰ Veteran identity is not only driven by military experience but military experience within a historical context. For example, Vietnam-era veterans and post-9/11 veterans have different military and veteran experiences. However, they still share the identity of being a

³⁶ Tyson R. Smith and Gala True, “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Society and Mental Health* 4, no. 2 (2014): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869313512212>.

³⁷ Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*, 8-9.

³⁸ Nancy D. Harada et al., “Veteran Identity and Race/Ethnicity: Influences on VA Outpatient Care Utilization,” *Medical Care* 40, no. 1 (2002): 117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3767869>.

³⁹ Sharon Young, George Ondek, and Glenn Allen Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteranness,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 176, <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.308>.

⁴⁰ Corrine E. Hinton, “‘I Just Don’t Like to Have My Car Marked’: Nuancing Identity Attachments and Belonging in Student Veterans,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020): 97, <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.211>.

military veteran and have similar traits of veteranness.⁴¹ Furthermore, Martin describes the veteran identity through how veterans exist symbolically in the American unconscious. The veteran identity is woven into national narratives. Martin states that “[n]o single notion of ‘the veteran’ exists because no single story of our nation exists.”⁴² The role veterans play in society is impacted greatly by how they exist and are perceived in the American unconscious. Veteran identity is intrinsically woven into how society conceptualizes national narratives. There is not one singular national narrative and instead a myriad of narratives.

Veteran status can also be seen as a cultural identity. Military culture promotes expressions of collective identity.⁴³ These militaristic values combined with shared experiences create a veteran cultural identity. Veteran culture may also be influenced by individual military experiences as there are differences among branches, rank, and deployment status.⁴⁴ Veteran identity is also influenced by the transition from military to veteran status, which involves the transition out of the military world into the civilian world. Veteran identity may be influenced by how a veteran re-assimilates to the civilian world, which can differ based on their military experience.⁴⁵ It is important for service members to have a successful transition from their military identities to their veteran identity as identifying as a veteran can help shape their self-perception and hope for their future after their military service. Their responses and ideals toward assimilation can be understood as the veteran mindset.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Young, Ondek, and Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteranness,” 176.

⁴² Travis L. Martin, *War & Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2022), 16.

⁴³ Wesley H. McCormick, Joseph M. Currier, Steve L. Isaak, Brook M. Sims, Brett A. Slagel, Timothy D. Carroll, Karl Hammer, and David L. Albright, “Military Culture and Post-Military Transitioning Among Veterans: A Qualitative Analysis,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019): 287, <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.121>.

⁴⁴ Harada et al., “Veteran Identity and Race/Ethnicity: Influences on VA Outpatient Care Utilization,” 119.

⁴⁵ Tyson R. Smith and Gala True, “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” 148.

⁴⁶ Young, Ondek, and Phillips, “Stranger in a Strange Land: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteranness,” 176.

Why Do Military Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs?

There is very little scholarship as to why military veterans join motorcycle clubs. There is scholarship on why men join motorcycle clubs and how motorcycle clubs were formed.

Motorcycle clubs also attract veterans, as there are a variety of clubs gleaned towards strictly veterans or those with relationships to veterans such as the U.S. Veterans Motorcycle Club and the War Vets Motorcycle Club.^{47,48} Moreover, even though military veterans and motorcycle clubs have had a relationship there is little scholarship analyzing it. The available scholarship discusses two common themes: brotherhood/camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Therefore it is important to further the discussion on the limited scholarship published.

The term “brother” is male-specific.⁴⁹ According to Jackson, using the notion or term of brotherhood showcases a closeness and emotional expressiveness that reframes acts that are stereotypically feminine as authentically masculine.⁵⁰ Brotherhood is often related to the military, as Dulaney explains brotherhood as “brothers born of warfare ... a kinship that runs deeper than blood relations.” After their military service, these brothers begin to search “for relief from the residual effects of their wartime experiences [by] seeking out one another just to be around kindred spirits.”⁵¹ Camaraderie is also the word used to describe “the intimate relationships that members of the military force during service.”⁵² These relationships are rooted in a shared experience of overcoming challenges. Military cohesion is “the emotional bond of

⁴⁷ “About –U.S. Veterans MC, Nation,” U.S. Veterans MC, Nation, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.usveteransmc.org/about>.

⁴⁸ “Who We Are,” WarVets MotorCycle Club, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://warvetismc.com/who-we-are/>.

⁴⁹ Patricia Yancey Martin and Robert A. Hummer, “Fraternities and Rape on Campus,” *Gender & Society* 3, no. 4 (1989): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124389003004004>.

⁵⁰ Brandon A. Jackson, “Bonds of Brotherhood: Emotional and Social Support Among College Black Men,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642, no. 1 (2012): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212438204>.

⁵¹ Dulaney, “Over the Edge and Into the Abyss: The Communication of Organizational Identity in an Outlaw Motorcycle Club,” 25.

⁵² Martin, *War & Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation*, 21.

shared identity and camaraderie among soldiers, within their local military unit.”⁵³ When a soldier leaves the military an aspect that they miss the most is the community spirit.⁵⁴ Once a soldier leaves the military there is no great brotherhood motivated by a common purpose. According to Saia, many military veterans may join motorcycle clubs after serving in the military to strengthen their community through communal motorcycle rides. Motorcycle clubs provide general camaraderie brought together by people with like-minded interests, similar to what was felt while serving in the military.⁵⁵ For many military veterans, it is essential, for their mental health, to re-establish a new sense of community and camaraderie that was taught to them when transitioning from the military to civilian life.⁵⁶ Camaraderie/brotherhood can provide mental health support by helping veterans transition back to civilian life and by making it known that they are not going through this transition alone.

