



Black Veterans' Insight on Racial Disparities in Military Administrative Separations

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Military service provides a path toward the middle class by granting veterans benefits, including healthcare and compensation for disabilities acquired during service. Military characterization of service, assigned by the Department of Defense at separation, can qualify or disqualify veterans from benefits access. Black service members are 50% more likely than White service members to receive an Other Than Honorable rather than an Honorable discharge, resulting in disproportionate impediments to the benefits designed to facilitate re-entry into civilian life and prevent poverty. Yet, the Department of Defense provides little meaningful remedy for Black veterans to correct less than Honorable discharges, instead operating under a presumption that the service member's own misconduct warranted these discharges. The present study analyzed 26 semi-structured interviews with Black military veterans to gain insight into their experiences in service and how they conceptualize the causes of racial disparities in military separations. The study revealed persistent mechanisms of structural racism in the armed services. The participants (1) described the military as reflective of racialized civilian society rather than a race-neutral meritocracy, (2) emphasized the ability to adapt and conform to white cultural norms as key to success, (3) recounted overt instances of racial harassment, and (4) described a lack of access to accurate information about the administrative separation process. The participants' experiences of racism in the military suggest that service members' conduct alone does not explain the statistical racial disparity in 'bad paper' discharges and indicate a need for better pathways for Black veterans to correct their discharge status.

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“Mr. Johnson” served as a firefighter for 3.5 years in the United States Air Force before he tested positive for marijuana, which he used to self-medicate the mental health symptoms he began experiencing in service. Mr. Johnson’s supervisors had multiple options. They could refer him for treatment, provide a warning and minor punishment while he concluded the final months of his enlistment, or separate him early with an Honorable, General, or Other Than Honorable (OTH) character of service ([Air Force Separation Regulation AFI 32-3611, 2022](#)). They opted for the OTH discharge, which resulted in Mr. Johnson’s inability to access veterans benefits, including Veterans Health Administration (VHA) treatment or disability compensation from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) for his service-related mental health condition. Because of his OTH discharge, Mr. Johnson was also disqualified from employment by the local fire department. Mr. Johnson says, “I believe in my heart that they deliberately [said] we’ll give you an OTH and see what you do with that. You won’t get any VA benefits. You’ll be screwed the rest of your life.” Mr. Johnson’s story of the post-service consequences of a ‘bad paper’ discharge is all too common among Black veterans. The authors would like to note that for the purpose of this study, all former service members are referred to as ‘veterans’, although United States law defines a veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable” ([Adams & Montalto, 2017](#)).

In 2022, the Department of Defense (DoD) established an Internal Review Team (IRT) on Racial Disparities in the Investigative and Military Justice Systems ([DoD, 2022](#)). The IRT’s report found significant racial disparities across these systems. It concluded that the greatest disparities “exist along the [military justice] continuum where there is significant discretion and limited oversight or procedural protections” ([DoD, 2022, p. 20](#)). Disciplinary decisions that place service members on a path to success or separation are primarily made by first-line supervisors, senior enlisted leaders, and junior officers. Once a service member is involved in the justice system, additional discretionary actors “have the ability to take independent actions that can, for better or worse, affect service members throughout their military careers and long after” ([DoD, 2022, p. 22](#)). Lower-level supervisors in the military also facilitate access to rewards such as special assignments, which provide opportunities for advancement, make recommendations for training and promotions, and issue punishments such as letters of reprimand. The cumulative effect of decisions and recommendations made by discretionary actors influences a commanding officer’s determination as to whether service members receive non-judicial punishment

(also known as an Article 15) or administrative separation. Notably, although the IRT Report found that the racial disparity was linked to discretionary actors, it stopped short of concluding that racism was a factor in those decisions. It offered no recommendations for veterans whose careers were cut short and whose benefits were stripped by those decision-makers ([DoD, 2022](#)).

The IRT Report demonstrates that DoD recognizes that racial disparities exist at an institutional level within the armed forces’ disciplinary apparatus. However, the recommendations for the future provided no remedy to the racialized injustice experienced by Black veterans or the material impact on their lives. The DoD’s efforts to understand the racial disparity did not include any acknowledgment that the system where discretionary actions produce racialized results could be infected with deliberate racism or implicit bias. In this qualitative study, we used the recollections and opinions of Black veterans to generate a theory about the causes of this racial disparity and find potential solutions to remedy past injustices. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do Black veterans understand and conceptualize the causes of racial disparities in military service, particularly regarding the end of their military career?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & BACKGROUND

Service members who separate from the military receive a discharge document or certificate of release called a Department of Defense (DD) Form 214. The DD 214 contains the basic outlines of a service member’s career, including their “character of service,” colloquially known as the discharge status. Most service members receive Honorable discharges, but the DoD also administratively separates service members with General (Under Honorable Conditions) and OTH discharges ([Veterans Legal Clinic, 2016](#)). More rarely, service members found guilty after a trial by court-martial can be punished with a Bad Conduct or Dishonorable discharge ([DoD, 2024](#)).

General and OTH discharges are executed at the discretion of a service member’s chain of command, with few procedural protections for the affected service member—however, these discharges significantly affect veterans after service ([DoD, 2022](#)). The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides veterans benefits such as healthcare, disability payments, education, and home loans. VA benefits are intended to help veterans maintain financial stability, improve health outcomes, and secure civilian employment—with each having eligibility criteria.

Veterans with General discharges are excluded from education tuition benefits. Veterans with OTH separations are presumptively excluded from all VA benefits (38 C.F.R. § 3.12). The VA makes eligibility determinations for veterans with OTH discharges on a case-by-case basis in complicated and lengthy proceedings where the majority of veterans are denied some or all benefits. The bias against OTH veterans is so pervasive and the eligibility rules are so arcane that VA staff routinely turn them away without even conducting an eligibility review (OUTVETS, 2020). OTH discharges also negatively impact state-level benefits and employment potential. These challenges help explain why veterans with OTH and General discharges have significantly higher rates of mental health conditions and substance misuse than those with Honorable discharges (Brooks Holliday & Pedersen, 2017).

