

“Bringing Them Back One Song at a Time”: A Qualitative Program Evaluation of
Operation Song

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Human Performance

Middle Tennessee State University

May 2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my husband who stood by my side and supported me through all the sacrifices that we made so that I could follow this dream. I would never have started or finished this without you. I also dedicate this to my daughter in hopes that she may be inspired to live boldly and never be afraid to change directions. I also dedicate this to the amazing men and women who have served and currently serve in the military, both in my family and in those I have met through the years. You all give me the drive to keep fighting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Steven Estes, Dr. Hilary Miller, and Dr. Rudy Dunlap for all of your guidance and patience throughout this process. I am incredibly grateful to be finished, but learning from each of you throughout this experience has reiterated my desire to grow as an academic and researcher.

I want to also thank my family and friends who are either active duty in the military now or have been in the past. Thank you for endlessly helping me work through the questions and clarification that has helped me make sure this dissertation has as much specific language and clarification as I can possibly create as a civilian.

I also want to thank Operation Song for letting me dive deeply into the nuts and bolts of the organization. I hope this dissertation provides research that will help the organization continue it's wonderful mission.

ABSTRACT

The diversity of today's military service members and veterans offers a unique opportunity for community-based organizations to be evaluated as complementary and alternative programs. These activity-based services may enhance or support federal programs or may function as a different option when those programs are not effective. Operation Song is a non-profit organization based in Nashville, TN that facilitates songwriting programs for military service members, veterans, and their families. The goal of the organization is "to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies and opportunities for self-expression. We use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses, to improve the quality of their lives and facilitate successful transitions to civilian life." This dissertation offers a mixed-methods approach to a qualitative program outcomes evaluation of the veteran specific programs provided by Operation Song. Through an inductive-deductive approach, seven themes of outcomes were discovered from 63 different participant perspectives. The connection between these outcomes and organizational goals was found to be positively related. Overall findings seek to add to the evidence-based literature emphasizing the benefits of activity-based community programs like Operation Song that serve military service member and veteran populations, as well as their families.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Operation Song is that warmup, you know. That warmup to create you. To create that comfort zone to get you started talking about what's wrong. It gives you a way to talk about it. . .it's a precursor, but it's so much more than that. I mean it. I could walk into my therapist now and talk to her a whole lot more effectively because of Operation Song.

– Wyatt

Operation Song

Operation Song is a non-profit songwriting organization that started in 2012 with a mission “to empower veterans and active-duty military to tell their stories through the process of songwriting” (Operation Song, n.d.). The goals of Operation Song, as defined by the organization, are as follows:

Our overall goal is to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies and opportunities for self-expression. We use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses, to improve the quality of their lives and facilitate successful transitions to civilian life (Operation Song, 2020).

The organization was founded by a professional songwriter from Nashville, TN after touring with Armed Forces Entertainment Tours on military bases and installations around the world (Operation Song, n.d.). Inspiration from the stories and challenges of military service members led to the idea that “transforming their story into a song might help them process seemingly random and chaotic events and emotions of their service and give them some order, perspective, and validation” (Operation Song, n.d.). The program originally took place in collaboration with a local Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) music therapy program and has since expanded to retreats throughout the country; however, the majority of services are hosted in Nashville, TN. Sessions often

take place in collaboration with the VA, local universities, military installations, and music organizations that are typically located in the local communities in which participants live.

Over the course of a day, a weekend, or extended weekly programs, the Operation Song experience encourages participants to share their stories while professional songwriters turn these stories into songs. These songs become creative outlets that put words to the intangible memories and create structure through a combination of music and storytelling. Operation Song encourages a transformation of the experiences military service members and veterans (MSMV) are struggling to process from their time in service or beyond through extended weekly programs, virtual writes, and retreats. Operation Song services are facilitated specifically for military veterans, active-duty service members, caregivers or spouses, and Gold Star families (family members of military service members who have died during their military service). The organization has organically progressed from the one weekly program of songwriting at a local VA medical center to a variety of programs that has collectively written over 850 songs with veterans, active duty service members, and families from all eras dating back to WWII.

Operation Song is one of many non-profit organizations that do not claim to be therapeutic, but which actively focus on helping MSMV and their families improve their quality of life. The organization does not function as a clinical therapy program and outcomes are not documented as part of a patient's progress plan. And yet, participants often say that Operation Song "changed my life" (Operation Song, n.d.). The quote to start this chapter came from a participant in Lauber (2018) that helped identify the Operation Song core experience as "a catalyst to invoke personal change" (Lauber, 2018,

p. 44). Participants like Wyatt (all participant names have been changed to a random generated name or a chosen alias by the participant) described the Operation Song programs and retreats as a jump off point that led to a variety of personal changes for each individual. Five key themes described the essence of the experience: a setting that promoted authenticity, the act of songwriting, the influence of uniquely skilled songwriters, the experience of unexpected emotional outlet, and a sense of trusted social support. Participants shared stories of finding “a new sense of purpose and a decreased sense of guilt” (Lauber, 2018, p. 57). Others described the experience as one that opened them up for progress in other therapies and a willingness to try new activities (Lauber, 2018).

Community-Based Non-Profits & MSMV

Operation Song was founded based on an idea that military service members and veterans might find a sense of “order, perspective, and validation” by “transforming their story into a song” (Operation Song, n.d.) All program formats use songwriting as the activity of intervention. Songwriting has been found to help individuals structure traumatic memories (Orth, 2004), decrease depression and anxiety symptoms (Baker et al, 2015), and help individuals restructure a positive sense of self (Baker et al, 2015; Tamplin et al, 2016). Similar non-profit programs exist to provide services for MSMV through other forms of activity such as river running (Dustin, Bricker, Arave, Wall, & Wendt, 2011), fly fishing (Craig, Alger, Bennett, & Martin, 2020), and surfing (Caddick, Phoenix, & Smith, 2015). Like Operation Song, these community-based programs use purposeful and enjoyable activity as interventions intending to improve a variety of life functions for MSMV.

These community-based leisure and recreation programs are driven by experiential development and are highly influenced by social and cultural integration, which has been identified as important for MSMV during the transition from military to civilian life. These services have been associated with social connection, psychological improvements, physiological benefits, physical health, practical skills, and cognitive improvements (Fenton et al., 2017). These settings offer unique environments that can address the diversity of needs for MSMV who choose not to seek clinical treatment, who are not receiving benefit from traditional services, or who may not necessarily require therapeutic goals but continue to experience ongoing difficulties. These are not presented in this dissertation as a replacement to traditional forms of MSMV therapies but are discussed as complementary alternatives to improve or enhance services focused on addressing the needs of MSMV.

Although a significant majority of post-9/11 veterans have identified pride in their military service and felt they had a step up in life because they were in the military, 44% of these same survey participants identified that their overall transition out of the military back to civilian life was difficult (PEW, 2011). Studies focused on the ongoing transition for veterans from prior eras are limited. Veterans are identifying "some to extreme difficulty" during the past 30 days in "finding meaning or purpose in life", "enjoying or making good use of free time", "belonging in 'civilian' society", "taking part in community activities", and several variables associated with maintaining relationships (Sayer et al. (2010, p. 595). The Department of Veterans Affairs has found that two-thirds of veterans continue to identify ongoing difficulties adjusting to civilian life following military service (VA, 2018). For military service members who experience combat, an

intertwined connection between the positive memories and the traumatic memories of wartime service adds another layer of complication to the recovery process (Junger, 2015).

By promoting and facilitating leisure and recreation activities each of these community-based organizations provide services that help participants experience something unique and beneficial. This “something unique and beneficial” aspect of these activities in some cases rises to the point of being a therapeutic intervention. Systematic investigation into the nature of these outcomes is required, however, to determine the quality of the intervention. With the growth and proliferation of Operation Song since its inception in 2014, it is arguably a good time to evaluate the program.

There is ample evidence that Operation Song has positive impacts for many of those involved in its programs. This dissertation seeks to identify what these outcomes are for military veterans through a qualitative program outcomes evaluation in order to understand and evaluate these services.

Qualitative Program Outcomes Evaluation

A program evaluation is a purposeful inquiry into the “activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs” (Patton, 2015, p. 18). Information is collected to help with organizational decision making, to help analyze effectiveness of programs, and/or to help guide direction of future programming (Patton, 2015). Qualitative program evaluation is used to look at why something is accomplished, how it is accomplished, and/or what it is accomplishing (Patton, 2015). This can be achieved through a variety of methods that are designed based on the purpose of the research. Program evaluation can be broken down into two major categories: formative and summative (Kushner, 2005).

Formative evaluation is focused on program improvement (Kushner, 2005). This type of program evaluation takes place either before a program is implemented or during the delivery of services (Mathison, 2005a). The purpose is to provide feedback focused on improving services (Mathison, 2005a). Process evaluations are a form of program evaluation that answer the question of how an organization accomplishes the goals it sets out to achieve. This specific application of evaluation focuses on program operations and the process of how a program produces outcomes and results (Patton & Herman, 1987). By examining how the process of a program is implemented, process evaluations seek to understand whether or not a program is functioning as intended (Zint, n.d.).

Summative evaluation is focused more specifically on policy development and decision making (Kushner, 2005). This type of program evaluation takes place at the end of programs or after completion (Mathison, 2005b). Outcomes evaluations are a form of program evaluation that answer the question of what has been accomplished as a result of the program. Outcomes evaluations seek to determine the impacts and outcomes of a program intervention (Patton, 2015). This method of program evaluation is important in capturing the diverse differences of individual outcomes, as well as the common patterns that exist among the combined sources of meaning derived from participant perspectives (Patton, 2015). Outcomes evaluation also looks into the extent to which the program is actually achieving these outcomes (Zint, n.d.). For this dissertation, the focus will be on what is being accomplished according to the participants of Operation Song and whether or not these outcomes connect with defined organizational goals.

Design

Operation Song has described a theory of what the programs and retreats intend on accomplishing as specified through the organizational mission, vision, and goals. The mixed-methods approach to this dissertation enables this theory to be looked at from a level of complexity that considers multiple angles for evaluation of outcomes. The outcomes described by participants are not cut and dry descriptions of gains or losses based on a standardized scale of measurement. The outcomes are deeply personal and qualitative evaluation enables an ability to look beyond statistics at a level of inquiry that accounts for individual differences in perspectives. Operation Song does not function as a clinical service that analyzes success or failure based on the goals met as part of a documented treatment plan and yet, participants say the programs “changed my life” (Operation Song, n.d.). Assessing what changes influence an individual’s life is difficult to accomplish through linear data collection and analysis.

In a mixed methods design, both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to achieve the goals of the research question(s) and purpose. Quantitative methodologies take an objective/positive stance towards research where objective meaning differs from the subjective realities for participants (Crotty, 1998). These subjective meanings are important but are considered less important than more scientific explanations. In this dissertation, quantitative data exists in the form of yes/no questions from proprietary Operation Song participant questionnaires. These methods seek to identify standardized outcomes, but do not necessarily provide a descriptive context that fully considers what the outcomes mean. These findings provide a starting point to direct data collection and

analysis. Qualitative methods will also be incorporated in order to further explicate the findings.

Qualitative data gives light to the meanings that are not fully able to be explained through quantitative methods by adding context to “make sense of the numbers and to place the results in a larger community” (Patton, 2015, p. 179). Qualitative methodologies take a constructionist/subjective stance towards research where meaning making is a construction, regardless of scientific explanation or subjective meaning (Crotty, 1998). Understanding is created through an equal emphasis on both scientific explanation and subjective meanings. In searching for the outcomes of a community-based songwriting organization that implements creative and culturally immersive programs, qualitative evaluation is required to understand what outcomes are constructed through participant perspectives. Qualitative data is collected in this dissertation through analysis of open ended participant questionnaires and survey, review of historical interviews on Operation Song, and new interviews conducted for purposes of further saturating the developing theory of outcomes.

The mixed methods design of this dissertation enhances validity by blending the individual strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative methods into an independent strategy (Patton, 2015). This establishes triangulation and adds strength to the overall study (Patton, 2015). Triangulation is “the use of a variety of data sources in a study” (Patton, 2015, p. 136). Patton (2015) describes an importance in looking for any information that answers the research question in a program outcomes evaluation. This dissertation will construct a theory of outcomes as described from participant perspectives and will compare those outcomes to the organizational goals as defined by

Operation Song. The overall goal of Operation Song will be broken down into five measurable pieces for better analysis of whether or not a relationship exists.