Members of a motorcycle club understand that they are part of a collective and that for club members to contribute to the creation of their system they must ensure conformity of individuals. Part of the conformity is wearing the club colors or patches which are usually sewn on a vest, and are placed in precise locations on the back of the vest. These vest symbols indicate a hierarchical standing within the club. For example, a president’s patch will be worn in a more prominent and physically higher location on a vest than the sergeant-at-arms. A standard part of motorcycle club culture is that of the position of a prospective member as compared to fully-patched members of the club.⁵⁷ Prospective club members are taught the value of humility and

⁵³ Lester R. Kurtz, ed., *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict* (San Diego: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2022), 447.

⁵⁴ Jack Belden, *Still Time to Die* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

⁵⁵ Anthony M. Saia, “The Evolution and Influence of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs in the American West” (MA thesis., University of Idaho, 2015), 19.

⁵⁶ Sara Kintzle et al., “PTSD in U.S. Veterans: The Role of Social Connectedness, Combat Experience and Discharge,” *Healthcare* 6, no. 3 (August 2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare6030102>.

⁵⁷ Dulaney, “Over the Edge and Into the Abyss: The Communication of Organizational Identity in an Outlaw Motorcycle Club,” 113-14.

without humility, there can be no functional collective social system.⁵⁸ To a club, humility teaches that one's actions are no more valuable, or are just as valuable, as the actions of others in the social system.⁵⁹

According to researchers, club members tend to believe that belonging comes from joining a club where members not only share a similar experience or background, but where members look like you.⁶⁰ There are motorcycle clubs geared toward specific racial groups such as the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle club, an African American motorcycle club, or The Latin American Motorcycle Association.⁶¹⁶² Guzman describes why Black men join social groups. “Historically, ... African Americans formed social organizations to engage in racial uplift and status enhancement.”⁶³ However, according to Guzman, social organizations have shifted from enhancing status to preserving intra-racial ties. Black spaces were created for Black people to stay in touch with their culture and peers. Many Black spaces are often social clubs, which not only allow for the creation of a space that uplifts the burden of race but also de-emphasizes it which allows Black people to focus on themselves and nurture an intrinsically driven sense of belonging.⁶⁴ However, there is no literature on why military veterans who identify as minorities join motorcycle clubs, including why minorities join predominantly white clubs versus clubs specifically formed for people of color.

⁵⁸ Dulaney, “Over the Edge and Into the Abyss: The Communication of Organizational Identity in an Outlaw Motorcycle Club,” 152-54.

⁵⁹ Medina, “Motorcycle Club Experiences & Motivations,” 42.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Guzman, “Walking the Intra-Racial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion Within a Black Social Club,” *Sociological Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2022): 590, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2021.1918593>.

⁶¹ “Home,” NABSTMC, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.nabstmc.com/>.

⁶² “About Us,” Latin American Motorcycle Association, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://lama.world/about-us/>.

⁶³ Guzman, “Walking the Intra-Racial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion Within a Black Social Club,” 590.

⁶⁴ Guzman, “Walking the Intra-Racial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion Within a Black Social Club,” 592-603.

According to Boehm & Kubzansky, purpose can bring lifelong benefits and is important to maintain one's health.⁶⁵ Psychologist Anthony Burrow defines purpose as, “ a forward-looking directionality, an intention to do something in the world.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, he compares a purpose and a goal. A goal can be accomplished. For example, wanting to be a father is a goal because it can be accomplished, however, wanting to be a great father is a purpose as it aligns more with intention rather than achievement. One can come close to the ideal, but it is never a completed task.⁶⁷ According to Ryff, a purpose consists of “goals, intentions, and a sense of direction, all of which contribute to the feeling that life is meaningful.”⁶⁸ Scholars agree that purpose and goals are connected, as having a meaningful goal allows for a purposeful life.⁶⁹ Having goals can provide a foundation for purpose. Purpose can enhance health and act as a stress buffer, especially for those that have experienced stress from an unpredictable and uncontrollable event as this type of stress can pose a threat to those who do not have an established purpose.⁷⁰ This is because “major stressors can disrupt individuals’ framework for understanding themselves and their place in the world.”⁷¹ According to McKnight and Kashdan, having a purpose helps facilitate coping strategies when stress does arise.⁷² When joining groups such as motorcycle

⁶⁵ Julia K. Boehm and Laura D. Kubzansky, “The Heart’s Content: The Association Between Positive Psychological Well-Being and Cardiovascular Health,” *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 4 (2012): 655, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027448>.

⁶⁶ Esther Kim, “The Benefits of Having a Sense of Purpose,” PRYDE, last modified December 3, 2020, <https://pryde.bctr.cornell.edu/news/2020/12/3/the-benefits-of-having-a-sense-of-purpose>.

⁶⁷ Esther Kim, “The Benefits of Having a Sense of Purpose,” PRYDE, last modified December 3, 2020, <https://pryde.bctr.cornell.edu/news/2020/12/3/the-benefits-of-having-a-sense-of-purpose>.

⁶⁸ Carol D. Ryff, “Happiness is Everything, Or is it? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-being,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 6 (December 1989): 1071, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>.

⁶⁹ Patrick E. McKnight and Todd B. Kashdan, “Purpose in Life as a System That Creates and Sustains Health and Well-Being: An Integrative, Testable Theory,” *Review of General Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017152>.

⁷⁰ Tim D. Windsor, Rachel G. Curtis, and Mary A. Luszcz, “Sense of Purpose as a Psychological Resource for Aging Well,” *Developmental Psychology* 51, no. 7 (2015): 975, <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000023>.