OTH discharges are of particular interest for legal advocates because they are the only discharge status in which supervisors' discretion, without meaningful due process protections, can eliminate access to virtually all post-service benefits. Thus, the individual biases, cultural norms, and prejudices of a service member's immediate supervisor and their chain of command can have an outsized impact on a service member's life even after they exit the military.

After a decade of representing veterans with less than Honorable discharges in military discharge upgrades and VA eligibility proceedings, the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) conducted a study to investigate whether veterans with 'bad paper' discharges were disproportionately people of color. CVLC analyzed DoD data comprising over 1.2 million separations from 2014–2020 and found a stark racial disparity in military administrative separations between Black and White service members in particular. Although many other racial groups have histories of military service and racial discrimination perpetrated by the U.S. military, the present study sought to further investigate disparities found in CVLC's *Discretionary Injustice* report, which showed a pronounced racial disparity for Black service members. According to CVLC (2022), Black service members were "approximately 1.5 times as likely as White service members to receive an OTH rather than Honorable discharge, and approximately twice as likely as White service members to receive a General discharge" (p. 5).

Black Americans generally experience racial inequality in access to private health insurance (Sohn, 2017), the ability to buy a home (National Association of Real Estate Brokers, 2022), and unemployment rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Benefits earned through military service have the potential to measurably improve social outcomes for Americans who choose to serve (Veterans Legal Clinic, 2016). For Black veterans, a 'bad paper' discharge erases

the VA healthcare, education, and financial benefits that military service would otherwise provide. In cases where the veteran has a disability caused by their service, they may be left untreated, unemployable, and impoverished (Brooks Holliday & Pedersen, 2017; Veterans Legal Clinic, 2016). Perhaps as a result of these interconnected causes, racial minority veterans are almost twice as likely to live in poverty as White veterans (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017).

Veterans who received a discharge characterized as less than fully Honorable are not without recourse. They may apply to a discharge review board within the DoD to upgrade their discharge status. However, despite the evidence of racial disparities, the DoD has issued no guidance to its discharge review boards on how to weigh veterans' claims of racism or bias when determining these applications. A 2014 report by The Legal Aid Society of Columbus showed that boards denied applications based on racial discrimination at a significantly higher rate than other applications and "largely discounted or discredited veterans' stories of racial abuse" (Nordstrom et al., 2014, p. 5). In contrast to its lack of guidance on race, the DoD has issued guidance for applications where the veteran incurred a mental or behavioral health condition or experienced military sexual trauma in service prior to a 'bad paper' discharge (Carson, 2016; Hagel, 2014; Kurta, 2017). This guidance takes into account the military's historic structural inadequacies regarding mental health diagnosis and treatment and sexual assault policies and weighs in favor of finding veterans credible and upgrading the discharge.

Structural racism within the military should be understood similarly to structural biases regarding mental health and sexual trauma (i.e., that structural factors mitigate service member misconduct and influence discretionary actors' use of 'bad paper' discharges). The evidence of structural racism in the military is well documented by nonprofit organizations (CVLC, 2022; Protect Our Defenders, 2017), researchers (Burke & Espinoza, 2012; GAO, 2019; Anwar et al., 2024), and the DoD (DoD, 2022; The Inspector General Department of the Air Force, 2020). In addition to the IRT and CVLC reports previously mentioned, sociologists Burk and Espinoza (2012) contested the claim that the U.S. military is a good model of race relations in their review of an institutional analysis of racial patterns across several areas of military concern, and found indicators of institutional racial biases in the areas of officer promotion, military justice, and in-service risk for PTSD. Protect Our Defenders, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to ending sexism and racism in the military, found in a 2017 study that "Black service members were substantially more likely than White service members to face military

justice or disciplinary action” (Protect Our Defenders, 2017, p. i). A 2019 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that before disciplinary events occur, “Black, Hispanic, and male service members were more likely than White or female members to be the subjects of investigations” even when controlling for factors such as rank or education level (GAO, 2019, p. 2).

Among the individual service branches, only the Air Force has conducted deeper investigations into the interactions between racial identity and the military justice system. The Inspector General of the Air Force published a report in 2020 that found racial disparities in multiple areas, including administrative separations and promotions. It found that “young Black enlisted members are almost twice as likely as White enlisted members to be involuntarily discharged based on misconduct” (The Inspector General Department of the Air Force, 2020, p. 3). An additional study undertaken by RAND Corporation’s *Project Air Force* concluded that disparate treatment was “at least partly responsible” for racial disparities in both Article 15 punishments and court-martial referrals in the Air Force (Anwar et al., 2024, p. 44).

Despite this body of evidence, none of the government sources mentioned explicitly point to racism as a source of these disparities across the military justice continuum. In 2019, The GAO stated that it lacked corroborating information and additional statistics required to make conclusions about the causes of the disparities. It was noted and recommended that the DoD conduct a “comprehensive evaluation” of causes (GAO, 2019, p. 79). However, the DoD’s IRT concluded that “[the] DoD is left with aggregate numbers showing disparities, but with little insight into precisely where these processes the disparities are happening or why,” although it implored DoD leadership to take action nonetheless (DoD, 2022, pp. 19–20).

This paper posits that asking Black veterans to share their experiences elucidates some of the sources of racial disparities in military discipline and separation and that structural racism embedded in the military’s culture, expectations, and disciplinary systems helps explain why these racial disparities persist. Because race is a social rather than a biological construct (Du Bois, 1999), racial disparities serve as an indicator of structural inequality—an uneven and unfair distribution of power and resources—within our society and institutions. Structural racism refers to “the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice... [which] reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources” (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 1453).