Research Purpose & Questions

Previous research indicated that participants of Operation Song experienced personal change as a result of the program (Lauber, 2018). My personal and professional experience with the organization combined with the unanswered questions from my previous masters thesis inspired this dissertation. This research project seeks to discover what these outcomes are for participants in Operation Song programs and whether or not these outcomes are consistent with those the program's founders envisioned. With the goals of Operation Song specifying nothing about being an independently therapeutic intervention, the findings from previous research on this organization warrant further inquiry into the evaluation of program outcomes.

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran specific programs and compare these outcomes to what the program's founders envisioned. Through an exploration of perspectives held by veteran participants, findings seek to identify outcomes and the relationship of these outcomes with organizational program goals. Operation Song is offered as an example of how activity-based community organizations can serve military service members, veterans, and their families through enjoyable experiences such as songwriting.

In order to meet the purpose of this dissertation, a qualitative mixed-methods framework is employed to answer the two overall research questions:

1. What are the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran focused programs?

2. Do these outcomes align with goals as defined by the founders of Operation

Song?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The power of Operation Song is really simple. You take a veteran who has multiple flashbacks and all types of little stories and he [songwriter] pulls em' out and he's able to take that mess that is in their head and combine it into a 3-4 minute song that hits every veteran right between the eyes because it's exactly what they are thinking. -

Migali

Operation Song

Operation Song is a Nashville based non-profit organization with a mission “to empower veterans, active duty military, and their families to tell their stories through the process of songwriting” (Operation Song, n.d.). Their vision is “to become the premier songwriting organization serving the active duty and veteran community, to expand our programs stateside and overseas, and to train others in our model” (Operation Song, n.d.).

The goal of the organization is:

Our overall goal is to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies and opportunities for self-expression. We use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses, to improve the quality of their lives and facilitate successful transitions to civilian life. (Operation Song, 2020). For purposes of evaluation, the organizational goal of Operation Song will be

broken down into individual pieces for measurement based on my background as a recreational therapist where goals are specific, focused, and measurable. The overall goals of Operation Song are written here in their isolated forms as follows:

1. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies

2. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of opportunities for self-expression
3. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses
4. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals improve the quality of their lives
5. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals facilitate successful transitions to civilian life

Operation Song was founded in 2012 when a professional songwriter who had toured military bases around the world with Armed Forces Entertainment Tours saw the potential power of “transforming their [veterans and servicemembers] story into a song” (Operation Song, n.d.). The idea that songwriting might help military service men and women find a sense of “order, perspective, and validation” (Operation Song, n.d.) drove the creation of Operation Song. The first sessions took place at a local VA medical center through a Recreation Therapy/Creative Arts therapy program. Operation Song was incorporated as a registered 501C(3) nonprofit in 2014. The board of directors was also created in 2014, followed by the hiring of an executive director, program director, and several contract employees to accommodate the demand and growth of programs several years later.

To date, Operation Song has written over 850 songs and has a goal of serving 150 participants in 2021. Sources of funding comes through grants, individual donors, and corporate support. Decisions for the organization are made collaboratively among the board with final approvals coming from the Chairman of the Board and Founder of

Operation Song. Operation Song songwriters are professional writers with a proven track record of commercial success along with the ability to create high-quality songs in a short amount of time. They also possess other intangible skills, most importantly the ability to create trust and a “safe space” according to participants where they felt comfortable enough to share throughout the Operation Song process. In addition, songwriters are recruited based on their interpersonal skills and genuine interest in helping others. Participants need no musical or writing experience, only the desire to tell their stories. There is never a charge for any of the programs. Operation Song participants are veterans, active-duty service members, and their families. Programs also focus on serving caregivers, Gold Star families, and establishing partnerships with treatment facilities to focus on military sexual trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder, or other diagnoses based on purpose of the collaboration. Operation Song has no age limit for participation. Songs have been written by WWII veterans all the way to currently active duty service members.

The core logic model (Patton, 2015) of Operation Song remains the same for all program types or specifications. This is a description of how programs are facilitated from start to finish with a connection of activities to processes and outcomes (Patton, 2015). The logic model of a program describes how a program intends to meet its goals and achieve the proposed outcomes (Rogers, 2005). For all Operation Song programs and retreats, the program model starts with referral, progresses to songwriter/participant pairing, and ends with the creation of a song. Participants are recruited based on the program, facility, and series purpose; however, all participants are chosen based on their interest in wanting to tell their story, a determined need to do so, or the interest of a

family member needing to take part. For clinical partner programs, participants are referred through their process. For non-clinical programs, referrals are made through word of mouth or individual reach outs. Once the program begins, songwriters are paired with a participant or assigned to a group program and are instructed to let the participant tell whatever story they choose. Although the majority of stories told have involved some aspect of military service, war, or loss, not every song written has been about a traumatic experience. In fact, there are many songs about happiness, hope, and humor.

The songs are not created with a predetermined goal, so the only consistency with themes exists within the experiences the participants choose to share. Once the songwriter and participant are paired, they work together to create a song that expresses the story chosen by the participant. Professional songwriters are natural storytellers by nature, so the partnership between these individuals and the participants creates a unique and creative pathway of telling the stories. Typically, the only people in sessions are the songwriter(s), the participant(s), and maybe one or two staff members from the facilities. At the end of all programs, the songs are shared, and every participant gets a copy of their song as a compact disc (CD) or digitally. Operation Song currently facilitates programs through four major categories:

1. **Extended Weekly Programs.** Eight-to-ten-week programs are hosted with veteran groups of eight or less at VA Medical Centers, DoD Installations, Vet Centers, and community facilities. Referrals for these programs take place within the hosting facility or program and is completed before the start of the Operation Song program. Sessions are either facilitated once a week for two hours for 10 weeks or are scheduled one or two times a month, ongoing throughout the year.

Although the format of sessions mold and adapt to the needs of each group, sessions progress from an initial “get to know you” ice-breaker session of sorts to facilitation of in depth writing and discussion. Throughout the extended programs, songwriters move the group from introductions to a collaborative production of reminiscence, structured writing, and musical composition that leads to the creation of each song. Within these group formats, peers and songwriters can add input, but the ultimate decision on all songwriting lies with the participant for his or her own song. The end of these extended programs culminates in a graduation ceremony where everyone’s songs are played in front of family, friends, staff, and other invitees. The ceremonies are different based on where the programs take place, but each participant always gets the opportunity to either speak to the crowd or stay seated while their song is played live by the songwriter or through a recording. If the participant chooses not to speak, the songwriter introduces the song and tells the background story. Sometimes participants choose to sing along. The recording of songs written in these extended programs either take place in recording studios in the Nashville area with participants in attendance or they are done by the songwriter off-site. Participants have input on the song throughout the entire process, so taking them to the actual recording studios continues the process until the song is fully produced. If this is not possible, the songs are always still produced with input from the participants. After graduation, participants get to keep a copy of their song.

2. **Local Retreats.** These one, two, or three day programs differ in timeframes but all have the same core process as the extended weekly programs. Participants are

introduced to their songwriter and are individually paired; they go somewhere to work together and create their song. The group eventually comes back together for a closing ceremony where the songs are shared. Participants all receive a copy of their song. Some of the retreats include the recording production of the song on-site or at a recording studio. Retreats have taken place in several different states where Operation Song songwriters and staff travel to facilitate in collaboration with local songwriters or hosts. Operation Song retreats take place in collaboration with universities, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers and Vet Centers, Department of Defense (DoD) military installations, and community facilities. The purpose of partnering with these non-clinical, community programs is focused primarily on Operation Song's goal to "facilitate successful transitions to civilian life" (Operation Song, 2020).

3. **VA National Retreats.** During these three or four day retreats, participants are flown in to Nashville, TN from various regions of the country along with a Music Therapist from one of the facilities within the VISN (Veterans Integrated Service Network). A VISN is a regional area of a grouping of VA Medical Centers and facilities. Participants for these programs apply within their facility and are chosen by Operation Song. These retreats still have the same premise of the local retreat program format with the same progression of songwriting tasks. The evening of the first night is dedicated to a meet-and-greet with musical performances and introductions of the songwriters to the veterans. The majority of the next day or two is spent writing with production taking place at a local recording studio so the participants get to see the process of their song come to

life in person. On the final day, the same closing ceremony as with other programs is conducted. In addition to the songwriting process, participants in this particular series of retreats are also taken to local historical and social experiences to add a cultural and recreational aspect that is unique to this series only.

4. **Virtual Programs.** During 2020, Operation Song chose to adapt programs to accommodate COVID-19 restrictions and began implementing virtual sessions. Virtual sessions have been completed in all forms – single day retreats, extended weekly programs, and several of the clinical partner programs. The same recruitment process and program implementation process exists in these programs with the adjustment that all interactions are done virtually through video conferencing services. The virtual programs have also expanded services to offer one-on-one virtual writes.

Measurement

Operation Song is a young organization. Consequently, program evaluation and measurement have consisted primarily of participant questionnaires along with testimonials made by participants. These questionnaires were designed to establish qualitative data for grant applications, to determine the greatest impact from the participant's point of view (Operation Song, 2019), and provide insight on program and service improvement. More formal assessments have been conducted including the Cohen Perceived Stress Scale for pre-test/post-test analysis; however, these have not been provided on a large-scale basis and cannot be used for analysis in this evaluation. As a masters thesis project, I conducted a phenomenological exploration of the experience of Operation Song. The experience itself was found to be “a catalyst to invoke personal

change” (Lauber, 2018, p. 44). Participants discussed positive things happening in their life following their Operation Song program or retreat. The experience was often described as one that helped with “finding closure, ‘connecting the dots’, and the overall processing experience” (Lauber, 2018, pp. 44-45). Participants somewhat described positive outcomes, but that was not the purpose of that research project. The key findings of that project offer a form of qualitative insight into the Operation Song experience:

1. **Setting Promoted Authenticity.** The setting of Operation Song was described as a place where participants felt genuine. Participants felt they could speak without judgment and felt they were “amongst friends” (Lauber, 2018, p. 46). Regardless of the physical location, the experience created its own setting where participants felt able to be their authentic selves.
2. **Unexpected Emotions.** Participants expressed a sense of amazement at what could be said in the short amount of time that a song is. The amount of detail and description that was put into these songs as condensed forms of stories led to emotions with “not much chance of there being a negative result” (Lauber, 2018, p. 49). Participants felt emotions they had not felt in some time and were not expected to feel during this experience.
3. **Trusted Social Support.** The impact of being with other veterans was important to the Operation Song experience. The social support experienced in this setting led to an increased realization of coping strategies and shared past experiences. The camaraderie described was also expansive to the Operation Song songwriters and personnel who were described as becoming “part of the squad” because of their ability to listen (Lauber, 2018, p. 51). The social support was not only

influenced by the other veteran participants, but also by the songwriters and Operation Song volunteers.

4. **Uniquely Skilled Songwriters.** The songwriters were found to be a huge impact on the experience. Their ability to help tell the participants' stories was led by the songwriters' ability to "truly listen" and make sense of the memories being shared (Lauber, 2018, p. 52). The fact that these songwriters were not just any amateurs and came from a background of "award-winning talent" also impacted the ability of participants in opening up (Lauber, 2018, p. 53). Participants described the songwriters as experts that they wanted to listen to.
5. **Songwriting.** The act of songwriting helped create a tangible outlet that the participants were able to share with others. All participants in Lauber (2018) discussed the impact of having something to give to another person that enabled the ability to get "a look into what I couldn't really say" (p. 54). Songwriting helped increase communication and create positive "posttraumatic growth" and was the direct activity that led to a connection of these influences (Lauber, 2018, p. 56).

Additional findings that did not fit within these themes were grouped under a category of "unique experiences" (Lauber, 2018, p. 56). These participant statements focused on outcomes and were less descriptive of the Operation Song experience. Participants identified a "new sense of purpose and a decreased sense of guilt" (p. 57), "a reduction of medications and an increased openness during talk therapy" (p. 58), an "increased ability to express themselves socially" (p. 59), and a drive that led to a sense

of being more outgoing, trying new skills, and being more social (Lauber, 2018). To date, this is the only official data collected and documented on Operation Song.