⁷¹ Windsor, Curtis, and Luszcz, “Sense of Purpose as a Psychological Resource for Aging Well,” 976.

⁷² McKnight and Kashdan, “Purpose in Life as a System That Creates and Sustains Health and Well-Being: An Integrative, Testable Theory,”.

clubs, purpose can be found as social support. Social support refers to the response provided by an individual's social networks such as family, peers, and community which provide emotional, cognitive, and material resources.⁷³

Summary

There is literature that can begin to help describe and understand motorcycle clubs such as literature describing groups and clubs. However, it is important to note that terms such as groups and motorcycle clubs do not have a consistent definition to be used for analysis. Scholars are not in agreement as to how a motorcycle club can be defined. There is scholarship describing motorcycle clubs, but not a consistent standard as to what a motorcycle club is. Therefore, more research needs to be done to provide a standard definition of a motorcycle club. There is much scholarship on veteran identity and veteranness that helps further the discussion on what a veteran is. However, when relating military veterans and motorcycle clubs there is limited scholarship. In the scholarship that does talk about the relationship, it is often describing themes of brotherhood/camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, there are motorcycle clubs geared toward specific racial groups, which play a role in the sense of belonging, however, there is no literature on why military veterans who identify as minorities join motorcycle clubs and how they choose which clubs to join. This needs to be studied as it will aid in understanding why military veterans join motorcycle clubs.

⁷³Jingxue Cai and Rong Lian, "Social Support and a Sense of Purpose: The Role of Personal Growth Initiative and Academic Self-Efficacy," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.788841>.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Design

This study used a qualitative exploratory approach. I designed an interview guide to try and understand why military veterans join motorcycle clubs through interviews and personal narratives. My interview guide used mostly open-ended questions, but did include some closed-ended questions to gain information on the demographics of the participants. To gain various perspectives, I interviewed three participants. Participants were members of the same motorcycle club and two of the members were from the same chapter. Interviewees lived in Maryland and were chosen out of convenience for the researcher, as this state provided the most accessibility because of where I lived. I chose to structure my interviews in a semi-structured manner to be able to have more of a conversation about each of my interlocutors' veteran experiences. Having a conversation-style interview allowed me to gain more perspective and dive deeper into each of my interlocutors' personal thoughts, stories, and opinions. I also analyzed three blog posts, all from different websites answering a question related to why military veterans join motorcycle clubs. Using both a semi-structured interview style as well as analyzing blogs allowed me to highlight and expand on the answers given through themes such as tradition and transition outside of previous studies' themes, which were limited to brotherhood/camaraderie, belonging, and a sense of purpose.

Participants

For the interview portion of my study, members of motorcycle clubs had to be cis-gendered men who were at least eighteen years old, active members of their respective motorcycle clubs, and military veterans who have been honorably discharged. To protect the

privacy of the participants, identity data was not shared outside of the PI, and all participant information was changed and displayed under a pseudonym.

Instrument

I constructed an interview guide with five categories of questions. This interview guide can be found in Appendix A. The first category was comprised of closed-ended questions about the participant's demographics. Categories two through five were all made up of open-ended questions. The second category included questions about the participant's military service. The third category included questions about the participant's motorcycle club experience. The fourth category consisted of narrative questions putting together a storyline of the participant's military service and motorcycle club service. The fifth category included reflective questions centered on the participant's feelings about being a military veteran, opinions on their motorcycle club membership, and how other characteristics impact both of these identities. Although this interview guide was written it was used more as a template to make sure I hit certain topics during the conversations. Using a semi-structured interview style provided greater flexibility in the questions asked as well as a more comfortable environment for conversation. These questions were designed to elicit information about participants' backgrounds, their experiences in the military, and experiences in a motorcycle club to better understand the reasoning for joining a motorcycle club, their continued membership in a motorcycle club, how joining a motorcycle club impacts their everyday civilian life if at all, and similarities between the military structure and motorcycle club structure if any. Since this study used semi-structured interviews, I asked questions in various orders depending on the participant's response. I also asked follow-up and clarifying questions to ensure my understanding.

Data Gathering Procedures

The data-gathering procedures included interviewing research participants through phone call and having one of the participants write answers to the interview guide which was returned to me by mail. I contacted motorcycle clubs in Maryland by email through their websites. A copy of this email can be found in Appendix B. I made sure to state that participation was voluntary and that if the participant met a set of requirements an interview could be set up. The participants had a choice of how they would like their interview conducted. One participant requested to write the answers to the interview guide. Two participants were interviewed by phone. Before participating all the interviewees were told that their participation was voluntary and that any questions that they did not want to answer or at any time during the interview they were able to stop. Most of the interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how much the participants wanted to expand on. The questionnaire received in the mail took approximately one hour to transcribe and approximately three to four hours were spent transcribing each interview that was conducted via phone. My data-gathering procedures also included analyzing data from blog posts. I found three blog posts by searching the question, “why do veterans join motorcycle clubs.” I picked three blogs that answered this question. It took approximately two hours to transcribe and analyze all three blogs.

Data Analysis

I completed a data analysis once all the interviews and blog posts had been transcribed. I organized my findings based on shared themes, similar reasoning, and views. My key question posed was why military veterans join motorcycle clubs and the answers to this question were organized under five themes. The first theme was tradition, the second theme was transition, the

third theme was purpose, the fourth theme described brotherhood/camaraderie, and the fifth theme organized answers related to a sense of belonging.