Although the DoD, as a matter of official policy, has a long history of racial inclusion, it can still maintain a structurally

racist environment if it is understood that the military is viewed as a white institutional space. White institutional space is created when people of color are excluded during the formative period of an organization, and when White people during this era create “institutional logics (i.e., norms of operation, organizational structures, curricula, criteria for membership and leadership), which imbed white norms into the fabric of the institution’s structure and culture” (Bracey & Moore, 2017, p. 285). For the first centuries of the U.S. military’s existence, Black service members were either prevented from serving or segregated, and many of the military norms that arose during that period continue to operate (CVLC, 2022).

When Black people and other people of color are excluded during the formation of the organization’s norms and culture, white institutional norms become characteristics of the institution, which serve to mask racism and discrimination within seemingly race-neutral policies (Bracey & Moore, 2017). For example, until recently, military policies on hairstyles did not accommodate natural hairstyles for Black service members, yet non-compliance with military grooming standards could be considered misconduct (Enokenwa et al., 2022). Another indicator of the military as a white institutional space is the persistent lack of diversity in military leadership, even decades following formal integration. In 2020, only 2 out of the 41 senior (four-star) military commanders were Black, with 43% of service members identifying as people of color (Cooper, 2020). Congressional nominations to the military service academies, which train future commissioned officers, remain overwhelmingly white (CVLC, 2021). Sociologist Victor Ray has called for a research agenda on organizations, arguing that organizations do not exist as race-neutral bureaucracies (Ray, 2019). Instead, “[s]eeing organizations as racial structures provides a descriptively more realistic picture of organizational formation, hierarchies, and processes” (Ray, 2019, p. 27). Racialized organizations shape individual agency within the organization, legitimate unequal access to resources, permit whiteness to become a credential, and decouple formal commitments to equity and inclusion from existing racial practice (Ray, 2019). Ray (2019) argues that more empirical research is needed at the meso level to understand the daily operation and distribution of resources that lead to institutionalized racial inequality. The present study answers both Ray’s call and the call of the IRT report to gain insight into Black veterans’ racialized experiences. Moreover, it seeks to better understand how structural racism operates in the military and contributes to worse separation outcomes for Black service members in comparison to their White counterparts.

METHODS

DESIGN

The focus of this study is to expand on Ray's (2019) implications of racial inequality in the military to determine how the U.S. military, as a purportedly race-neutral organization, discharges Black service members, creating racially unequal access to important material resources. For this study, the material resources are financial compensation, healthcare benefits, and other benefits and services provided by the VA. Although the military does not control benefits eligibility, it can reduce or eliminate a veteran's access by issuing an OTH or a General discharge. To expand upon recent quantitative studies regarding racial disparities in separation, this study interviewed 26 Black veterans about their lived experiences regarding military culture, discipline, supervisor authority, and access to legal help. The interview questions sought to find what the participants would attribute to their success if they were granted an Honorable discharge and what happened in cases where they earned a General or OTH discharge.

DATA COLLECTION

After obtaining International Review Board approval through Yale University (#2000035249), utilizing snowball sampling, participants were recruited through CVLC's client network and a Black Air Force Veteran who served as a key informant. Recruitment included calling, emailing, and advertising the study through an electronic mailing list of legal advocates and concluded when 26 participants were recruited. The researchers interviewed 26 participants between July and October of 2023. Interviews were conducted in person, virtually, or telephonically. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, gave informed consent to the study, and consented to being audio-recorded for transcription and data analysis. Participants answered questions about their experiences in the military and about their views on racial disparities in military outcomes, including what it was like to be Black in the military, their military jobs, experiences with promotion and discipline, their process of being separated, post-military life, and degree of access to VA services.

SAMPLE

The sample included 26 Black veterans who received either an Honorable, General, or OTH discharge status and excluded veterans who received their discharge as punishment following a court-martial. While prior research shows that there are racial disparities in those punitive discharge statuses, the present study focused on the administrative separations in which discretionary actors play a defining role. Administrative separations (Honorable, General, and OTH discharges) involve few due

process protections for the service member, while punitive separations (Bad Conduct and Dishonorable discharges) have similar due process protections for the accused as in civilian court.

Of the 26 veterans interviewed, 18 had an Honorable discharge, one had a General discharge, and seven OTH (three of which had been upgraded to Honorable post-service). Researchers interviewed 21 men and 5 women (self-identified gender; all participants identified as cisgender). CVLC's 2022 quantitative study on race and separations did not find an interaction between race and gender in statistical modeling. Therefore, interview questions did not attempt to differentiate between experiences based on gender.

The 26 participants served in each of the four primary service branches. Eleven respondents served in the Air Force, six served in the Marines, six in the Army, two in the Navy, and one in the Army National Guard. Because we recruited veterans using snowball sampling and a key informant was an Air Force veteran who contacted other Air Force veterans, the Air Force is overrepresented among the respondents compared with other service branches.

Veterans who received Honorable discharges provided information and perspectives on their paths to success and what they observed about their Black peers during their time in service. Additionally, several of these veterans completed over 20 years of service and rose to positions of authority where they participated in or oversaw the administrative separation process for others and offered their insight from both perspectives.

DATA ANALYSIS

Researchers took notes and transcribed each interview through the automated online transcription service Rev. They then compared the transcription to an audio review of each interview, edited for correction, and coded interview transcripts for emerging concepts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). After identifying consistent themes, interviews were line-by-line coded using the Dedoose qualitative coding software program.

FINDINGS

Military Culture Reflects Racial Biases in Civilian Society

As one of the nation's first institutions to abolish segregation, the U.S. military projects an image of a race-neutral meritocracy. For example, service members in the Army and Marines were long encouraged only to see green (the color of the uniform) rather than race (Maucione, 2020; McCoy, 2024). However, while it purports to guarantee equal opportunity, the U.S. military recruits its members

from civilian society, importing its complex racial history, including chattel slavery, state-sanctioned violence and intimidation, and discriminatory housing policies. Eleven participants (Air Force $n = 4$, Army $n = 3$, Marine Corps $n = 3$, National Guard $n = 1$) independently identified aspects of the military as reflective of a racially problematic society in contrast to a race-neutral enclave protected from the civilian world. They explicitly compared their military experiences to discrimination in civilian employment, behavioral monitoring, and discipline and punishment within the civilian criminal justice system. These comparisons emphasize the need for the DoD to recognize that the military is not a race-neutral institution where biases are left behind.