The Theory of Operation Song

For Operation Song programs, songwriting is the major activity component. Songwriting combines the act of storytelling with musical listening into an experience that may transcend each act on its own. In telling stories, meaning is created (Caddick, et al., 2015; Daniels & Boehnlein, 2015). Storytelling provides a narrative framework that structures memories and experiences into something that can be shared. These narrative frameworks are important for understanding the purpose and direction of the human experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). For MSMV, the sharing of stories has been found to help normalize the experiences of trauma through the creation of a collective group identity (Caddick et al, 2015). This is important in helping MSMV who are having difficulty transitioning from a world of understood expectations in the military to being able to find direction in the ambiguities of a new, civilian lifestyle. Storytelling in the form of facilitated reminiscence has also been found to show greater improvement in PTSD symptoms for military veterans than a standard psychotherapy group (Daniels & Boehnlein, 2015). Participants did better in standard therapy when they engaged in a life review group with other veterans first. Both of these studies do well in suggesting that the storytelling aspect of Operation Song may be one of the mechanisms that helps the organization achieve its goals of enhancing “traditional veteran therapies”, self-expression, and processing “service related issues, injuries, and illness” (Operation Song, 2020).

In addition to storytelling, songwriting is dependent on music. Musical listening impacts an individual's brain by activating communication between the areas where emotions and memories are housed (Tamplin et al., 2016). Because music activates these communication networks, this may assist with the reorganization of emotion and memory (Bensimon et al., 2012). Music improves social connection, sense of belonging, and social acceptance (Bensimon et al., 2012). Music defies cultural stigmas and language barriers (Orth, 2005; Bensimon et al., 2012) and creates a space where creativity can enhance communication. Group music settings offer an environment where the experiences of trauma can be processed more easily than in focused talk settings (Carr et al., 2012; Bensimon et al., 2012; Tamplin et al., 2016). Musical identities have also been found to be a part of an individual's sense of self that remains "intact despite other fractured identities" (Tamplin et al., 2016, p. 125). This is important in understanding why music can be such a breakthrough when used in programs like Operation Song that allow participants who have experienced negative life events or trauma to guide the transition of their story to a song. This might also help provide an understanding of music impacts Operation Song's ability to achieve goals of self-expression, improved quality of life, and transitional assistance for participants (Operation Song, 2020).

Sayer et al (2010) found that 56% of veterans surveyed identified "difficulty confiding or sharing personal thoughts and feelings" (p. 589). The ability to share one's life story and relate to others directly impacts the ability to feel a sense of self-worth, connection, and freedom. The act of songwriting exists as a creative means of purposefully restructuring and redefining stories. This method can help individuals find a sense of competency through the act of creating something meaningful. Songwriting has

been found to help individuals structure traumatic memories (Orth, 2004), decrease depression and anxiety symptoms (Baker et al., 2015), and has an influence on helping individuals restructure a positive sense of self (Baker et al., 2015; Tamplin et al., 2016). Songwriting activates autobiographical recall and residual identity (Tamplin et al., 2016), which can help create a logical and structured order to an inner dialogue that might be highly disordered. This is important in helping MSMV translate their past to their present while maintaining a positive sense of self after they leave the military. For Operation Song, songwriting is the core to the “creative and integrative methods” that drive the organization towards achievement of their goals, mission, and vision (Operation Song, 2020).

Over the course of a day, a weekend, or several months, Operation Song programs encourage participants to share their stories while professional songwriters turn these into tangible, creative outlets that express the memories and emotions as a song. These songs put words to the intangible memories and create structure through a combination of music and storytelling. For individuals who are struggling to process their experiences during military services and beyond, Operation Song programs encourage the transformation of these experiences.

The Impact of Military Demographics

Evaluation of programs such as Operation Song are needed to create evidence based justification for these services as viable complementary or alternative options to help MSMV. The demographic diversity of today's MSMV population is important to understand when analyzing the programs designed to meet their changing needs. The needs of each generation are different, the stories they need to tell are different, and the

ways they need to tell these stories are different. In order to understand the impact a program has on the MSMV participants being served, it is important to understand how current demographics differ from those in the past to be able to understand whether or not programs designed to serve MSMV populations are truly meeting their goals. It may be a thought for some that all veterans can share the same story, but this is far from true.

Age

Of the 20 million veterans alive today, 4.4 million have served since September 11, 2001 and over half of the living veteran population is under 65 years of age (VA, 2018). Post 9/11 veterans are the youngest group to utilize VA resources since the Vietnam War (VA, 2018). This transitions the interests of federal programs from the older veterans of Vietnam, WWII, Korea, and Desert Storm to the younger Post 9/11 generation. VA data shows that 75% of post-9/11 veterans are under 45 years old (VA, 2018). These age differences mean differences in family structures, educational or career goals, and interests in how/what services are needed from federal systems. Age differences also affect the cultures and societies of their lifetimes and the assistance resources available throughout the years. Increased awareness of treatments is also affected by age, as well as exposures to hazards during war. For Vietnam, one of these exposures is Agent Orange (Public Health, 2020). For OEF/OIF, two of these are traumatic brain injury and burn pits. Treatment preferences (Sayer et al., 2010), access to and usage of technology (Resnick et al., 2012), and a new emphasis on inclusion of national guard and reserve members (Sayer et al., 2010) – a population left out of many past benefits and research – all reflect the impact of generational differences on programs seeking to serve these individuals.

Gender

Gender roles are also changing with today's MSMV population. The United States military has been and still is dominated by male roles; however, women's roles in the military have moved from primarily serving in nursing or clerical positions during World War II to full involvement with all aspects of military service today. Women make up 10% of the entire military (VA, 2018) and the VA is adapting by providing women's services, military sexual trauma programs, and many psychology, social work, recreational therapy, and creative arts therapy programs that focus specifically on women's treatment groups. Although Military Sexual Trauma (MST) by no means is only a female issue, a majority of veterans being treated for this are women. Approximately 55% of women and 38% of men experience sexual harassment during their time in military service (PTSD, 2018). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) populations also have increasing service opportunities provided by the VA. Every VA facility has a veteran care coordinator focused on LGBT and related identity populations (Patient Care Services, 2020).

Benefits

Federal programs actively focused on the ongoing transition from active duty to veteran lifestyles have changed drastically through the years. Initial federal services following WWI focused on compensation for disability, insurance, and vocational rehabilitation (VA, 2018). Through the years these expanded to include educational benefits, unemployment benefits, improved medical care, home loan opportunities, pre-separation counseling, and an increasing focus in most recent years on improving access to care and increased/improved mental health services among others (VA, 2018).

Both the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) are increasing services to MSMV. The Veterans Health Administration now has a Transition and Care Management program that works as a partnership with DoD and VA “to transition the health care of injured and ill” MSMV and mobilized Reservists, and National Guard from military treatment facilities to VA facilities (VHA, 2017). The VA Office of Community Engagement was created to focus on establishing and developing partnerships in the community that support the mission of the VA (OCE, 2021). The Veterans Benefits Administration has a Solid Start Program that assists with the transition of newly separated service members by connecting resources, which also include the National Resource Directory (VBA, 2020). DoD has an Office of Warrior Care that expands transitional care to include adaptive sports, internships, caregiver programs, and connection to The National Resource Directory which houses information on a multitude of national resources (DoD, n.d.). These services exist to assist MSMV during their transition back into the communities they will now call home and have drastically improved throughout recent years.

However, just because federal services exist does not mean that MSMV know these benefits exist, how to access the benefits, nor does it mean they will use them. Zoli et al. (2015) found that 60% of post 9/11 veterans indicated that "navigating VA programs, benefits, and services" (p. ii) was the most significant challenge to their transition from the military.

Deployments

In addition to these changing demographics, multiple deployments and "prolonged periods of combat stress and explosive hazards" (Sayer et al., 2009, p. 703)

are increasing the stress placed on MSMV and their families. Deployments are long and service members often deploy repeatedly throughout their time in the military. The Pew Research Center (2011) estimates that approximately 60% of post 9/11 veterans have been deployed to combat zones and the majority have deployed more than once. Along with the increased risk of injury, military deployments often bring relationship issues into the equation. PEW Research Center (2011) found that 61% of post 9/11 veterans that had marital issues during deployment also had issues with community reintegration. Family is often thought of as a positive impact for MSMV; however, one study found that marriage had a negative effect on the military to civilian transition (PEW, 2011). The predicted community reintegration success rate of service members who were married during their military time decreased from 63% for those who were not married to 48% of those who were (PEW, 2011). This is a dramatic decrease but does make sense when thinking about how a family unit functions. Marriage is not an individual entity; it is a joint connection between two people plus the addition of any children, dependents, siblings, parents, etc. if that is the case. Family systems are interconnected and when one member is separated for significant amounts of time, the entire system is affected. When the physical or mental health of a married service member suffers, the family suffers as well. A family system functions as a whole, so the overall success of the family's well-being depends on the well-being of each individual within.

Warfare Tactics & Equipment

For those in combat, enemies are not always opposing soldiers dressed in colors or outfits that show they are the bad guys. Instead, women, children, young men, and old men are often dressed as civilians are the enemy. Fights are being taken into homes and

on streets, where combat service members may never actually see these enemies. This creates a significant impact to the psychological scars that our MSMV are returning home with. Living in a constant state of vigilance and unease is difficult to adjust to when these service members come back home to a calm, consistent lifestyle. This can also exist for those who are not deployed to combat zones but serve significant amounts of time in other countries away from family and an understood sense of normalcy.

In addition to the way wars have been fought during recent decades, the equipment and survival tactics have also impacted the success or failure of transition back into the community for MSMV. Since the Korean conflict, helicopters have served integral roles in rescue and operations missions, increasing the evacuation and survivor rates of wounded service members (Musemeche, 2017). Medical training and the equipment being worn has also significantly improved during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) (Musemeche, 2017). This is wonderful for increasing survivorship from wounds that would have most likely resulted in fatalities during previous conflicts. This also creates an increased number of returning service members who have severe and psychological injuries that were not seen in such significant numbers in the past.

The usage of the IED (improvised explosive device) is also creating trauma for service members who survive these explosions. These military service members are returning with severe and complex disabilities such as "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), amputations, burns, loss of vision, combat stress and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)" (VHA, 2017) as well as, spinal cord injuries. Furthermore, the stress of not knowing when such a device might be deployed causes significant levels of

psychological stress and chronic vigilance. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) rates in Iraq & Afghanistan veterans are 23% (Hayes, 2019) and PTSD rates are estimated at 11-20% for OIF/OEF veterans, 12% for Gulf War/Desert Storm, and 15-30% of Vietnam veterans (PTSD, 2018). When combined, MSMV with TBI and PTSD have an increased risk for more chronic issues (Hayes, 2019) and PTSD has been associated with an increased risk of suicide (Contractor et al., 2014; McKinney et al., 2017). These impairments and injuries involve extensive time in therapy, medical follow-up, and adaptive training. The prevalence of physical and mental health issues among MSMV is known to negatively impact community reintegration (Resnick et al., 2012).

Culture

Cultural resistance is another complicated factor that may create difficulty transitioning to a civilian lifestyle. Military culture itself is surrounded by a sense of strength, resilience, and camaraderie. When MSMV find themselves injured, disabled, or suffering from mental health issues, their perception of being a valued member of this strength-based culture may be challenged. A culture of camaraderie is embraced for MSMV where brotherhood and sisterhood is life dependent for some in certain occupations. The relationships that develop are interconnected with a sense of shared purpose to serve or through definable duties. A sense of “closeness and cooperation” has been described as something that is often missed by combat veterans due to the inherent nature of how connected a group needs to be to ward off danger or manage the stress of loss (Junger, 2015). A communal sense of belonging and self-sacrifice exist in the military that is not often shared upon return to modern society (Junger, 2015). Reintegration problems that stem from cultural disconnect and lack of social bonding can

lead to isolation or hesitation to fully engage in the social world that surrounds the new veterans.