Protection of Human Subjects

A designee of the institutional review board at Vanderbilt University determined that the study posed minimal risk to participants. I gave each participant a copy of the approved questions and a description of the study. The participant's right to privacy and safety was protected by not using any individual identifiers. There were no health risks that were greater than what the participants encountered each day.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

This section examines the results of the study which included two interviews and one answered interview guide with military veterans who are motorcycle club members as well as data gathered from blog posts answering the question of why military veterans join motorcycle clubs. The results are organized within themes of tradition, transition, purpose, brotherhood/camaraderie, and belonging. However, it is important to note that reasons military veterans join motorcycle clubs were not just limited to a single theme instead answers fell under multiple themes. For example, author Ryan stated that “[a]fter serving the country and spending time within a close-knit military unit for many years, often overseas, motorcycle clubs continue the tradition of camaraderie for veterans.”⁷⁴ This answer included brotherhood/camaraderie as well as the theme of tradition. This shows that veterans join motorcycle clubs for multiple reasons. This is important when discussing why veterans join motorcycle clubs as members are connected not only because they share interests, but because of shared experiences and feelings from the military.⁷⁵

Demographics

I was able to obtain three responses from military veterans who are members of a motorcycle club in this qualitative research study. Each participant is listed under a pseudonym.

Steven identifies as African American and is a member of a motorcycle club in the state of Maryland. He enlisted in the military when he was nineteen and served for four years. He served in the Air Force and took on a variety of jobs as a plumber as well as a medical escort. Steven was never deployed. He is an active member of his motorcycle club.

⁷⁴ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

⁷⁵ Saia, “The Evolution and Influence of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs in the American West,” 42.

Richard identifies as African American and is a member of a motorcycle club in the state of Maryland. He enlisted in the military when he was eighteen and served for fifteen years. He served in the Air Force where he was a police officer and worked gate patrol as well as a desk sergeant. Richard was never deployed. He has held positions of authority in his club but is currently in the process of retiring from his motorcycle club.

Allen identifies as African American and is a member of a motorcycle club in the state of Maryland. He enlisted in the military when he was twenty-one after he graduated college and served in the Marine Corps for twenty-three years. He was deployed in Iraq for eight months. He is an active member of his motorcycle club, has been a member for seven years, and has held positions of authority in his club.

My content analysis came from three blog posts. The first blog was titled “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs.”⁷⁶ This blog was found on a website called cycletrader.com, a blog that discusses various aspects of motorcycles and motorcycling. The second blog was titled, “Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs.”⁷⁷ This blog was found on DD214Direct.com, a website whose mission is to help veterans and their families. The third blog was posted on rallypoint.com a “digital platform for the military community to come together and discuss military topics both socially and professionally.”⁷⁸ The blog was titled, “How many of you have joined, or thought about joining, a motorcycle group?”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ryan Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com,” Cycle Trader. Trader Interactive, last modified May 4, 2022, <https://www.cycletrader.com/blog/2022/05/04/5-reasons-veterans-join-motorcycle-clubs/>.

⁷⁷ “Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs,” DD214Direct, last modified, May 20, 2018, <https://dd214direct.com/veterans-join-military-motorcycle-clubs/>.

⁷⁸ “How Many of You Have Joined, or Thought about Joining, a Motorcycle Group?,” RallyPoint, last modified July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

⁷⁹ “How Many of You Have Joined, or Thought about Joining, a Motorcycle Group?.”

Tradition

The military is bound by tradition and history. Ryan stated that “[m]otorcycles have been used in the military for the past century. After World War II, the first motorcycle clubs started with veterans riding Harley and Indian motorcycles, which helped establish the biker identity and a sense of unity. Today, these biker clubs continue the tradition, riding alongside one another on some of the most powerful bikes found on the street.”⁸⁰ Even as personnel come in and soldiers' ranks change, what remains is tradition. Military tradition instills continuity among its members, new and old.⁸¹ Due to motorcycle clubs forming in the United States because of World War II veterans coming together to ride motorcycles, many of the themes and traditions of motorcycle clubs share similarities to the military and its structure.⁸² Allen stated that “[motorcycle clubs] are founded on the military mindset.” For example, the military promotes uniformity. “Despite the diversity of [military] personnel, there is a certain uniformity in how the services operate.”⁸³ Military personnel have to wear specific clothes in a specific way. The uniform that soldiers wear differentiates them from civilians. The badges on their uniform provide context as to what group they belong to. The symbols they wear indicate their rank and the level of authority they have.⁸⁴ Allen reported that “wearing the motorcycle club uniform [which consists of a vest with the motorcycle club patches] is similar to a military uniform.” Furthermore, when describing the uniform of their motorcycle club both Richard and Allen described the patches they wore, where they were worn, and how holding positions of authority differentiated where and what patches

⁸⁰ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cyclotrader.com.”

⁸¹ Guy Siebold and Thomas Britt, *American Military Life in the 21st Century: Social, Cultural, and Economic Issues and Trends: Active Duty Life* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2019), 6, <https://search-ebshost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1924859&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸² Dulaney, “A Brief History of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs,” 4.

⁸³ Siebold and Britt, *American Military Life in the 21st Century: Social, Cultural, and Economic Issues and Trends: Active Duty Life*, 4.

⁸⁴ Siebold and Britt, *American Military Life in the 21st Century: Social, Cultural, and Economic Issues and Trends: Active Duty Life*, 3-4.

were worn. Tradition is heavily woven into military culture and identity. Therefore, the connection provided to my interlocutors by the tradition of military values is important in their reasoning for joining and staying in a motorcycle club.