Mr. Williams, a Marine Corps veteran who experienced military sexual trauma and racist violence during the late 1980s, was discharged with an OTH and later received an upgrade to Honorable. He stated, when referring to the military and the actions of commanding officers, “It’s white America. It’s what they do. Smile in your face and stick you and stab you in your back ... there’s no surprise. There’s nothing different than what I’ve been dealing with all my life.” Mr. Nelson, who was Honorably discharged after serving nearly 10 years in the Army during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), stated in reference to his experience with White service members, “They don’t change because they joined the Army. They all still the same Americans ... For me, it is just like being [expletive] Black in America. It ain’t no different. The Army is America. It’s the same [expletive].”

Several participants drew parallels between the military and employment discrimination in civilian workplaces. Mr. Davidson described an insidious experience of discrimination in his military employment as a “heightened standard” for his work compared to his White peers. Mr. Davidson, who retired after 18 years in the Air Force, described a stressful career where he was one of the only Black people in his occupational specialty. His work was heavily scrutinized by White superiors, who also belittled and demeaned him—telling him to “sit out in the hallway while the big boys have their meeting.” Mr. Davidson stated:

Issues went from, if we were doing work, anything that was done, my work was always double checked or [I] had to keep correcting things that weren’t, that didn’t need [to be] corrected. Or if there was an award coming up, I was told last and then I had to rush around and try to get things done.

Mr. Davidson described being given less than the standard allotted time for bereavement after his mother passed away and intentionally being assigned work in a morgue after his loss, which he understood to be racist antagonism.

Mr. Turner served in the Army and the Air Force before honorably retiring after 22 years. Mr. Turner went on to a successful career in the corporate world and compared the impact of workplace discrimination in the military versus civilian employment:

Racism isn’t something that the Army or the military has a monopoly on ... I would just say in the military, because of such a controlled environment and people in leadership roles have such control over you and your career that is amplified, the effects of that is amplified because they can prevent you from progressing your career, prevent you from getting any kind of recognition, which can have an effect on you as a person.

While employment discrimination has wide-ranging effects on an individual’s life, the added control of the military employer compounds those effects for service members. For example, not only does the military determine a service member’s job, but it also decides in what area of the country (or world) a service member lives and the type of housing they reside in. Service members’ safety and lives, in and outside of combat, are held in the hands of their supervisors. Military employment is a way of life, not simply an occupation.

The participants in this study likewise compared military experiences to the civilian criminal justice system, including systems for policing and sentencing. In the military, supervisors can punish nearly any misconduct as a criminal violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, even when such conduct is not a violation of civilian law. The participants compared commanding officer discretion to the power civilian police exercise over Black individuals during traffic stops. They described being overpoliced for playing “excessively loud” music while off duty or for being late, while their White peers exhibited similar behaviors without facing the same consequences. Mr. Gibbs, a National Guard veteran, likened the type of discretion supervisors have to that of the police:

It’s kinda like, like when you get pulled over by a police officer ... it’s [up] to him what you gonna get charged for based on how he’s feeling. He has a whole list of stuff he can write you up for ... speeding, you didn’t have your seatbelt on, you didn’t use your blinker, but which ones he puts on that ticket is up to him. To me, it’s basically based on that same thing, whatever relationship you have with the admin and your unit is gonna put [in] your paperwork to show what type of soldier you were.

Mr. Scott also spoke about discipline being based on the whims of a commanding officer's discretion, stating, "Some of that decision, they could be just, they could have had a bad day ... they had a bad day." Mr. Carter expressed that officers may have rules they are supposed to follow, but informal structures of discipline and power are also at play, stating, "It's just like the police and them, you know what I'm saying? You have your code of conduct, but then you also have what you call rules, underground laws." Mr. Nelson believes that to get an OTH, "All [it] takes is for you to get on the wrong person's bad side."

Research on the civilian criminal justice system has shown that it is racism, rather than increased criminal activity, that leads to racial disparities in enforcement (Alexander, 2020). Similarly, Black service members are unlikely to be inherently predisposed to commit more infractions than their White counterparts. Structural bias and individual prejudice of decision-makers, therefore, likely contribute to the documented racial disparity within the military justice systems and explain Black veterans' comparisons of aspects of their own service to the civilian justice system. Far from being a race-neutral meritocracy, Black veterans identified military service, by and large, as reinforcing the racially discriminatory paradigms found in civilian employment and policing.

THE ABILITY TO ADAPT AND CONFORM TO MILITARY NORMS AS THE KEY TO ACHIEVING SUCCESS

The United States military has its own culture, with specific rules, norms, and codes of conduct, and it recognizes that younger service members require training to adapt. The 2022 IRT report acknowledges that its discretionary actors "exercise significant discretion in how to respond to misconduct and performance deficiencies exhibited by young and inexperienced enlisted members who are still adapting to the expectations of military service" (DoD, 2022, p. 21). The study participants described learning to navigate military culture as essential to achieving success. However, when an individual service member enters this culture, they are not stepping onto an equal playing field. The ability to adapt, conform, or assimilate into the military's culture is mediated by a variety of factors, including race, familiarity with white culture, prior life experiences, and access to mentorship. Seventeen study participants (Air Force $n = 8$, Army $n = 5$, Marine Corps $n = 4$) discussed issues related to adaptation to the military.

Code-switching, or adapting one's speech and behavior to maximize social acceptance in varied contexts, is a learned skill many Black Americans acquire to navigate the white spaces they encounter in different educational,

professional, and social contexts (Craig, 2016). Mr. Heyward described his pre-military experience with code-switching as an acquired skill essential to his process of acclimating and adapting to the military environment:

So for me personally, I code-switch quite often. So I could fit into pretty much any group... I know for others it was a little more difficult because not everyone's used to being in different types of groups... It's a skill that you develop and they didn't have that skill.