This separation between military and civilian worlds is not something that is only perceived by MSMV. Eighty-four percent of post-9/11 veterans and 71% of civilians acknowledge a gap between military-civilian understanding (PEW, 2011). This gap can create negative stigmas may develop a perception of weakness or inability to serve the mission they signed up for. This can lead to negative emotions, difficulty setting goals, and a lacking sense of personal value. Stigma has been identified as one reason for not seeking mental health treatment (Hoge et al., 2006; Cai et al., 2014; Erickson, 2011). Stigma is a negative internalization of a concept and is often referenced in disability studies. In the case of MSMV mental health, a stigma exists that mental health issues are a sign of weakness. Stigma has also been related to clinical expectations that can be reduced through social engagement with other veterans (Caddick et al., 2015).

Generational cultures can also influence this transition. World War II veterans were welcomed home with parades and patriotism while Vietnam veterans were welcomed home with an era of protests and distain. The political and cultural environment of every generation has a large impact on the perceptions offered to the military and their own internalization of the experience. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a good example of this. World War I coined the term “shell-shock” (Reschke-Hernandez, 2014, p. 276) that described what we now know as PTSD. Rates of PTSD among today’s veterans vary depending on time of service but remain consistently higher for military populations than civilian populations. These rates do not include those who have not been diagnosed but may still be living with the ramifications. The rates of PTSD

are not the only issues MSMV face; however, this diagnosis has been highly publicized and is used often in reference to community-based programs such as Operation Song. The impact of culture could be discussed as an endless dissertation on its own; however, this dissertation identifies this as an issue to suggest that even veterans of the same eras, genders, ages, or any number of demographic distinctions can experience the same traumas and successes in completely different ways. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is not something new that OEF/OIF veterans magically found during their return in Iraq or Afghanistan. On the other hand, it has become better treated, better understood, and better acknowledged.

Operation Song has no age restrictions for participation and has written songs with veterans and active duty service members from all eras and generations since its inception in 2014. There is also no gender restriction for programs. Operation Song is a non-profit organization that has shown an ability to successfully partner with both community-based and federal organizations serving the MSMV population. The organization has shown an ability to assist military families and service members returning from deployments and has facilitated programming with Warrior Transition Battalion which is focused directly on injured service members. Operation Song programs pay special attention to military culture in all activities. This organization has already shown an ability to positively influence participants. This dissertation seeks to identify what these outcomes are.

The Impact of Enjoyable Activity on Trauma

In order to connect the who, what, where, when, how, and why of the program evaluation for Operation Song, a context also needs to be provided to connect the purpose

of this research project with a need to understand the outcomes. Although Operation Song is not a therapeutic service in itself, the majority of programs are conducted in collaboration with mental health service providers with an emphasis on recovery from trauma. For individuals who have experienced trauma, there is a disruption in the way the brain functions. Memory and learning are impacted (Bremner, 2006) and the cognitive and emotional disruptions can distort an ability to trust and express the experience (Green, 2011). A positive sense of self can also be challenged following disability (Tamplin et al., 2016) because the experience of trauma itself can inherently fragment one's ability to process the experience (Baker et al., 2015). When these fragments affect an individual's perception of reality, they may find themselves stuck between worlds of past, present, and future. This makes it difficult to envision beyond the here and now. When reality is fractured, a sense of identity becomes challenged. Identity associations have already been described as important influences for reestablishing meaningful roles. Adams et al. (2019) found that a higher sense of veteran identity was associated with a less likelihood of reporting suicidal ideation and a greater likelihood of VA service utilization. This is important when veteran suicide rates are 1.5 times higher than civilian counterparts (VA, 2018).

Many nonprofit organizations exist to serve MSMV in a national attempt to reduce suicide numbers, increase a sense of belonging following the military, and to improve opportunities for meaningful involvement in their communities. Many of these organizations use a leisure or recreation activity as the basis of their programs. Team River Runner uses "adventure and adaptive paddle sports" (Team River Runner, n.d.). Project Healing Waters uses fly fishing (Project Healing Waters, 2020). Team Red,

White and Blue uses “fitness activities, social gatherings, and community service events” (Team RWB, 2021). Operation Song uses songwriting. The goals of these organizations may or may not focus on therapeutic gains, but all focus on using these activities as a means to improve social interactions, community involvement, or participation in preferred activities for MSMV.

The activities of purpose used by these nonprofit organizations can be defined on their own as leisure and/or recreation. Leisure is time spent engaging in an activity that exists without obligation and offers a sense of satisfaction and meaning from the experience (Kleiber et al., 2011). Leisure is listening to music to pass the time. Recreation adds the concept of structure and time limits to the experience (O'Sullivan, 2019). Recreation is writing lyrics to tell a story. Leisure has been described as "a central role" in the process of personal transformation following "negative life events" (Kleiber et al., 2002, p. 229). Kleiber et al (2002) described leisure patterns as being potentially easier to adapt than other areas in life. This may be one reason that programs that are driven by leisure activities may be so helpful with posttraumatic growth. If an individual who loved sports and physical activity suddenly requires the traumatic amputations of both legs, this previous interest in sports as a leisure pattern could be utilized to enhance rehabilitation efforts through adaptive sport programming. Participation in the preferred sports activity from an adaptive level enables an opportunity for self-reflection and attention to one's current abilities. By understanding what an individual is able to do and enjoy, opportunities like adaptive sports create the first steps to increased engagement of others with similar interest. This interactive comparison of self to others can help a person reestablish a sense of relatedness to those around them. Once an individual is able

to feel a part of something greater than his or her own self, he or she may be able to find confidence in his or her own abilities.

From a clinical standpoint, leisure and recreation are actively used by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in a variety of programs. The VA is the primary entity providing services to military veterans and employs more recreational therapists and creative arts therapists than anywhere else in the country (Rehabilitation & Prosthetic Services, 2019a). Recreational therapy is a

treatment service designed to restore, remediate and rehabilitate a person's level of functioning and independence in life activities, to promote health and wellness as well as reduce or eliminate the activity limitations and restrictions to participation in life situations caused by an illness or disabling condition (ATRA, n.d.)

At the VA, these therapeutic services use leisure and recreation-orientated activities that include, but are not limited to adaptive sports, creative arts, music, and social activities. The purpose is to design programs that "support each Veteran's self-directed, self-determined, and fully independent participation in their chosen life pursuits" (Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, 2019a). Creative arts therapy at the VA combines art, dance, drama, and music therapy to work on similar goals with an emphasis on expression (Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services, 2019b). Although Operation Song partners with recreation therapy and creative arts therapy services within the VA for certain programs, the organization itself does not employ recreational therapists or music therapists.

Leisure and recreation participation has also been found to help reconnect an individual to a positive sense of previous self (Vella et al., 2013; Hutchinson et al., 2003). This creates a new sense of normal by connecting identities of the past to those of the

present instead of allowing the individual to continue to isolate and separate their life into pre-military and post-military outlooks. Leisure has been associated with posttraumatic growth (Craig et al., 2020; Kleiber et al., 2002) by restoring or creating hope (Kleiber et al., 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Craig et al., 2020), offering a sense of purpose (Hutchinson et al., 2003), and by enhancing processing (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2018). Positive leisure experiences are also associated with an appreciation for life (Kleiber et al., 2002) and have been associated with buffering negative effects of PTSD (Craig et al., 2020; Caddick et al., 2015; Dustin et al., 2011). Leisure activities can provide a distraction from the negatives in life and can provide an escape (Hutchinson et al., 2003). This distraction can lead to a realization of purpose and personal abilities. Participation in leisure and recreation can create social bonds, increase social value, increase out-group acceptance, and improve an individual's ability to relate to others (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009; Tuval-Masiavh et al., 2018). Sayer et al. (2010) found that enjoying free time, a sense of belonging in a "civilian society" and taking part in community activities were identified as significant difficulty by almost half of the veteran participants. Programs like Operation Song that help participants find positive ways to structure their free time, a sense of belonging, and interests in their communities can help MSMV with their processing and reintegration experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

For this dissertation, the overall purpose is to identify the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran specific programs and to compare these outcomes with those envisioned by the program's founders. This was accomplished through a qualitative program outcomes evaluation framed in a mixed-methods methodology. An inductive-deductive design is employed in order to utilize multiple types of data specifically focused on participant perspectives. The perspectives of Operation Song participants provide the best insight as to what the organization is accomplishing.

Qualitative Program Outcomes Evaluation

An outcomes evaluation is conducted to determine "the results and impacts of an intervention" (Patton, 2015, p. 178). If Operation Song programs create changes for participants, then these changes are able to be identified as outcomes. Outcomes can be looked at as the variables in an equation (Patton, 2015). These separate and independent descriptors of what happens in a program, intervention, or treatment directly relate to the context and relationship of the program as a whole (Patton, 2015). In an outcomes evaluation of a program, Patton (2015) suggests that researchers should seek out any data, quantitative and qualitative, that helps to answer the research question. Quantitative types of assessment are great for measuring change on a numerical level and show whether or not change has taken place. For purposes of this dissertation, quantitative information has been captured through Operation Song proprietary participant questionnaires that were taken immediately following participation in an Operation Song program or retreat. This information provides insight to potential outcomes suggested by participants but does not offer any context or meaning outside of the yes or no answers

provided. The “critical context” (Patton, 2015, pg. 179) that explain how these scores truly impact an individual is not evident with evaluation of this source on its own.

Quantitative research seeks to answer a question and qualitative research explores a question (Patton, 2015). Qualitative inquiry takes a direct look into an experience by understanding the individual perspectives of those who took part in the experience (Charmaz, 2006). For Operation Song, each participant experiences the programs differently than every other participant because they all have a different story to tell. Combining these perspectives through a combination of interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and open ended survey methods establishes insight into the outcomes of the program.

Qualitative research transforms change into a description of the relationships an individual has with the world around them that can be shared and understood by others. Instead of simply answering yes or no as to whether or not changes took place following a program or intervention, qualitative methods explore the relationships of those changes and the context in which the individual participants interpret or apply those changes. For Operation Song, all programs intend to enhance traditional veteran therapies, enhance opportunities for self-expression, to help individual process from their service-related issues, injuries and illness, to improve their quality of lives, and to facilitate successful transitions into civilian life (Operation Song, 2020). In order to adequately measure the relationship of Operation Song outcomes with these organizational goals, a qualitative mixed methods approach offers the ability to look more deeply and openly at what the outcomes truly are.

Qualitative methods add context to the relationships found in data. Context can be described as everything and anything that is happening between participants and the world around them. Context highlights the fact that people all have things happening to them that affects their interactions with their environments (Patton, 2015). This context also plays a role in the process of meaning making where an individual's experiences, social interactions, and cultural associations all impact their concept of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The majority of participants in Operation Song programs have experienced something that negatively impacts their ability to share their story with others and process past experiences. The relationship of Operation Song program outcomes and the context in which these are understood have a different impact on each individual participant in their own individual environments because the motivations and reasons for participating are all different.

Inductive-Deductive Approach

Mixed methods strategies use both inductive and deductive methods through the inductive-deductive research cycle (Tashakkori et al., 2021). This methodology cycles through initial information that is grounded in facts or observations to an inductive analysis of theory development that leads to deductive conclusions of relationships discovered within the research (Tashakkori et al., 2021). Research questions can begin to be answered anywhere within this cycle, starting with either inductive or deductive inquiry (Tashakkori et al., 2021). This dissertation follows this inductive-deductive approach to answer the two specific research questions.

The first research question is answered through an inductive approach. Inductive research is focused on generating new theories to describe what is happening (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967). This inductive approach to research analysis allows meaning to be discovered through emerging patterns without presupposition (Patton, 2015). This means that findings come about through the exploration of relationships discovered during the research process, not before. For this dissertation, outcomes had not yet been evaluated by Operation Song. The theory of outcomes were constructed through the constant comparative analysis of multiple sources of participant perspectives. The diversity of these individual perspectives is important in qualitative theory development (Charmaz, 2006) for this dissertation because experiences such as Operation Song can be explored directly through the lens of those who lived them.

The second question is answered through a deductive approach. Deductive approaches typically start with a hypothesis predicting an outcome and then move forward to test this theory (Tashakkori et al., 2021). For this dissertation, goals of the organization already existed. Once outcomes were discovered through the inductive aspects of this dissertation, these findings were then compared to the individually isolated goals of the organization to determine whether or not relationships existed.