Transition

One aspect of veteran identity is how veterans transition from the military world into the civilian world, which can differ based on military experience. Transition is the change from military status to civilian status.⁸⁵ For Steven, in his transition, he did not find difficulties with his new veteran identity, but another characteristic, parenthood. He described the transition back to civilian life as “okay” and the toughest part of the transition was raising kids after service. When asked if the military helped to provide resources to adjust back to civilian life or if the military explained how to navigate this new chapter he answered “no.” The ease of transition greatly depends on the veteran's experience. Steven stated that joining a motorcycle club influenced his transition back to civilian life. Ryan described a form of transition in that motorcycle clubs and motorcycles are a “...form of riding therapy to fight negativity and stress,” which can ease the veteran transition back to civilian life.⁸⁶ Ryan also stated, “[i]n addition to providing opportunities to converse and connect with one another, motorcycle clubs gather vets to share the joys of riding and the freedom of motorcycling. Feeling the breeze as you rumble down the road makes it easier for riders to leave behind their worries while supporting each other.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, both Richard and Allen shared similarities as they both did not feel as if they had a transition, however, this was for different reasons. For Richard there was not

⁸⁵ Tyson R. Smith and Gala True, “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” 148.

⁸⁶ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

⁸⁷ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

much of a transition as being in the military was just another job. When describing his transition back to civilian life he said, “it was no issue for me. It was fine. I was always stateside, so it was like going from one job to another, you just didn’t have to wear a uniform.” The biggest difference between military life to civilian life is, “maybe that there [are fewer] rules.” Rules don’t apply to civilian life the same way they do in military life. Allen stated that he did not have a transition because of being a Marine as in the military branch he served in, the values taught to him and the mindset he formed never changed. Allen stated:

Well actually as a Marine you never really do transition back. The Marine Corps was totally in line [with] who I was, it fit my personality. I'm a by-the-book type of guy [and] follow the rules. [As a Marine] [y]ou want to be respected, [so you] keep yourself physically and mentally in shape. I was taught [a] strong mind and strong body go together. As a Marine we never really transition. You never say former, you always say, Marine. That's why there's no transition. Things I was taught as a Marine I will never forget as we still live those things now. I now work for the Department of Defense [and] I've been working here since I have been out of uniform, so I'm always around military members. For me, it's not really quite stepping away from the military. We take off the uniform, but I can assure you that the characteristics of being a Marine are embedded in us and are not going anywhere.

Furthermore, in the job that he has now, he is still constantly surrounded by military members, so there is very little change in the people he is interacting with. All veterans do go through a transition in the change from their military status to civilian status. However, the ease and awareness of the transition varies based on the veteran's experience in the military as well as other characteristics of their identity such as parenthood or career after military service.

Purpose

Purpose is “an intention to do something in the world.”⁸⁸ Ryan reported that “[b]y promoting a positive image for motorcycle riders and the military, motorcycle clubs are one

⁸⁸ Kim, “The Benefits of Having a Sense of Purpose.”

more way veterans can continue to serve their country by giving back to noble causes. Riding clubs often encourage their members to volunteer or donate to community efforts or charities. Some of these clubs are affiliated with nonprofit organizations, and many have ties to the military and outreach for veterans.”⁸⁹ Richard reiterated these sentiments as he said, “I heard about [my motorcycle club]. I thought you know what [this is] good because they gave back to society. They weren't about drugs, sex, and stealing. We also give back [through] scholarships. I want to be clear about giving back. My club is about veterans giving back to veterans, feeding the homeless, schools, students, you know giving them scholarships, bookbags, [and] we do a food bank.” Allen highlighted that, “to [even] join my motorcycle club you have to do a community service project.” Petty Officer First Class Rodney Bracey stated “[w]e help fellow Veterans support local charities that help veterans and support each other.”⁹⁰ In, *Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs*, “[t]he truth is, the vast majority of all-military motorcycle clubs are perfectly law abiding and, more often than not, involved in standing up for great causes, charity work and volunteerism.”⁹¹ Moreover in *Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs*, “... they get the satisfaction of knowing they are continuing to make a positive difference in their community, state or country, all while having the time of their lives.”⁹² Military structure provides soldiers with a clear purpose to follow the military’s demands which is a service to others through the aim of fighting for their country. This often entails dissociation from the civilian identity and expectations of autonomy. Joining a motorcycle club that promotes giving back and community service, especially with community service being required for many,

⁸⁹ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

⁹⁰ Rodney Bracey (@PO1 Rodney Bracey), “I’m a member of the CVMA (Combat Veteran's Motorcycle Association). Chapter 34-4 Lowcountry Pirates in the greater Charleston, SC area. We help fellow Veterans,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

⁹¹ “Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs.”

⁹² “Why Veterans Join Military-Only Motorcycle Clubs.”

allows ease into regaining civilian identity, but a connection to civilian society through action as well as a way to do good for others with others.⁹³

Purpose and transition often go hand in hand when discussing why veterans join motorcycle clubs. Having a purpose has a “potential to enhance developmental opportunities and capacity for adaptation across the life span.”⁹⁴ Purpose can also act as a stress buffer when stress arises from unpredictable and uncontrollable events. This is because major stressors can impact an individual's understanding of themselves and their place in the world.⁹⁵ Having a purpose can facilitate self-regulatory tools also known as coping strategies that can help with resilience to stressors.⁹⁶ Master Sergeant Daniel Yoder describes how “[b]eing part of a motorcycle club is the only thing right now keeping me sane.”⁹⁷ When describing his transition after being deployed in Iraq, Allen highlighted how joining a motorcycle club opened the door to finding a sense of purpose after returning home. Allen reported:

In 2004 I was mobilized and stationed in Iraq. When I was in Iraq one of the things that helped me get through being there for those eight months was that I told myself that when I get back home I would purchase a motorcycle. [I] thought of the things that I would do to it [and] I had this mental picture of how I was going to get this Harley-Davidson to look. When I returned home before I even purchased a bike I distinctly remember driving and [seeing] a group of motorcycle riders in blue and black. They were all dressed really nice[ly] and were riding really nice bikes. [They] looked really nice in their uniforms, well I call it [a] uniform but they had their vests. You [could] tell they were very well put together as far as the way they carried themselves and the way they looked on their bikes. I did my research and at that point, I learned about my motorcycle club and I sent an email asking about them and saw their pictures and I went from there.