Other participants evoked the concept of performance before an audience as they explained how they were prepared to fit into military culture and life. Mr. Nelson described having to learn how to perform the role of a soldier. Speaking about his eight years of service, Mr. Nelson said, "Being in the Army was no different to me than being a rapper or being on Broadway" and that it was "Lights camera action!" when he put on his uniform. When we asked Mr. Nelson about his familiarity with this performance, he attributed it to his pre-military practice with adapting to a white culture, stating, "I just know how to maneuver in certain types of environments." Ms. Willis attributed her military success to pre-military practice performing in a different sort of environment with set expectations:

I came from a church background ... I wouldn't say a strict church background, but it was very disciplined. I was in all the choirs. We did performances and speeches and plays ... I was an usher, so it's standing up however many hours in a Black church service ... I was already disciplined before I went into the military.

Mr. Washington said, "Being able to conform is a big deal," and described how being a lighter-skinned Black person from a higher socioeconomic background positively impacted his ability to adapt to, and therefore succeed in, the military. These study participants all identified pre-military experience in either code-switching or performing to rigid expectations as integral to their success at adapting to military cultural expectations.

Many of the study participants stated that mentorship on cultural expectations was vital to their ability to adapt. Eleven of the participants (Air Force $n = 9$; Army $n = 2$) emphasized learning about the norms and military culture through mentorship as key to their success during their service. Mr. Nelson explained that he had immediate mentorship when he entered because his regimental commander was from his home neighborhood. Mr. Nelson stated:

“I had somebody to have my back. I had somebody to guide me and help me understand that ... and basically, what he told me straight up by his mouth, he was like, ‘the Army is no different than in the streets—the only difference is the snakes wear camouflage.’”

Ms. Jackson described how she learned to ‘play the game’ from her mentors and explained that she perceived a heightened standard for Black service member’s behavior and professionalism:

You stay sharp. Make sure you look sharp every day. You have to look better than everybody else. You need to make sure your uniform is ironed, clean, be there. Not just on time, but before time. If you want to excel, you need to stand out, but don’t stand out too much ... It’s all about perception. You come in looking clean, cook, make sure you’re saying, sir. Yes, ma’am.

Ms. Powers described how mentorship makes a difference for younger service members’ learning to adapt. She served as a mentor in her role as First Sergeant. In response to a young Black service member facing discipline for routine lateness, she stated, “Rather than just throw the book at this guy, I put the human lens on, then asked ‘if this was my younger brother or my son, what would I do?’” She learned he struggled with adjusting to the time change of his new base, leading to oversleeping, which was compounded by deep homesickness. Rather than resorting to discipline, she helped him resolve his jet lag and homesickness.

Eight participants (Air Force, $n = 6$; Army, $n = 1$; Marine Corps, $n = 1$) also described a prominent social network in the military that acted as a prophylaxis against discipline exclusively for White service members. According to Mr. Reid, discipline was based on “who you knew.” Multiple participants referred to this network as the ‘Good Ole Boys’ (GOB), a social web of White male service members, mostly higher ranking, who exercised informal power, control, and exclusion through their network ties. According to Ms. Bailey, an Air Force veteran, the benefits of the GOB system are:

Knowing there’s always a way, the answer is never really no... When you’re part of that system, even when you hear ‘no,’ you know that there’s a possibility. That possibility based on who I know and who they know, we can turn this ‘no’ into [a] ‘yes.’

However, the participants stated that they were excluded from membership in the GOB. Thus, it was not an available adaptive strategy for avoiding discipline, as it was for many

of their White peers while navigating military culture. The participants also shared examples of consequences for failing to adhere to military culture, which they analogized to white culture. Mr. Heyward explained how Black service members’ cultural norms were distinct from the military’s expected cultural norms and how failure to perform the expected norms could be detrimental, stating:

Black service members, we’re very vocal, we’re very animated as well, and sometimes we could be loud, we like to enjoy ourselves. So when we laugh, and we’re in a group of other Black people or other Hispanics, we exaggerate a little bit with how interesting or how funny or something that might actually be because that adds to how funny it actually is. That’s just the added flavor, so to speak.

Mr. Heyward detailed how this behavior was unfavorable and seen as ‘obnoxious’ by White peers and supervisors for not conforming to their standards. “They see you as a certain type of way and then they automatically use that against you or they’ll hold some preconceived notion against you based off what they think that behavior means.” Ms. Jackson described stepping in and mediating after a young Black service member had developed a reputation as unfriendly and having an ‘attitude.’ As it turned out, the ‘attitude’ was the service member’s emotional reaction after a peer made a racist joke about her husband. Ms. Jackson also identified the necessity of non-reaction to being discriminated against as key to conforming to military culture:

If they’re telling you things that you don’t like, don’t even show it on your face. Just give ‘em a head nod and say, I’ll work on that and then go figure it out. Don’t get into it. Don’t get combatant with ‘em because at the end of the day, you’re really not going to win.

In her leadership role, Ms. Powers attempted to protect a group of Black enlisted members who appeared to be categorically considered problematic. However, when she pointed out to a White commander that the lowest Enlisted Performance Report (EPR) performers were all ‘guys of color,’ he dismissively told her, “Those guys are knuckleheads.” Ms. Powers disagreed with that assessment, viewing the young soldiers’ conduct as a preventable result of a lack of support networks as well as reactions to racism. She stated,

“When you talk to those guys, it was like, oh, ‘nobody cares about me’ ... ‘Why does nobody care

about you?’ or ‘why do you feel uncared for?’... [and] most of the time it was simply that, ‘well, they don’t see me as a human being or me as a person.’”