Data Sources

Multiple sources of data describing the perspectives of Operation Song participants were analyzed to create a holistic theory of outcomes that is consistent with Charmaz's (2006) emphasis on multiple vantage points. Patton (2015) also specifies the importance of utilizing any data that answers the research question. The two different research questions call for different types of data sources.

The first research question focused on identifying the outcomes of Operation Song. Three types of data were compared and analyzed to answer the question and are presented in order of evaluation.

1. Questionnaires

The first set of data existed in the form of historical questionnaires that are proprietary to Operation Song ($n=49$) and were completed during 2018-2019. These voluntary questionnaires asked participants to provide basic demographic details, as well as yes/no and open-ended questions about their experience immediately following participation in an Operation Song program. These questionnaires were developed by the organization for purposes of program analysis and participant impact. Questions were asked that addressed perceived changes, comfort in opening up and sharing their story, coping skills, closure, and the overall experience of their Operation Song program. Examples of questions are: “What made this a positive experience for you?” and “Can you see any immediate changes from participating in Operation Song?” These questionnaires are important for analyzing participant perspectives through the lens of what Operation Song determined to be potential outcomes at the time these were developed.

These questionnaires incorporated both quantitative yes/no questions and qualitative open-ended questions. The yes/no answers were analyzed to provide a percentage of participants who did or did not identify with the specified changes at the completion of their program. The open-ended questions provided a sense of context and description of meaning for each of these. Analysis of this set of participant perspective data led to the initial themes that directed the next step in the data collection process.

2. Interviews

In order to further saturate the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006), two sets of interviews ($n=14$) were incorporated into this dissertation. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted during August-September 2020 as a theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) method to explore categories developed through evaluation of the questionnaires and to focus on the developing theory. These interview questions were designed to ask about each individual's experience of perceived outcomes. A structured interview protocol was developed with questions having a baseline focus on outcomes for all participants. Examples of questions are:

- What was the importance of sharing your story?
- How do you feel this program has influenced or affected your relationships?
- How do you think that the experience of Operation Song has influenced your coping abilities?
- In general, what would you say you got out of the whole experience?
- From your point of view, what kind of outcomes were from Operation Song?
- If I just open ended asked you if you thought that there was an overall outcome of Operation Song - an effect that you've noticed in your life or something different -what would you say that was?

In addition to these interviews, original interview transcripts from Lauber (2018) were added to data analysis. A re-evaluation of these interviews produced new and relevant findings which were not documented in the previous research. Adding this information to the current dissertation project helped to provide more substance to the

emerging theory. During all interviews, a semi-structured format was maintained to enable open conversation with a directed focus on the topic of Operation Song.

3. Survey

After analysis of the previous sets of data, themes had been created to describe a theory of the outcomes of Operation Song well enough to compare with organizational goals. In order to account for potential bias or emotional inflection that can be found as a weakness of interviews (Patton, 2015), an open-ended Qualtrics survey was sent to participants of the 2020 interviews that asked one specific question: “For you personally, what have been the outcomes of Operation Song?”. These participants were purposefully chosen due to the wealth of information already provided through their highlighted cases. This specific method enabled an additional outlet for participants to add a written response in addition to their interview. Seven of the participants completed this survey. One of these seven also added an additional descriptive addendum to this answer via email that was analyzed together with the survey.

The second research question focused on identifying the relationship between the discovered outcomes and the goals defined by the organization. Once a theory was developed to describe the outcomes of Operation Song veteran specific programs, these themes were compared to the program goals as defined by the organization. The relationships discovered were then compared to existing literature that describes how these outcomes fit or do not fit within the isolated goals. Patton (2015) emphasizes this revisiting of literature as a way to help outline analysis.

Participants

Both purposeful and theoretical sampling techniques were used to determine participants for this dissertation. Purposeful sampling offers an opportunity to develop “information rich cases” that help make sense of the core issue of the research purpose (Patton, 2015, pg. 53). The purposeful sample for this dissertation consisted of military veterans who have completed Operation Song retreats or extended programs. There was no specified timeframe of required participation and results ended up being both immediate and long-term focused, as participants were involved as far back as five years in one case. Theoretical sampling took place with the addition of new data throughout the dissertation process. Inductive techniques focused on analyzing cases that highlighted the emerging theory in order to move from “exploration to deepening to verification” (Patton, 2015, pg. 289). Interviews were chosen to add to data collection based on the importance of information they would add to the emerging theory of outcomes.

Coding

Code generation is the process of transcribing data into categorical terms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding creates the framework for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This enables researchers an ability to describe meaning from abstract concepts and to establish a set of outcomes from programs such as Operation Song that may not have obvious or visible results. Charmaz (2006) describes code generation in multiple phases. Initial coding of data sources was the first step that created action descriptions to be further examined through focused coding. For this dissertation, manual line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006) was the method of coding for all data. In-vivo coding was conducted to use the language provided by participants (Saldana, 2013). Each

individual's responses were coded and compared to every other individual's response. Key words and phrases were coded based on the concept of outcomes stemming from the program. The initial codes found most often were rewritten as themes that were determined to be the most significant in all sets of data.

Focused coding took place during analysis of interviews that further scrutinized the initial codes to identify those most significant for categorization. Focused coding reduces the most frequent and most important codes into more precise categorizations (Charmaz, 2006). In this dissertation, focused coding took place by revisiting the data based on the themes established during initial coding. The themes discovered during focused coding were further explored through theoretical coding during the final stage of comparative analysis.

Theoretical coding explored the data relationships and generated a theory describing the "common themes or patterns" (Charmaz, 2006). This created the final theories that describe the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran specific programs. All identifying information of participants was removed for the final copy of this article. Participant names have been changed either to an alias chosen by the participant or by a randomly generated name chosen by this researcher.

Memoing

Memoing also took place throughout the entire data collection and analysis process which added to the theoretical coding. Memo-writing is used as a method of collecting thoughts that help to identify patterns and conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2006). During this dissertation, memoing took place as a "free-flowing" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 80) method that drove the adaptation of interview questions and additional review of

literature as themes were constructed. After theoretical coding generated common themes, these were written out, compared again to the interview transcripts and questionnaires, compared with memos, and restructured until a final theory was constructed with supporting themes. These memos helped me make sense of thoughts that I had documented throughout the dissertation process that helped add to the description of findings. These memos also helped answer questions or provide direction where I found myself becoming either tangential or stuck with coding and theme development.

Triangulation

The strongest support for implementing this dissertation as a mixed methods qualitative program evaluation is the concept of triangulation. Triangulation is the combined use of various data sources that adds strength to a research study (Patton, 2015). In this dissertation, both historical and newly collected data were used. Two sets of interviews, questionnaires, a survey, and my perspective of involvement were all included in the analysis of Operation Song veteran specific program outcomes. Once these outcomes emerged, the findings were then compared to organizationally defined goals.

Ethical Considerations

Internal Review Board approval was secured with expedited review in March 2020 and is attached in Appendix. IRB approval included the use of all historical data listed above, as well as the collection of new data through the 2020 interviews. Due to COVID-19 adjustments for personal contact opportunities, potential participants were recruited through an email sent to contacts that were provided by Operation Song. Ten

individuals responded and completed interviews individually with this researcher either over the telephone or through the video conferencing application Zoom. One participant did not respond to full completion of the approved consent form and this interview was erased prior to transcription. All interview and survey participants included in this dissertation agreed to and completed informed consent verification either verbally, by email, or through Qualtrics. Interviews were recorded through Zoom or a handheld recorder and transcription was completed independently by this researcher. All interview participants were contacted to confirm the overall findings.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness in this dissertation, several points need to be made. A first point to be made is the verification of data. Following completion of this dissertation, all contacts from the 2020 interviews were emailed to ask if they would be willing to participate in an additional phone call to verify the findings. Four participants responded and the overall findings were discussed and confirmed. The founder and Chairman of the Board of Operation Song and other representative of the organization were also contacted post completion of the majority of this dissertation to confirm statements about how the organization works, the goals of the organization, and to add additional details necessary for this project. No findings were shared with the organization at this time. Several representatives of various departments within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) were also interviewed to verify reviewed literature focused on the dissertation topics.

A third point to be noted is the triangulation of data within the mixed methods research design. This added to the trustworthiness of this dissertation by accounting for

the application of both quantitative and qualitative methods of outcomes evaluation through the different sets of data. This provided 63 different participant perspectives that enabled the identification of Operation Song outcomes.

A fourth point would be my personal experience with Operation Song. My perspective of the experience involves a viewpoint as a recreational therapist working at the Department of Veterans Affairs, by my involvement as a board member with Operation Song, and by my previous research on Operation Song. I had access to the Operation Song questionnaires prior to this dissertation but made sure that I had all approvals from the founder and Chairman of the Board before utilizing any data for this project. I also found out during the 2020 interviews that I had already met some of the participants who responded to my request for interviews. Through conversation, a generalized understanding that we had met each other and that I had volunteered at their programs did exist. My perspective and experiences described throughout this dissertation cannot be fully considered fieldwork because I did not enter those situations with the specific intent of studying and observing within this dissertation purpose. However, I have been involved in almost all Operation Song types of programs and settings in some way shape or form. This enabled me to provide my unique perspective of “what it is like to be a part of the setting or program” (Patton, 2015, p. 338). There were no conflicts of interest in this project.

Participant Observer

Charmaz encourages the researcher to be a constructive member of the research process because researchers “are part of the world we study and the data we collect” (Charmaz, 2006, p.10). The interests of a researcher’s previous experience and

professional perspectives guide the choice of methods for conducting the research and create a baseline for developing ideas throughout the process (Charmaz, 2006). For this dissertation, my perspectives helped drive the purpose of this project, as well as the questions to be asked in interviews. My perspective did not, however, influence the results. I have never participated in the Operation Song programs as a participant, so I cannot speak to the level of detail provided by individual perspectives from the participants collected throughout the process of this dissertation.

I was first introduced to Operation Song while working as a supervisor of the recreational therapy and creative arts therapy programs at a local Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I was invited to a graduation for one of the 10-week programs during the first few months of my new position. I had never seen an Operation Song session, nor had I ever met with anyone from the program before this. I cannot recall how the program was introduced or what was said, but I do remember the songs. One song was funny and talked about anger issues in a lighthearted way, but the rest were deep and many of the audience cried in their seats while listening. I remember laughter between songs and introductions, many tissues, and the absolutely genuine interactions between the veterans, VA staff, and Operation Song songwriters. I also remember several of the participants saying this had done more for them than any other therapy they had participated in. Without having seen the actual sessions myself, I still remember thinking “of course” because I was, and always will be, a proud proponent of Recreational and Creative Arts Therapies, especially with this population. What I did not realize was the massive impact that these veterans were attributing to Operation Song, of which I would later learn in further involvement with the organization. Since this is all an experience from my

memory, I cannot validate or verify any of this. However, I lead with this story as the reason why Operation Song caught my eye as a researcher and to provide my perspective of the first time I was introduced to the program. If someone can claim that writing a song is more beneficial than any other therapy they have participated in, is this true? How? Why? If I as an observer can see that these graduation ceremonies are important and that the participants obviously got something out of the experience, how can I actually measure change and determine the impact so that doctors and psychologists will also see?

Although I was never a true participant, I did have both an inside and outside look at the experience of Operation Song. During my time of observation, I was a member of multiple outgroups as a non-veteran, non-patient, non-songwriting civilian therapist, so my recollection of observation offers an “etic” approach to the evaluation of this experience. This etic perspective is one of an outside observer who looks at events separately in comparison to other events or cultures (Patton, 2015). My first active involvement with Operation Song took place as therapist working with a VA outpatient recreational therapy program that collaborated with Operation Song. I took part in the recruitment process and therapeutic observation of my patients who were participating in the 10-week program format.

In these groups, the only people present were a group of 5 or less participants, songwriters from Operation Song, the patients, and the 1 or 2 recreation therapy/creative arts therapy staff. My role was more of a supportive role, so I observed the songwriters as the leaders of the program who guided progression of the sessions through direct interaction with the participants. In this specific program format, there was a buildup

process to the entire experience. Some participants brought poems from their own personal writings and worked with the songwriter and the group to transition these into a song. Sometimes the songwriter would have an exercise in songwriting practice or theory. Sometimes the participants would talk and the songwriter would engage them in a form of redirection of the story to the format of lyrics or a discussion of how the music would sound. Both the songwriters and participants always appeared to be actively listening to each other throughout the process. The songwriters were driving the group, but the veterans were providing the map and directions. As a non-songwriter, I cannot claim to have an insider's understanding of the process of songwriting, but I was able to observe the process in this specific setting.