⁹³ Tyson R. Smith and Gala True, “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” 147.

⁹⁴ McKnight and Kashdan, “Purpose in Life as a System That Creates and Sustains Health and Well-Being: An Integrative, Testable Theory,”.

⁹⁵ Windsor, Curtis, and Luszcz, “Sense of Purpose as a Psychological Resource for Aging Well,” 976.

⁹⁶ McKnight and Kashdan, “Purpose in Life as a System That Creates and Sustains Health and Well-Being: An Integrative, Testable Theory,”.

⁹⁷ Daniel Yoder (@SMSgt Daniel Yoder), “Being part of a motorcycle club is the only thing right now keeping me sane. I have been a member of the American Legion Riders for 8 years now. The Riders is a,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

Allen describes how he created a goal to buy a motorcycle when he returned home. From the goal he was able to find a sense of purpose and belonging in a motorcycle club when he returned home.

Brotherhood/Camaraderie

Brotherhood describes “a closeness and emotional expressiveness” among men. In his interview, Steven reported “brotherhood” as a reason for joining a motorcycle club and was encouraged to continue his membership in a motorcycle club as it provided “worldwide friendships.” Furthermore, when describing what it means to be a member of a motorcycle club he said it is also someone who has your back. Steven then went on to describe the day-to-day of being a motorcycle club member as “community.” Master sergeant Niclas Svensson stated, “I am a Green Knights member. ...[t]he bond of brotherhood is amazing.”⁹⁸ Similarly to brotherhood, camaraderie is “the intimate relationships that members of the military forge during service.”⁹⁹ When describing reasons for joining a motorcycle club, members often used these terms to describe other words such as family, company, bond, and fraternity. Ryan reported, “[f]or some riders, motorcycle clubs are like family and give veterans the opportunity to ride with pride and socialize.”¹⁰⁰ As explained by Seaman Timothy Ehrenhaft, a motorcycle member, “[m]y club brothers are my second family, and many are closer than family.”¹⁰¹ This is important when

⁹⁸ Niclas Svensson (@MSgt Niclas Svensson), “I am a Green Knights member. As you said, the bond of brotherhood is amazing. I was a member of Chapter 28 in AZ for a few years and now a member of Chapter 1,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

⁹⁹ Martin, *War & Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

¹⁰¹ Timothy Ehrenhaft (@SN Timothy Ehrenhaft), “I’ve been a member of the American Veterans M/C since 2003 with no regrets. My club brothers are my second family, and many are closer than family.” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

discussing why veterans join motorcycle clubs as it describes how members are connected not only because they share interests but because of shared experiences and feelings from the military.¹⁰² Allen stated, “most members join for brotherhood.” He went on to say that, “the brotherhood and camaraderie [are] huge, however, we also attract military members who can appreciate what it means to take care of your equipment and the way that you look. [There is also] the sense of the person to [your] left and your right always has your back. Someone is always going to provide you with assistance if you ask. Brotherhood, fellowship, and people seeing things like you and doing the same things you do,” are the reasons for joining a motorcycle club. Richard went on to say that “I enjoy the camaraderie, riding different places, [and] seeing and attending social events.” These shared feelings are described by Major Brian Haddle as “[h]aving done 30 years of active and reserve service I found that I missed the brotherhood that you only get with others that served. I missed being around soldiers and the club gives that back. Most of the members are of course former enlisted men and I get no breaks at all for being an officer, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I love them all and in the club, we are all brothers who served.”¹⁰³ Most veterans join motorcycle clubs for brotherhood/camaraderie, as it is similar to what was experienced when serving in the military. It was the theme highlighted and talked about the most, which can relate to its importance for veterans.

The sense of unity and brotherhood is also linked to the theme of tradition as brotherhood/camaraderie are aspects that are prominent in military culture and tradition. While

¹⁰² Saia, “The Evolution and Influence of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs in the American West,” 42.

¹⁰³ Brian Haddle (@MAJ Brian Haddle), “I am a proud member of the US Military Vets MC and love the brotherhood that the club provides. The priorities in the Club are 1) God and Family 2) Job 3) Club.,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

in the military you are in various groups such as a platoon, company battalion, and divisions. You also have barrack mates and friends in many divisions as well as are constantly with others in your unit.¹⁰⁴ Ryan described, “[a]fter serving the country and spending time within a close-knit military unit for many years, often overseas, motorcycle clubs continue the tradition of camaraderie for veterans.”¹⁰⁵