Other participants echoed Ms. Powers’ assessment when they spoke about the mental and emotional burden of navigating the military culture as a Black service member. Mr. Davidson served for 18 years and retired with an honorable discharge because he learned to adapt by over-performing and preemptively mounting defenses for the heightened scrutiny he was subjected to at work. Working under these conditions was arduous and emotionally challenging. Mr. Davidson said, “Me and faith is the only reason I made it through the military” and “I made it through the military because I wanted to prove them wrong.” Whether Mr. Davidson did, in fact, ‘make it through the military’ is a matter of opinion. Mr. Davidson stated that he left the service after 18 years in part because of the racial harassment he experienced in service. He now receives a reduced pension. However, if he had served for two more years, he would have retired with a full pension.

Participants identified adaptation to military culture as more than simply adapting to the military but also to its white cultural overtones. Thus, Black veterans identified additional burdens of adaptation and additional consequences of failing to adapt that would not be experienced by White service members. Participants identified various factors that differentiated Black service members with successful careers from those who were involuntarily separated. These factors included pre-military experience with white cultural spaces, Black mentors who provided explicit in-service guidance on adaptation, or the ability to intuit the behavioral expectations of their White supervisors. They also provided examples that not adapting caused White supervisors to view them as obnoxious, knuckleheads, or having an attitude, all characteristics that could give rise to worse performance evaluations. Black service members must meet a double burden when it comes to military adaptation, making them more likely to be judged as having performance difficulties than their White peers, presenting a structural disadvantage from the first day of service.

EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL HARASSMENT

Although several participants interviewed stated that they did not experience explicit discrimination in service, many shared experiences of racist physical, emotional, and professional harassment. These experiences of racial harassment ranged from racist jokes to severe racially-motivated physical and sexual violence. Some participants spoke about White peers using blackface, racial slurs, and violent threats. Several participants described submitting

to an OTH discharge as a means to escape such traumatic and stressful environments.

The most egregious and violent experiences of racism for some of the participants occurred for those who served from the 1970s through the 1980s. Mr. Redding, a Marine Corps veteran who served in the 1970s at Camp Pendleton, California, described serving under a supervisor who was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan, as well as other organized White supremacist groups, openly operated at multiple military bases well into the 1980s (Askew et al., 2021; Board of Veteran Appeals, 2015; Fantz, 2021; McCoy, 2024). Mr. Redding experienced racist violence, including being threatened by White peers who described a murder and rape of a woman they had committed.

For Mr. Benson, problems with racist peers and supervisors began as soon as he joined the Marine Corps in 1983. Mr. Benson’s uncle, a Marine Corps veteran, warned him against joining because of the racism he experienced during his own time in service. Mr. Benson described a hostile environment where he was verbally degraded and hit by White instructors during boot camp. While stationed at Camp Lejeune, he overheard threatening conversations by White peers and, on another occasion, was physically attacked by White peers. He felt that he could not report any of this racialized abuse because he perceived that his leadership favored his White abusers. He recounted being written up for minor infractions, such as being late and not wanting to attend a work party.

Eventually, Mr. Benson tested positive for marijuana on a single occasion and was discharged with an OTH, although White members of his unit had received General discharges for marijuana use. Mr. Benson decided not to contest the OTH at the time, stating, “I couldn’t take it anymore. I had one year to go ... actually less than a year, I didn’t even want to stay there. I just said, ‘I’ll take the Other Than Honorable... I didn’t even care.’” It was not until he applied for VA benefits upon his arrival home that he understood how severely inhibited this discharge status had left him. After 20 years, Mr. Benson applied to have his discharge status upgraded but was denied.

Working under the threat of racist violence was a shared experience for Mr. Turner, a 22-year Army veteran who retired with an honorable discharge after serving from 1996–2018. He described:

My first boss, I believe, when I was in Korea, was racist ... He was so bad, so bad, and so toxic. But he created an atmosphere where even he had a Black officer under him, a major while I was the lieutenant at the time, who adopted his tactics to the point of actually—he threatened to kill a guy one day in the office.

Ms. Jackson, who served in the Air Force from 1996–2006, worked in a dental clinic with White doctors who were abusive toward the support staff, stating:

We work[ed] directly with a doctor, and most of the doctors, the dentist, they're White men. So I've seen instances where me and other Black airmen are working with these doctors, and they are just horrible. They're just throwing paper on the floor and talking crazy to us. One guy threw one of the instruments on the table, and it almost hit me ... [and] I go to the people, I go to the superiors or I go to someone like my supervisor or something, and I'm asking, 'Hey, can you change me around?'"

Ms. Jackson then explained her leadership's lack of response to complaints of mistreatment made by Black service members when compared to White service members. She asked:

Can you change me and get me with somebody else? 'No, you just stick it out. He's just having a bad day.' That's what I get. But soon as Kylie or Pam, (White women) they're getting their feelings hurt. They're crying, [then its] 'oh, let's move you around. Let's change you around. It's okay. Let's change you around. Can you just be a little bit more lenient on them?' What the hell?

Eventually, Ms. Jackson resigned herself to the reality of racialized treatment and its consequences in the clinic, stating, "We didn't even combat it or fight it. You're just like, okay, it's going to happen. It's going to happen."

Study participants from more recent eras of service described racist jokes as a predominant form of harassment. Mr. Frank, a young Navy veteran who served from 2016–2020 and was separated with an OTH, talked about hearing White peers make racist jokes in the dorms, which served as his home in the service. Mr. Heyward, a Marine Corps veteran who served from 2011–2015, spoke about White peers using racial slurs casually and took the position that these incidents were so commonplace they did not necessarily stand out as malicious:

He's called me the N-word a few times, but it was never out of anger or hate, just drunk and probably used to saying it. But that was my experience overall, not overt or malicious. Racism is just stupid White country kids who are doing what they're used to doing, talking the way they're used to talking...But the other guy, just stupid racist jokes, I can't even think of any off the top of my head, like relegating Black people to monkeys.