I also was not a veteran or a patient in these experiences. I was a civilian, recreational therapist. I looked at measuring changes based on a set of goals and objectives that I individually defined for each of the participants. The etic perspective of their participation in Operation Song was defined by whether or not they reached these goals. Although I do not recall the specific objectives, the goals most likely focused on improving social skills, self-esteem, or sense of autonomy. These outcomes are more global senses of behavior that can be looked at outside of this specific event. This etic perspective offers an objective look at the behaviors within an experience in relation to behaviors outside of that experience (Beals et al., 2020). The experiences held within this program could be compared to songwriting programs with non-military populations, leisure or recreation activities with military populations, or even clinical therapy services.

In contrast to the etic perspective, an emic perspective offers an in depth look at what it is like to be an insider of an experience. For Patton (2015), the emic perspective

takes a participant-observer from one who is seeing what takes place to one that also feels “what it is like to be a part of the setting or program” (p. 338). My purpose as a therapist was to help the participants safely work through the processing aspect and social interactions that took place, but the intimate nature of the stories made me feel like I was a part of their group. Because of the way the groups functioned, everyone in the group (myself included) was involved in encouragement and the social aspects of the experience. It was difficult to distance myself from feeling anything in this role. One participant wrote about many years of survivors guilt from switching with another service member who was later blown up on that mission. The description of what happened and what he felt was so open, honest, and moving that I felt like I had lost a piece of myself as well when I heard him talk and listened to his song. In no way can I say that anything in my life has ever resembled what he went through, but in the moments of listening to that song it seemed like I experienced in some small way some of what he felt.

This is what I have seen and felt Operation Song do on more than one occasion. These songs appear to turn into a physical representation of the emotional scars these participants are carrying, and in the time I have been with them in the programs, seem to be a release. There was something indescribable that was happening for these participants and could be observed in their demeanor and interactions as sessions progressed. I do not know whether the changes that took place lasted, but I do know that participants went from not being able to tell a story, not wanting to tell a story, or not knowing how to tell a story to having one they can share as a result of the program. The emic perspective enabled me the ability to see and feel what it was like to be involved as a participant with Operation Song.

The different aspects of my perspectives of the Operation Song are meant to highlight the context of the experience from both participant-observer and observer perspectives which are important in conducting research (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2015). It is my observation that by creating a song, Operation Song gives an outlet to those who may never have found their way. This dissertation is designed as a program outcomes evaluation to determine what outlet actually exists from the organization's programs and to purposefully identify the outcomes from the perspective of program participants. Although I have connection to the participants and the programs of Operation Song, this does not make me a true insider to the specific "cultures and positions" that are inherent to this experience (Beals et al., 2020, p. 599). This is why it is important to evaluate the outcomes of Operation Song from both the perspectives of participants and the original goals defined by the founders of Operation Song. In order to understand those outcomes, a context needs to be provided to help recognize the potential impact on traumatic recovery, individual differences, and the military to civilian transition.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Findings will be presented in two distinct divisions based on the two research questions. A third section will highlight several unique cases as emphasized in qualitative program outcomes evaluation (Patton, 2015). The first research question asks, what are the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran focused programs? This question will be answered through presentation of both quantitative and qualitative information. The second research question asks, do these outcomes align with goals as defined by the founders of Operation Song? Findings from the first question will be compared to the programmatic goals of Operation Song as defined by the organization. Multiple figures are presented to represent findings and connections.

Sample Population

The overall, combined sample population for this dissertation was 63 participants. 73% were male ($n=46$), 19% were female ($n=12$), 8% did not answer ($n=5$). Ages ranged from 27-93. Military branches included Army, Air Force, Marines, and Navy. Of those who responded, thirty percent of participants completed Operation Song extended weekly programs ($n=17$) and 70% completed retreats ($n=40$). Ninety three percent of participants who responded identified with having a disability or impairment ($n=42$).

Research Question 1: What are the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran focused programs?

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative findings come from analysis of Operation Song proprietary questionnaires that were given to participants after completion of programs or retreats between 2018-2019. These questionnaires were designed and implemented by the

organization and permission was given for analysis during this project. Since these are historical sources created prior to this dissertation, there was no ability to seek clarification from respondents or to search for a larger set of data for some of the questions. During the 2018-2019 timeframe these questionnaires were revised with slight rewording of several questions, so a few have smaller numbers of respondents than the others. In all, five questions were able to be analyzed for the purposes of this dissertation.

Ninety-four percent ($n=45$) of participants identified with observable immediate changes following participation in Operation Song and 100% ($n=21$) of those who were asked identified being able to “open up and share” their story. This question was later reworded to ask about comfort in telling one’s story and 89% ($n=25$) responded that they were comfortable sharing. A sense of closure was experienced as a result of Operation Song for 83% ($n=15$) of participants and 87% ($n=41$) felt they were better able to cope with life after participation in Operation Song. These findings show evidence of positive outcomes from participant perspectives. However, as with most quantitative measures, there is no context to describe what these outcomes are other than the inferences made further than the percentages of success.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative responses exist in the open-ended questions on questionnaires, interviews, and a follow up survey for 2020 interview participants. These combined sources formulate the qualitative responses that help to answer the research question. Seven major themes were constructed through analysis of participant responses that describe the theory of Operation Song outcomes. (See Figure 1). Table 1 presents additional expansion of quotes that created these themes. All identifying information for

participants including song titles, locations where they may have recorded or performed, clinical or other community programs they may have been involved in, songwriters, and Operation Song board members or representatives have been changed or extracted to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study and the organization. Each theme has been compiled to best describe the collective outcomes of change that result from participation in Operation Song. Outcomes may be experienced independently or may exist in conjunction with other outcome themes.

Theme 1: A Positive Sense of Self. Participants described a positive sense of self as an outcome of Operation Song. This sense of self stemmed from a feeling of being able to express emotions and their own sense of personal self that was created by the atmosphere of Operation Song programs and retreats. Adam described this as a new feeling of “I am somebody”. Participants stated they felt the atmosphere of Operation Song created an opportunity to express truth and “the realness of who you are”. This was also described in terms of a renewed sense of self. The programs and retreats helped “reiterate” who participants felt they were and enabled a positive sense of comfort “in my own skin”. The “fun” atmosphere of the programs and retreats combined with the sense that participants were not “worried about tryin’ to impress” anyone or fit into any type of patient role enabled a renewed sense of self.

By the end of the eight weeks of class, my toes no longer touched the floor. I no longer felt the need to be isolated; I think I became a different person. Maybe a real human. I owe a lot to Operation Song. I don't know where I might be had I not become a member of this great organization.

Feelings. Participants described feelings such as “happy; excited; satisfied” as outcomes of Operation Song. Not only did participants feel something as a result the

experience, they also described an ability to express and release emotions as a result of the programs. This was described as “letting out emotions often kept in” or “exploded with emotion”. Participants identified a new sense of peace or freedom as Operation Song became an outlet to share and express feelings. Several participants described this as a general difficulty prior to engaging in Operation Song. Participants credited Operation Song with reenabling an ability to experience emotion again during participation. The act of songwriting was specifically mentioned as one of the reasons for this release of feelings. Participants described an ease in being able to share feelings and emotions through the writing aspects of Operation Song and several compared this as being more effective than sharing solely through conversation. Chad described the ability to feel comfortable enough to share about his traumas as an outcome of Operation Song’s environment:

When you’re talkin to a doctor at the VA it’s like well they’ve heard this stuff before...when you’re talkin to the music writers and stuff, they haven’t necessarily heard your story. . .you’re more excited to tell your story, you know what I mean? Because it’s somebody that doesn’t sit and listen to stories all day. So it’s kinda cool to talk about it with somebody else, somebody you’ve never met.

Self-expression. Participants described Operation Song as a “medium” to express their own personal sense of self and to share stories that may or may not have ever been told. Bruce stated “I never spoke of the killing for 50 years” but did so in Operation Song. The experience was creative and unique in the sense that an actual form of art was produced that represented the individualized story of each participant. The songwriters were described as encouraging and “never once like squashed an idea”. This gave participants “that freedom to express myself”. Operation Song was described as “a new

more exciting way to express myself that I never had the opportunity to use before.” “I was able to express myself in ways I had hidden away”.

Self-expression is an important aspect of personal growth and Several participants compared Operation Song to more traditional forms of therapies with similar goals. One participant, Felix, specifically mentioned how Prolonged Exposure (PE) did not work. PE is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy that focuses on helping individuals manage memories of trauma (APA, 2020). Felix attributed Operation Song as the experience that taught him songwriting as a positive outlet for self-expression. Felix further described how he joined a creative writing group after completing Operation Song as a continued way of “expressing myself”. Chad summarized this by stating “I learned a new, more exciting way to express myself that I never had the opportunity to use before.”

Participants described the programs as giving them a voice where they were able to express who they are and to share the stories they were previously unable to tell. Summer shared a story of how once this voice was found, a series of events took place in her life that led to reunion of family that had been separated for many years.

I just feel like Operation Song was the voice that I needed for so long to get what I needed to say that I couldn't say out there. And then, once my voice was heard, I just felt like the universe answered if that makes any kind of sense. . .I am forever in debt to this program. And I know that really, Operation Song had nothing to do specifically-like, they didn't facilitate the meetup between me and my family, but because of that opportunity I was down there in that area and I was able to reconnect.

Summer makes a great point in stating that Operation Song was not the instigator of the family reunion. However, she experienced a “courage to try” from the self-expression that took place during the experience.

Theme 2: Perspective. Participants described the development of new perspectives as an outcome of Operation Song. Through a sense of processing, structure, and the development of competency, participants described this new perspective in terms of a positive outlook that stemmed from the experience. Some participants described a new ability to see good from bad through the conversations and creation of songs. “They [songwriters] could take my idea and mold it into something that can really be good.”

Processing. “I feel as though I can do something else with my feelings other than be angry or cry.” Operation Song was described redirecting perspectives for many participants. In songwriting, “it was produced in a different way than how I heard it in my head and it was interesting to see a different perspective on the same lyrics, same chords, same everything, but completely different melodies.” With the help of the songwriters, participants were able to take a story or memory they had inside their mind and recreate it into a song. “When I told the ten minute story and he writes it out in like three verses, just seein’ it in that way definitely gives you a new perspective. It gives you a new way to look at it.” The songwriters did not change anyone’s stories, they simply added a different perspective. “He [songwriter] took his [participant] experiences from Vietnam, which we all know there’s no way that they’re that good, and he made em in kinda a fun song. So maybe that would change his thinking of it you know?” The way the songwriters saw the stories and created songs out of the interactions with the participants was repeatedly described as unique and led participants “to see my trauma in a new light.”

For some participants this change in perspective led to a general sense of processing. Because they were able to hear their story from alternative points of view,

some participants described a redirection and rehousing of these memories and stories. Pat described this as having a new “place to honor my pain (within my heart, and not my mind)”. Other participants described this as open sharing and discussion that helped “connect dots”. “We got a lot of thoughts out. It helped me process something and helped me realize a little bit more what my mission with Operation Song really is.” Participants described a sense of understanding that was created as an outcome. Many participants described the songs created during the programs as something they wanted to share. For other participants such as Ira, sharing the song was not the purpose. The purpose of telling the chosen stories and writing the chosen song was to process and redirect a way of thinking:

I don't really want my songs-military songs, I don't really want everybody hearing them and I think that some veterans might feel that way as well. But initially the act of writing the song really does something and it definitely exposes something. . .I think the thing about songwriting is, I think that song-not just songwriting but really any art, has the capacity to impact the artist whether the artist realizes whether or not in a different way. And whoever's creating this, it has the ability to impact each individual in a different way. . .it's not just telling somebody's story for everybody. For people like me specifically. . .I wasn't trying to tell a story. I guess I was trying to get something out. And not only to get something out, but also to connect dots I guess is how I like to describe it. . .it's a-I guess a way of thinking. It's a way of changing the way that you're going to think and conditioning yourself to know yourself better.