Social support is the resources an individual’s social network provides that help them cope with challenges. Social support can come from family, communities, and peers.¹⁰⁶ When involved in warfare, the military’s control, unit cohesion, and stoicism increases. However, veterans sometimes withdraw socially, which is detrimental to their mental health in the long term.¹⁰⁷ However, a social network can provide support emotionally and materially which can help an individual find, feel, and form a stronger sense of purpose.¹⁰⁸ Sergeant First Class Derek Ashman stated, “I know I joined a motorcycle association to help our own. I am glad I did, because not only do I help our brothers and sisters that need help but the bond in the group is unbelievable.”¹⁰⁹ Ryan Miller reported, “[i]n addition to providing opportunities to converse and connect with one another, motorcycle clubs gather vets to share the joys of riding and the freedom of motorcycling. Feeling the breeze as you rumble down the road makes it easier for

¹⁰⁴ Siebold and Britt, *American Military Life in the 21st Century: Social, Cultural, and Economic Issues and Trends: Active Duty Life*, 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

¹⁰⁶ Zoe E. Taylor et al., “Parenting Practices and Perceived Social Support: Longitudinal Relations with the Social Competence of Mexican-Origin Children,” *Journal of Latina/o Psychology* 3, no. 4 (2015): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1037/lat0000038>.

¹⁰⁷ Tyson R. Smith and Gala True, “Warring Identities: Identity Conflict and the Mental Distress of American Veterans of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” 148.

¹⁰⁸ Kendall Cotton Bronk, *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 52.

¹⁰⁹ Derek Ashman (@SFC Derek Ashman), “I know I joined a motorcycle association to help our own. I am glad I did, because not only do I help our brothers and sisters that need help but the bond in the,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

riders to leave behind their worries while supporting each other.”¹¹⁰ Master Sergeant Christopher Mackey even highlighted that “[t]here are some great groups out there to join. I joined a Masonic Riding Association called the Widows Sons who do many charitable functions. The Military groups are great too especially the Patriot Guard. Either way the important thing is Fraternity which I miss since I retired. I now have a chance to be around like-minded individuals and have a whole lot of fun and have a purpose.”¹¹¹ A common theme among military veterans is that their sense of purpose was strengthened by connection to others whether that was serving other veterans or serving with other veterans.

Belonging

Belonging can come from joining a club where members share a similar experience or background, but also where members look like you.¹¹² This is important to members as it shows the reasoning as to how belonging plays a role in motorcycle membership. When members join a sense of belonging can come from uniformity, specifically in what you wear. For example, when you look around, members look like you as they are dressed exactly like you. Many motorcycle clubs practice the art of conformity as members wear the same colors. Not only this, but the patches put on their vests or jackets are the exact same and placed in the same spot on their uniform.¹¹³ Ryan reported that “[y]ou’ll see these road warriors flying their colors and sporting

¹¹⁰ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

¹¹¹ Christopher Mackey (@MSG Christopher Mackey), “There are some great groups out there to join. I joined a Masonic Riding Association called the Widows Sons who do many charitable functions. The Military groups,” RallyPoint, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/how-many-of-you-have-joined-or-thought-about-joining-a-motorcycle-group>.

¹¹² Guzman, “Walking the Intra-Racial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion Within a Black Social Club,” 590.

¹¹³ Dulaney, “Over the Edge and Into the Abyss: The Communication of Organizational Identity in an Outlaw Motorcycle Club,” 106-08.

patches for the armed services on their gear during meetups, parades, and motorcycle rallies.”¹¹⁴

Wearing a uniform in a motorcycle club is similar to wearing a uniform in the military. Even though soldiers come from different places or have different backgrounds their individuality in how they dress is left behind and replaced by uniformity in what they wear. When describing a motorcycle club Allen stated, “I distinctly remember driving and [seeing] a group of motorcycle riders in blue and black. They were all dressed really nice[ly] and were riding really nice bikes. [They] looked really nice in their uniforms, well I call it [a] uniform but they had their vests.”

Although belonging can come from what you wear it can also come from what you look like racially/ethnically. When describing motorcycle clubs in relation to race Richard stated, “they let whites in, but people who are black are interested in joining [his particular motorcycle club] because [his motorcycle club] is predominantly black.” Joining a club for racial belonging can help preserve intra-racial ties.¹¹⁵ It also provides a space that allows members to stay in touch with people who not only share similar experiences to them, but also look like them.

¹¹⁴ Miller, “5 Reasons Veterans Join Motorcycle Clubs - Cycletrader.com.”

¹¹⁵ Guzman, “Walking the Intra-Racial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion Within a Black Social Club,” 590.

CONCLUSION

Military veterans join and stay in motorcycle clubs for various reasons, however, there are many connections and similarities between these motives such as brotherhood/camaraderie and a sense of purpose. Moreover, my main question, why military veterans join motorcycle clubs, not only examines the relationship between and reasoning behind why military veterans and motorcycle clubs, but highlights how the veteran identity varies due to veteran and military experience. When asked if every veteran should join a motorcycle club each participant said it would be up to the veteran—it would be their choice based on if it fit their lifestyle. This highlights that there is not a one size fits all as to what veterans should take part in or be involved in. “Veteran” is not an all-encompassing word that perfectly describes veteran identity or veteranhood. Each veteran joins a motorcycle club for their own reasons. Veteran identity is experienced and felt differently based on various characteristics, feelings, and experiences by each veteran. Although experiences can be different, common themes do connect veterans.

Implications for Medicine, Health and Society

In the fields of veteran health and scholarship on veterans in a range of disciplines, understanding why military veterans join motorcycle clubs can better assist in increasing their quality of life. If it is understood that veteran identity and experiences are different among each individual more individualist care can be provided that is not a one-size fits all. Furthermore, the health of the military veteran population after returning and transitioning from war is important to better understand how to serve and increase their health and quality of life. There is little scholarly work done on these subjects and if furthered would be useful in increasing our

understanding and mechanisms of how clubs can be used to increase the health of the military veteran population.