Mr. Heyward adapted the ability to have a sense of humor about these incidents, an emotional strategy for tolerating them. Mr. Nelson, an Army veteran who served from 1997–2005, emphasized that the harassment began at the outset of his service, stating, "My first incident, I was probably in the Army 6 months, man and I had a White lieutenant call me boy." Mr. Reid, an Air Force veteran who served from 1998–2007, described an incident at the beginning of his service that set the tone in his workplace when they went out to eat together as an office:

One time as simple as ordering drinks. So the waitress comes around to me and I ordered Dr. Pepper. I'm, I like Dr. Pepper. And this young lady, uh, from Nebraska looked at me and said, 'Dr. Pepper, I thought Black people drank fruity drink.' I said, 'what?' She said, 'you know, like, there's orange on the menu, I figured you'd want the orange.' ... and I'm realizing that the whole table is kind of watching the exchange and no one said a word. A couple people are smirking. And, you know, and again, that, that kind of set the tone. I don't think I had been in the office 2 months when that happened.

Mr. Reid's anecdote highlights not only the experience of being stereotyped but also the lack of reaction or protection from one's peers, the social expectation of tolerating this treatment, and the exhausting and unfair experience of such conduct. Being subject to routine physical violence, threat of violence, or harassment in the form of jokes, racial slurs, and racial stereotypes were all too common experiences of the Black veterans interviewed for this study. The DoD has had ample evidence of severe racist harassment at the hands of KKK leaders on bases such as Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton, and yet there has been no remedy en masse for the Black veterans who survived this abuse as they served their country.

LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT SEPARATION AND BENEFITS PROCESS

The study participants described a lack of access to information about the separation and benefits process, and it was clear through several of their stories that they did not fully understand their rights during the process or the consequences that OTH or General separations had on access to post-service benefits. Without clear information required to navigate the separation process, Black service members are at a significant disadvantage with regard to accessing post-service benefits. What information Black veterans did access often arose through informal social networks rather than official sources. Mr. Scott and Mr. Nelson describe having known about only two of the five discharge statuses at the start of their service. Mr. Scott said:

All I knew was honorable and dishonorable, and then I had a friend that got discharged for General Under Honorable Conditions or something. I was like, what in the hell is that? ... So honestly, I didn't have any clue.

Mr. Nelson stated:

I'm going to tell you ... the regular person's general knowledge is you get an honorable discharge or you get a dishonorable. I don't think a whole lot of people know about General, Other [Than] Honorable ... That's some [expletive] you got to want to know. It's not no [expletive] that's told to you.

The fact that misconduct too insignificant to result in a Dishonorable discharge may nonetheless cause a service member to be separated and deprived of veterans benefits is not common knowledge to all. Mr. Nelson stated, "In order to obtain this information before it becomes relevant to their own circumstances, service members have to intuit the need to seek out this information." Ms. Bailey elaborated on the need to do one's own research as a Black service member to understand the consequences of one's options, referencing the common scenario where individuals accepted an OTH discharge out of fear:

So if you don't know what your options or rights are and [you] go off of what someone tells you, then maybe as an African American male or female or minority facing discharge, [you think] let me get out of here. Let me just avoid jail time, or let me avoid this worst-case scenario that I have in my head and take what they're offering versus trying to fight and figure out on my own what my options are.

She goes on to discuss how having a brother who also served in the military led her to seek out the necessary information to better advocate for herself and others, acknowledging that solely relying on the military to give the necessary information could lead to poor outcomes. Unfortunately, informal information channels are not always accurate. For example, Mr. Turner mentioned learning about different discharge statuses and processes at the 'water cooler', or unofficial information networks, stating:

So you find out not through official channels, but you find out through the rumor mill, oh, you can do what?... and of course, inaccurately delivered information... But I also found out about, hey, oh yeah, you can get it changed up six months out, just got to file paperwork.

The notion that a discharge status can automatically be upgraded 6 months after separation, while a prevalent rumor, is a myth. Service members who rely on such 'water-cooler talk' may accept 'bad paper' discharges and find later that an upgrade is unlikely. Ms. Jackson identified that, but for her own discernment, she could have wound up in just that situation. Had she not done her own research, which directly conflicted with information from her peers, she would have accepted a less fruitful separation agreement. Ms. Daniels discussed stepping in for Black service members who did not have access to information or mentorship to help them through discipline or separation, and detailed the importance of self-educating on military protocol and regulations, specifically when it came to the separation process:

Know the AFI [Air Force Instructions] and the regulations. Not only know the AFIs and regulations on your job and everything, but know finance. You need to know finance's job, and you need to know legal's job because you might need them... You have to know those things. So unfortunately, they have to get out there and learn that information to protect themselves. And a lot of times they're not getting that information until it's too late.

Ms. Daniels and other participants emphasized the need to proactively amass information about internal military operations. They emphasized not relying on formal channels to learn what one needs to know to navigate a separation successfully. Study participants spoke of not understanding their rights and a lack of competent and thorough legal representation during the discharge process. They also stated that without a mentor or an understanding of the process, it was easy to be taken advantage of. Several participants described the discharge process for veterans who separate with an OTH or General as akin to a plea bargain in the civilian justice system. Although there is the circumstance of separating OTH in lieu of court-martial, which essentially is a plea deal, most OTH discharges are not equivalent to a plea deal and have no similar protections. Mr. Reid, a 20-year Air Force veteran, said:

I've seen a lot of people get kicked outta the military. Yeah, I've seen a lot of people get outta the military and take a General to not take something worse or the threat of something worse because they don't even know the rules of the military. So, you know, you could, you could threaten well, 'we'll put you in corrective custody'... They'll scare you. I've seen 'em scare people and say, 'Hey, you better, it's exactly like a plea deal.'

Mr. Reid went on to explain that:

Even though you're in the military, you still don't know how the military works, and when being threatened with a court-martial, most veterans would rather take a less than honorable discharge because a court-martial is just like a courtroom in [in] the United States of America.... 'We'll give you probation or you can run the risk of getting 20 years.' So of course, everyone not knowing if they're guilty or not, depending on what it is, you say, 'oh, well give me the lesser.' Right. Because you don't know what they're gonna throw at you...they give you a plea deal, for lack of a better word, to get back home to mom. 'Well, here, sign it.'