Structure. A change in perspective was also described in terms of creating structure. Operation Song programs required the stories told from a participant’s memory to be restructured into the form of a song. The structure created in the development of these songs enabled a sense of focus and clarity. Participants described understanding that “you’ve got to find the important question you want to get to” in choosing the lyrics. Operation Song created focus and direction as outcomes of conversation and a

requirement of having to think creatively about what participants really wanted to say.

Absirokee described this as:

With Operation Song, the way that it took place is that you got to let a little bit out at a time. A little bit more, a little bit until you were comfortable at short paces that you wanted to go at. And you got a chance to tell what you did or did not want to tell. And the thing that the songwriters made clear is that, you know, this is your story.

Clarity was another impact of the structure created in Operation Song.

Participants described the songwriters and groups as helping “make your song make a little better sense. . .they’re not telling the story, they’re helpin’ you tell the story.” This was described as enabling the ability for the songs to truly represent what was intended.

Participants attributed the Operation Songwriters as specifically influential factors that provided this sense of clarity and structure. Chad described this influence on a changed perspective as follows:

We get to tell our story to someone who's objective. It's not a family member, it's not a friend, and it's not a therapist you know what I mean? And it's somebody that wants to hear it because they want to put it into their words. And then you know, hearing what we say in other people's words I just think that's - I don't know, that was the biggest thing for me was just hearin' the way he said it. . .like when I told my story and then hearin what my songwriter put into words. Just hearing a difference in it and I'm like 'wow! That is me!

Participants also described the songs created in Operation Song as visual representations of their stories. Alex described seeing the song as an experience in itself where “for the first time I was able to see my story before me and truly realize that I have overcome quite a bit. I still struggle, but again, it’s that new sense of purpose.” The change in perspective led to a realization of accomplishment and purpose.

Competency. Participants described Operation Song as creating a sense of competency in terms of feeling “productive” and finding a “sense of ownership in what

they're [participants] doing and how they express themselves". Rufus described this as "it feels good to create something because I've spent a lifetime of destroying things."

Participants described competency primarily in terms of accomplishment and ability. In creating the songs, participants had a tangible product to show as an outcome of what they accomplished. Eagles Wings described this as a factor that differentiated Operation Song from other activity-based veteran non-profit organizations:

Another element of Operation Song that gives it more definition and more purpose and more points is that Operation Song has a product. You can hold it in your hand. . . And you can bring that song home on a CD, play it for your family, and say 'this is what I did today'. And you can't do that with fly fishing. You can't do that with horseback riding, you know? And riding in the car you can play it. Some of your veteran friends are struggling, you can play it. It's there. It's a product. You can't tell them about, 'well, I went fly fishing the other day and we talked about this and that and you know it helped me so much'. But you're not going to be able to share that with anybody else. It's not a product. So that's a—that's an important part of Operation Song.

Being able to have something to show for what was accomplished was described important by participants. The creation of the song was described as an accomplishment that led to a feeling of competency. Learning how to write as a way "to help release pent up emotions" was also described by participants. Buck described this outcome as creating more than just a song:

It's not just putting words into the songs, it's not just that. It's putting medicine in your head. It's putting medicine in your heart. It's giving you back that desire to stand up to be that man, to be a leader, to be that woman, to be that whatever it is. . .it has helped me more than any of the medicine that I've been given for my head. . .it is medicine.

A sense of competency was further described as changing "mental health outlook" for participants that led to a sense of perseverance. Several participants described the process of Operation Song as difficult and requiring effort. The open

sharing of emotions and stories was not something that many stated they had done before. As a result of completing the Operation Song programs, the effort required by the process created a sense of accomplishment and a sense of ability for participants. In working with the songwriters, participants learned “how to construct a melody, how to construct a chorus and a verse and how to build that all out”. In order to transition a story to a song, participants did not need to learn “music theory” and this was not described as an emphasis of Operation Song programs. However, participants described learning “how a song is structured” which became a skill that could be maintained after they left the programs or retreats. Some participants identified this skill as something new that could potentially be pursued as a profession or continued leisure activity in the future. Participants described a new or reestablished sense of competency that was realized through a recognition of what they had overcome and a sense of capability in achieving goals. Craig described the process as a sense of resiliency and related the experience to the transition from military to civilian life:

I think that is [Operation Song founder]'s mission to like get people to see that whatever it is right, whatever the title is about, it's about resiliency and kind of overcoming obstacles then. The songwriting process is not an easy thing to do. I mean, to find all the parts and pieces to come together and create a song. It kind of gives people an idea of I can do something else besides the military. I'm not just a soldier or I'm not just whatever. And that's huge because a lot of people cannot transition. They just don't have the ability to kind of, come out of that service mindset.

Theme 3: Coping. Participants widely described Operation Song as a program that helped develop and reiterate positive coping mechanisms. Some described the process as one that led to forward momentum “in my healing”. Others described outcomes as having “another tool in my toolbox.” Operation Song became “another

avenue” of positive coping tools and served as an alternative form of therapy as per the perspectives of participants.

Tool. Operation Song itself is an experience. Participants described the whole process as a tool for coping but also specified music and songwriting as two keys that became outlets for coping development. Music was credited as an outlet for coping on a wide spectrum for participants from being “the only thing for me personally that has kept me going” to simply acting as something “different from anything that I have experienced before.” Participants identified music as a skill they learned to use for “self-soothing” and to continue engagement in music for leisure after the program was complete. Music was also credited as a “tool to bridge the gap for these things which pills and psychotherapy aren’t going to work. . .not for everybody anyways”. Several participants credited Operation Song with helping them reduce dependence on certain medications, but one participant in particular identified music as the reason for reducing medication dependence:

Thanks to Operation Song I have developed the ability to cope better with my P.T.S.D. by "self soothing" with music. This change in my life allows me to rely less on pharmaceuticals. I "have" another option "now" another tool (so to speak) A healthier one.

Music is experienced differently by all individuals and the natural incorporation of music into the Operation Song experience was described as “magic”, “more honest”, and a “universal language”.

It [Operation Song]works you see, the same way that therapy works. It’s just a different kind of therapy to open you up. There’s something about music that’s more honest than just saying things-just talking. There’s something about music that is connected to the soul and so, that’s why I’ve seen more people get benefit from the Operation Song than anything else.

The great thing about music is that, like I said with songwriting, everyone is an individual. We are all unique individual people. . .I think we should all describe each other as snowflakes in a way. We're all unique individuals and I'll tell you what, when a freakin bomb blows up you'll tear apart pretty fucking easy you know? We are all delicate. We are all delicate, unique, insignificant specs on the planet but we all do have our own lives and to us our lives are important. . .so with each of us being unique people, music reaches so many different people and through that you can have different impacts. So for me, bridging a gap is what I'm trying to do, but somebody else may have a story to tell you know?. . .They may have a beautiful colorful story to tell and that I believe in a lot of ways is-that's another part of the magic.

Songwriting is another key factor in Operation Song programming and was described by many participants in direct connection with coping. Songwriting was described as a coping tool that helped participants make connections between self-reflection and behavior. Songwriting was also attributed to the encouragement of “posttraumatic growth”.

When you have posttraumatic stress disorder, the tendency is to block certain parts of your life from changing and you stop evolving those areas and you have a blockage. You're not quite able to-you're not able to fire on all seven cylinders you know? You're blocked in at least one area, and when this happens it's incredibly hard to reach somebody. So songwriting is really one of the best tools I believe there is for that. . .Songwriting is in a way helping people direct their minds to that specific region of the brain with their concentration. With their concentration, it's a fruitful thing. It's not just your thought. It's putting your heart in your thought and putting yourself into it three ways breathing life into this thing, you know?

The experience of songwriting in Operation Song was mentioned by participants as a unique outcome that was a result of the overall process that included the talents of the songwriters:

Songwriting definitely-definitely you know whether it's Operation Song or not, it has the potential to help people. And I think that the way Operation Song goes about approaching it with true-I mean these guys are freakin' tremendous songwriters. They are the best in the country and that's just-I really feel like that has an even greater ability to reach people simply because you know these guys

are great songwriters. And not only great songwriters, but they are there for the right reasons.

Alternative therapy. In addition to actual coping skills developing as a result of the Operation Song experience, the majority of participants shared different descriptions of how they felt Operation Song served as “therapy”. Some participants described Operation Song as one of the most beneficial programs they have been a part of. Some even specifically stated that Operation Song saved their lives: “I believe what they’re doing is as therapeutic as anything and most of the people that you’ll talk to, that’s what they’ll say – it’s the best therapy that they’ve ever had.” “This has done more for me than any other program that I’ve ever gone through in the VA system or anywhere else in the community.” “It has helped me more than any of the medicine that I’ve been given for my head...it is medicine.” “Operation Song saved my life”.

I know Operation Song and [founder] can be credited with saving-how do you put a-you can’t put a number on it, but a lot of guys will tell you that they had the gun in the roof of their mouth, ready to pull the trigger and [founder] got them out of that, talked them out of that. There’s no way to settle the score you might say.

For participants that elaborated why Operation Song has been therapy for them, a feeling of acceptance was a major reason. Participants described overcoming grief, accepting “my life”, and a general sense of “acceptance”. Almost every interview participant and many of the open-ended responses from questionnaires identified the songwriters as another major reason Operation Song had such “therapeutic” value.

They all [songwriters] have that empathy to be able to talk to them [veterans], pull out their stories, and hit them exactly where they are trying to go. It’s absolutely perfect. I have not met a veteran yet, not one who’s gone through the program that hasn’t said this is the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

Operation Song is not a traditional form of therapy. Even when partnering with formal therapy programs, Operation Song still functions as its own unique entity. Felix told a uniquely personal story of how this setting and experience was different from clinical therapies in the sense that the songwriter was an “ordinary person”. He felt a reduced sense of stigma and a heightened sense of normal:

I know that traditional therapy is not for everybody. I mean, I've probably done them all and I've been in the hospital setting for [number of] months when I was in the hospital and I was going through a intense therapy every day. We would get up and we was on a schedule. It was structured every day and I think sometimes in those types of settings it's-I guess there's a stigma attached to that type of setting because you're in the hospital and your mindset is that you are sick, something's wrong with you and so forth. When you are outside of that type of setting, which is you know this case with Operation Song, I think it-it kind of makes you feel more like a normal person because you're in a different setting. You're outside of the hospital and there's not-the doctors are not there. You are with an ordinary person out there in society helping you to write a song. And he was very good, I mean he was very understanding and I could open up with him. I felt comfortable with him so that helped me to open up...it made me feel like I could trust him. It kind of opened up that trust avenue to a civilian, regular civilian person. He wasn't judgmental, so I think that helped in that respect. . .it helped me to feel comfortable and it helped me to feel normal you know, a sense of normalcy.

Theme 4: Motivation. Participants described a sense of motion or momentum as an outcome of Operation Song that can best be described as a catalyst of motivation. A sense of invigoration was described as a “spark” that propelled them forward into new pursuits. Rufus described Operation Song as the point where “I became very busy and I wasn’t that way before. Before Operation Song, I wasn’t like that. It came and all of a sudden Vroom.” Rufus shared that he had started participating in veteran specific non-profit groups in the community, started working on creative productions, and stated that the sense of closure achieved in Operation Song led to a sense of “I’m ready, let’s do something!”. Participants described Operation Song as the catalyst and jump off point for

when they began engaging in new leisure activities both at home and in the community, seeing a new value in seeking help, creating a sense of purpose in their lives, and leading to positive behaviors.

New activities in home and in the community. Participants specifically mentioned writing books, singing, playing guitar, journaling, writing songs, and even picking up previous leisure interests that were put down until after Operation Song. Some participants described how they became involved in songwriting groups, creative writing groups, or other veteran non-profit organizations in their local areas. Absirokee told a story about how Operation Song ended up being the first step in a series of programs he engaged in that established the act of songwriting as a leisure activity to continue at home and in the community. Operation Song was the first step, followed by a “basic song structures” songwriting group at Absirokee’s local VA, then plans to transition to a community-based performing arts program to “finish up there by actually compiling, composing, and performing our own songs”. Absirokee described Operation Song as a catalyst for a sense of community reintegration and also giving a potential “footstep through the door towards being an actual singer songwriter.” The goal of Operation Song is not to train future singer songwriters; however, for Absirokee and others, the experience enabled a sense of competence and confidence in the ability to develop songwriting from a leisure activity to a potential “money maker”.