Implications for Future Research

This research could be expanded upon in two ways. The first way would be diversifying the patient demographic. All three of the participants identified as African-American and were part of the same motorcycle club. Diversifying the participant demographic racially could provide more context and understanding of various other identities and how they co-exist with the veteran's identity. Diversifying participant demographics based on membership in motorcycle clubs could also help expand this research as all three of the participants were part of the same motorcycle club. If membership was expanded, reasons why military veterans choose specific motorcycle clubs could be studied to understand what qualities veterans look for when trying to find new groups to join. The second way this research could be expanded upon would be by limiting the patient demographic to military veterans of the same branch of the military with similar experiences. If military experience and veteran identity were made more consistent another way to study why veterans join motorcycle clubs could be made possible.

When discussing similarities between the military and motorcycle clubs both include a long process. Being in the military is no easy feat as it is very demanding of an individual's time and effort. This is similar to the time and effort it takes when joining a motorcycle club.¹¹⁶ Richard and Allen also both described the process of joining their motorcycle clubs. They had to do a community service project, sit in on meetings, learn about the history of their motorcycle club and also present on one aspect of the history they learned about. However, this theme could

¹¹⁶ Siebold and Britt, *American Military Life in the 21st Century: Social, Cultural, and Economic Issues and Trends: Active Duty Life*, 5.

be further studied in future research in whether or not this is a reason in which veterans join motorcycle clubs.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

Biographical Questions:

1. Where are you from/in what state are you currently living?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?

Questions About Military Service:

1. How old were you when you enlisted in the military?
2. In what branch of the military did you serve?
 - a. Did you always know that you wanted to join the military and be in this specific branch?
 - i. What factors influenced your decision?
 - b. How did you feel when you first began serving in the military? Were you excited to do so, nervous, or scared?
3. How long did you serve?
 - a. During your service were you deployed, if so when were you deployed?
 - i. Dates of deployment?
4. What duties did you perform in the military?
5. How would you describe your experience serving in the military?
6. What was your transition from military life back to civilian life like?
 - i. What were your feelings at the beginning of this transition and how do you feel about it now?
 - b. What do you think the toughest part of the transition was?
 - i. Do you think most veterans would say the same?
 - ii. What do you think most veterans struggle with when transitioning back to civilian life?
 - c. What is one part of the transition that was much easier than you had expected?
 - d. How does the military, if at all, help you readjust back to civilian life? Do they provide you with resources or tell you where to go or how to navigate this new chapter?
 - e. What do you think is the hardest aspect for people who are not veterans to understand about adjusting back to civilian life?
 - i. What do you think is the hardest aspect for people who are not veterans to understand about what it is like to be a veteran?

Questions About Motorcycle Club Membership:

1. Tell me about your first interactions with motorcycles. a. When did you first learn how to ride?
2. What motorcycle club are you a part of and when did you become a member?
 - a. Do you hold a position of authority in the motorcycle club?
 - i. How does one get elected into a position of authority?

- ii. How long and how many times can you serve in a position?
 - b. What kind of motorcycle do you ride?
 - i. Do you have to ride a certain type of motorcycle to be in the club?
 - ii. Do most motorcycle clubs ride similar motorcycles?
3. Did your membership overlap with your military service or did you join after you served?
 4. What made you want to join a motorcycle club?
 - a. Since you are an active member of your motorcycle club, what are some factors that have encouraged you to continue your membership?
 - b. Do you think this is similar for most motorcycle club members? If not, what do you think drives most veterans to join a motorcycle club and continue their membership?
 5. What does it mean to be a member of a motorcycle club?
 - a. What is the day-to-day of being a part of a motorcycle club?
 6. Can you tell me about the motorcycle club structure and organization and its similarities or differences to military structure and organization?
 7. If there is a motorcycle club uniform, when do you wear it and what do the different symbols/patches mean?
 - a. When wearing the uniform is there a special protocol you have to follow?
 - b. Does wearing a motorcycle club uniform change the way you feel about yourself? Is there a difference in the way that others perceive you?
 - c. Is this similar to or different than wearing a military uniform?
 8. What is the purpose of motorcycle clubs?
 9. There are many motorcycle clubs across the United States. What characteristics do potential members look for when looking to join a motorcycle club?
 10. There are many motorcycle clubs that take just veterans, and some that take anyone, but have a large percentage of members who identify as veterans. What do you think attracts people to specific clubs like this?
 - a. What do you think most veterans get out of being in a motorcycle club?
 - b. Would you recommend being in a motorcycle club to other veterans?
 11. There are many Black motorcycle clubs and many that are all or mostly White. How do you think race affects people's decisions about joining a motorcycle club?
 12. What do you gain from joining a motorcycle club?
 - a. Do you think joining a motorcycle club has influenced or impacted how you've adjusted to civilian life?
 - i. Do you think more veterans should join social clubs such as motorcycle clubs?

Appendix B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL:

Subject Line: Interview Inquiry

Hello,

My name is Sonali Prillman and I am currently a graduate student in the department of Medicine Health, and Society at Vanderbilt University. I am researching the relationship between military veterans and motorcycle club membership and would like to interview any willing members. I am reaching out to see if you would be interested in learning more about the study and participating. To participate you have to be at least 18 years old, be a military veteran, and be an active member of a motorcycle club. Your participation would consist of an interview about 60-90 minutes in length, scheduled at your convenience, and conducted in person or virtually on Zoom or Google Meets. I am happy to answer any questions via phone (xxx-xxx-xxxx) or email.

Best,

Sonali Prillman

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