Ms. Powers, an Air Force veteran who served as First Sergeant of her unit, therefore, was heavily involved in the discipline and administrative separation process, said, "I witnessed several, 'you better take this [non-judicial punishment], you better take this Article 15, or we're going to court-martial you.'" Mr. Lowery, a Marine Corps veteran, said that he was told his OTH discharge had very serious consequences:

[I] was told that because I was getting, a[n] Other Than Honorable, and this is what they told me whenever I was signing the paper...that it was a felony. It was a felony. Like we was felons. That was a felony charge and that would be on our permanent books forever.

Despite what Mr. Lowery was told, an OTH is not a felony, but the fact that this is something he was told and believed exemplifies the lack of information and representation available to Black service members. Black service members' accounts of misinformation and lack of information about the separation process and benefits system clearly indicate a need for a remedy for those who end up with OTH discharges. By the time a Black service member reaches the point of separation, they have already been subject to structural racism or deliberate racism that is likely to impact their experience of the separation process and their separation outcome. After trying to navigate an uneven playing field while adapting and conforming to military culture, lacking equal access to mentorship networks necessary for navigating advancement and mediating experiences of discipline, and potentially having experienced racial harassment in the forms of employment discrimination, racist jokes and slurs, and sometimes physical violence or the threat of violence, far too many Black veterans leave the service with a discharge status

that renders them unable to access the benefits they earned.

DISCUSSION

The experiences of 26 Black veterans reveal myriad ways that racism operates within the United States military. Black veterans see the military as reflective of employment discrimination and racialized policing in civilian society and emphasize the ability to adapt and conform to its white cultural norms and expectations as key to accessing an Honorable discharge. They describe experiences of overt racial harassment and challenges when accessing information about the separation and benefits process to their detriment. The DoD has already internally investigated the role of discretionary actors in pervasive racial disparities in the military and stated that these actors "bear ultimate responsibility and accountability for the climate and culture of their organizations" (DoD, 2022, p. 33).

The IRT made recommendations to the DoD to remedy the racialized effects of discretionary actors for current and future service members. These recommendations include increased training for decision-makers, enhanced procedural protections for service members facing disciplinary action or separation, and improvements to data collection to quickly identify and ameliorate disparities (DoD, 2022). These recommendations, if implemented, could help reduce racial disparities in separation in the future. However, none of these recommendations would provide a remedy to those veterans who have already suffered racial bias from previous service.

Black veterans deserve a remedy for unjust discharge statuses resulting from structural racism and deliberate discrimination during their service. However, the discharge review boards have a long history of denying discharge upgrade applications from Black veterans who identify bias or discrimination as factors in their separations (Nordstrom, 2014), although a model for a more just discharge upgrade process exists. Currently, the DoD offers veterans with misconduct-based discharges 'liberal consideration' when they allege that their misconduct was influenced by a mental health condition or experience of military sexual trauma in service. The DoD instructs its review boards to consider the veteran's testimony about their experience, even if the official military record cannot corroborate those experiences. The guidance instructs the review boards to consider evidence from sources outside the veteran's official record. Additionally, the boards are encouraged to consider evidence of behavior changes and the misconduct itself as possibly corroborating the existence of a mental

health condition. However, the DoD offers no similar guidance for experiences of racial bias in service.

Veterans who allege discriminatory treatment in service do not benefit from any guidance instructing the boards to favorably consider their testimony, external evidence of bias at their base, or their in-service behavior as evidence of systemic or individual racism. As a result, veterans who seek to upgrade discharges based on experiences of racial discrimination face an uphill battle, with their applications denied at rates far higher than similar claims sounding in mental health or military sexual trauma.

Black veterans applying for upgrades who served on bases (e.g., Camp Pendleton, Camp Lejeune, and Fort Liberty—formerly known as Fort Bragg) during eras of known Klan or other white supremacist activity, should be given special consideration or uniformly retroactively upgraded because of the documented racial violence that took place at these locations. The DoD should issue guidance to the discharge review boards, specifically governing standards of proof and credibility determinations, and grant ‘liberal consideration’ to veterans who argue that racism impacted their military separation. Because much of the evidence will not be documented by the official military record, the DoD must instruct the boards to give weight to the veteran’s testimony when it corresponds to the themes outlined in this study.

The DoD should instruct the boards to consider it in the veteran’s favor when they testify that recorded misconduct occurred because they struggled to adapt to military culture, received differential punishment compared to White members, were held to a different standard, and experienced explicit racial harassment and violence while serving. The DoD, The Department of Veterans Affairs, and Congress should heed the Connecticut Veteran Legal Center’s recommendations in the 2022 *Discretionary Injustice* report. Due to the DoD’s inattention to the implications of structural racism on discharge status, too many of our nation’s Black veterans live without access to sustaining benefits and bear the burden of a stigmatic discharge for which they were not at fault. Black veterans deserve to live with adequate financial means, affordable healthcare, safe and secure housing, and peace of mind.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. military historically held itself out as a race-neutral institution, yet quantitative studies reveal a persistent racial disparity in military discipline and discharge status (DoD, 2022; CVLC, 2022). The 26 Black veterans who participated in this study reflected that they perceived military culture and disciplinary systems as similar to U.S. civilian culture—

i.e., that racial biases existed and were pervasive. They identified an ability to adapt to white cultural expectations as a factor that influenced successful military service, and they identified experiences of racial harassment and the lack of accurate information about the separation process as detrimental to their success. These interviews support the view that the U.S. military operates with a structural bias that explains why Black service members receive a disproportionate share of ‘bad paper’ separations.

ETHICS AND CONSENT


This study (#2000035249) was approved by the Yale University Institutional Review Board.

COMPETING INTERESTS


The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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