Jamie told a story about how, after the military, he had resigned to a life of solitude and self-identified as a “hermit”. “I fully intended to be away from people. I was perfectly happy to be here in the wood and doin’ what I had to do.” Jamie “credited” Operation Song with his “coming out of my shell”. After the experience, Jamie then joined multiple

service-related organizations, started writing, and has remained active with a group of Operation Song alumni. Several participants have similar stories of increased activity both in the home and in their communities.

Purpose. Operation Song was specifically described as giving participants a sense of purpose. “It gave me a sense of purpose for my life” and “a feeling of importance.” It “helped me feel connected to something greater again.” This led to a sense of strength and a feeling of being “more relaxed now and resigned to living every day the best I can”. Aaron simply said “I want to live” in response to an open ended question asking about immediate outcomes of Operation Song and this feeling was reiterated by others. Other participants described this sense of purpose as feeling their lives had been saved:

First of all it's saved my life give me a reason to live it gave me a chance to watch the grandbabies grow up. It also gave me recent to want to be a part of something bigger greater than where I was at. It produced a magical moment for myself.

The sense of purpose Operation Song created for participants led to a sense of direction.

Buck described this as a realization that a change in path was needed:

It engulfed me. . .It gave me the passion it gave me to realize ‘oh you’re going down a wrong hole you know? You need to get back up and regroup and really listen to this and really figure out’ ‘cause I was one of those last ones to get my song at [location] done because it was just wow. I was soaked up with everybody else and their stories. I was just, I was so hooked. I felt the love again.

Buck went on to describe this “love” as a sense of camaraderie. “It’s a brotherhood, it’s a sisterhood you know?” The feeling of camaraderie and a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood that was described as part of the Operation Song experience enabled a sense of appreciation for what other veterans have gone through. Participants described this as influencing a sense of direction where they could see changes that

needed to be made when they were able to see the difficulties others were going through as a sense of “legitimising suffering” (Caddick et al, 2015, p. 294).

For some, this new sense of purpose gave “the courage to try” or “reinforces my need to remain active”. Purpose also created a sense of passion in the program and in life. “I fell in love with Operation Song. It has given me a new passion. It gave me a love to do things with my family.” Participants described a “fire” in the experience of being with the other Operation Song participants and songwriters where “you feel the passion of everybody else”. Craig described how it had been four years since participating in the original retreat program. He and a few peer Operation Song graduates had recently called the founder of Operation Song who was their songwriter and reminisced about the program and the song they had written together. He described in our interview how important it was to see the “value in the work that he’s [Operation Song founder] doing”. Other participants described this sense of shared passion as a passing of the torch sense of purpose that helped ensure “his [Operation Song founder] legacy will live on. I think it will for sure through me and my counterparts here. That’s’ always going to be our-kind of where we started.”

Seeing a value in seeking help. Participants described the process of Operation Song as one they saw value in. Seeing the value in the programs and retreats was described as leading to an awareness that “there is a program out there to really help veterans.” “That [Operation Song] was the catalyst for us kind of moving forward and seeing that there is a space and a need for this type of therapy.” Operation Song was also described as leading to “ a new outlook on the values of therapy.” Participants described being better able to talk with their therapists, reducing dependence on medications, and

seeing that “there are other things out there like this that can help people you know, to heal or help them in their recovery process.”

It's almost like- I hate to use the word precursor, but I mean it is a precursor but it's so much more than that you know? I mean it. I could walk into my therapist now and talk to her a whole lot more effectively because of Operation Song.

Two participants who described a reduction in medications and one attributed Operation Song as being a catalyst to help stop drinking. None of these participants gave “100% of the thanks to that-to just straight to Operation Song.” But they did identify the experience as a “major catalyst” in putting together the puzzle pieces that helped figure out what next steps to take.

Positive actions. There were several specific outcomes for participants that resulted from Operation Song which did not fall into any other category than the fact that they were positive. Other participants identified being more social, being more able to talk “in the company of my brothers”, having better relationships, being able to set personal goals, finding new motivation to write songs, and feeling more outgoing. The ability of being able to “express their selves through song” during Operation Song led them to better communication and relationship skills. Bruce stated “it opened up a lot of things for me. It made my life easier.” Craig stated “I can definitely tell you without a doubt that Operation Song has had a huge impact just in my life in general you know, in every aspect.”

Theme 5: Sense of Service. Participants described a sense of service stemming from their Operation Song experience. Many participants identified so much benefit and enjoyment from the experience that they wanted to extend this benefit by providing support to Operation Song from a variety of levels. Participants identified support being

provided from a monetary level, a production level, or a general desire to help. Several participants described making videos of songs or programs to expand communication capacities through visual representations of the experience. Many participants felt they were supporting Operation Song by encouraging others to participate and by spreading the word. Several participants stated they actively promote Operation Song outside of the Nashville area because they:

want to get the word out there. I want people to know, I want veterans to know there is options out there. So you know, if this ain't workin, try that. If that don't work, there's so much out there that they aren't aware of. It gives them an opportunity and I wanted them to know, hey there's another opportunity dude, it's called Operation Song

Absirokee had a unique take on this sense of service by describing the act of attending Operation Song as an act of service in itself:

Operation Song motivated me as far as. . .I'm more of an introvert especially since I have PTSD and I just-I felt like I was going out of my comfort zone but then I realized you know hey, this-this isn't just for you you know? You need to be out there like a scout and find out what the program is all about because I am interested in showing the veterans off as much as possible.

Outside of a general sense of service reciprocated through a desire to support Operation Song, a sense of service was created through the songs having a purpose on their own and through participants starting new programs hoping to help more veterans.

The song as service. Many participants described their songs as stories meant to represent something more than just the individual participant themselves. For some participants, the songs created during Operation Song were created for other veterans as a “tribute”, an “inspiration”, or something “everybody” could relate to. Eagles Wings described the song as a "vehicle to create opportunities for me to outreach to other PTS [posttraumatic stress] war veterans." The song had a purpose:

I think we can actually use the word purpose here, but it's not my purpose, it's the songs purpose. It's about the song and it's about the words of the song. And the listener relating very easily to the words, and-but, purpose is a strong word. Effect is another word. Another word is results. Another word is responses. Because, again, I encourage you to read the comments of-on the song and read those responses and even individuals who are not military but are still traumatized with PTSD relate to this song. And so it goes far and wide.

Eagles Wings also shared a story about how a “PTSD Treatment Director” from a foreign army contacted him “to ask if he could translate the song. . .for his PTSD troops” so his song was shared on an exponential level. Absirokee described the unique difficulties returning home from service in a combat location that was not officially recognized as a war by the United States where “you were there, but you weren’t there”. His song was created as “a way for me to kinda deal with my PTSD and stress. It’s also a way to give some notoriety to my brothers and sisters.”

Participants described a great sense of pride in their songs’ ability to reach beyond their own self. "I know that my song has touched others’ lives. People I've never met. That means a lot to me and lets me know that I'm not the only one experiencing the trauma." Participants described an importance in “knowing I can help someone else” through the creation of these songs, which had a healing effect in “helping other people”.

Started programs. Some participants experienced a sense of service stemming from Operation Song that led them to create programs to help other veterans. Participants created an alumni group, music programs, and a social program “for our local veterans here that want to get out of the house” and “be creative”. Craig specifically described how creating a program in his local area helped fellow graduates of Operation Song in “coming out of our shell and being more social with not only each other, but with ourselves and our girlfriends and things like that.” These programs appear to function as

a sort of second act of Operation Song for participants to continue growing, socializing, while helping other veterans.

Theme 6: The Tangible Song. Operation Song is unique in the fact that it has a product. Regardless of any other outcome, every participant is given a copy of the song they created either digitally or on a physical CD. “It gives hope, healing, camaraderie and something tangible. Proof of your struggle or feelings. Something you can keep, cherish, or trash (as a way of getting rid of that chapter of your life).” These tangible songs that can be heard and in some cases seen or touched, served as a very important aspect of the Operation Song experience as described by participants. The songs acted as something physical the participants could take with them and as a tangible representation of each participants’ accomplishments. The tangibility of these songs served not only as something that could actually be shared, but also as a representation of each participants’ ability to open up and served as a structure to the stories being told.

Operation Song is that warmup. That warmup to create you. To create that comfort zone to get you started you know, talking about what's wrong. It gives you a way to talk about it. . .sometimes that's the biggest issue, how do I, you know if I wanna tell you about this, if I wanna tell my mom, my daughter, or somebody like that about it how do I even start this conversation? And I was able to hand my mom that cd and she listened. . .She had a nice little start. I mean, it meant a lot to her. She got a look into what I couldn't say.

Something to Share. The song produced as an outcome of Operation Song was an actual thing that could be shared and talked about. Participants could give the cd or link to their song to anyone and that person could hear what was created. The songs became something that could be used as an “an open line of communication with my spouse that she can identify with.” The songs gave participants “something to talk about. It’s a subject that has success in it. It’s a subject that I can address even to non-veterans you

know?” Participants described an importance in being able to share the songs with children, spouses, parents, family, and the families of those the songs were written about. The songs acted as an actual bridge to connect communication barriers for many participants and created the capabilities to share. Chad described the song’s ability to shine a different light on his experience that was difficult for others to understand:

They also seemed to understand my trauma in a different way. I at least felt that way. Having a song to play for family and friends is easier than trying to verbally describe issues in my life...I believe a song helps them better understand than me telling stories.

The songs served a greater purpose than providing entertainment for every person interviewed. The songs gave participants a voice. Eagles Wings described the song as his “spokesman” that created a sense of safety:

It’s [song] in effect my partner, where I don’t have to open up myself and risk myself. I can have this Operation Song song play it for me and say my words for me in a format that is, first of all entertaining, and it’s hard hitting, it’s raw and it’s in your face. And it’s the real truth.

Ability to Open Up. The songs created something that could be physically shared, but in creating the songs, participants described the discovery of an ability to open up and share as a result of Operation Song.

There's a lot of folks out there I run across that have a story that they want to tell, but for them-a lot of them don't know how to do it. And so, when you're able to sit down and write your story out as a song, you've got something visual that you can see. And what happens is, I find out is some people have a lot of commonalities. 'Oh yea, you know something similar like that happened to me' and that gets their thought process rollin'. The next thing you know, they sit down and write. . .We can run across a lot of similarities and there's a lot of differences you know, in branches of services, when we served, what we went through, but then there's a lot of similarities also. And so, being able to communicate that way-because a lot of times you don't feel really comfortable just face to face right off talking to somebody about what you went through or what's goin on. But that - songwriting - can actually be a bridge that leads to that story coming out.

The creation of the songs was a process that was not done alone. Each participant worked with a songwriter as well as peers during the programs and retreats. Participants described an importance in being able to see and hear the stories come to life throughout the experience:

It's one thing to sit around and think it in your head, you know a certain scenario or certain situation, whatever, but it's another to hear it. And you know, anytime music's involved there's a feeling also. I mean, you hear it, you feel it.

Theme 7: Social Support. Participants described a variety of social impacts resulting from Operation Song all falling under the theme of social support. Participants describe now “having people to lean on”, “having another community of people that care”, “camaraderie”, and “fellowship”. Participants described unique senses of support each stemming from the interactions with Operation Song founders, songwriters, and representatives, as well as the interactions with peers throughout the programs. Operation Song songwriters and founders were repeatedly mentioned as the reasons participants were able to open up and share their stories:

[Operation Song founder] had a way of pulling emotions out of you and he wants to know what you're trying to say and he does it in the most gentle way, but he will get you to talk. He will kind of get you to say what's on your mind and kind of express yourself. And a lot of vets don't have that support system or have anybody in their life that can really kind of, you know, pull that out and do that for them.

Even though he's a songwriter and a well-known songwriter, but he is a better psychiatrist than anyone I've ever known. [Songwriter] had a way of talking to you and getting things out of you that you would never tell anyone else - not even your family. . .he deeply cared for what you were - for your story.

Participants also repeatedly expressed an intricate importance of the interactions with fellow veterans and peers:

The more meetings I attended the closer I grew to these great individuals. The instructors were so talented and put our stories into song. We told the songwriters stories that had never been told before. That "telling" took a tremendous weight off our shoulders and cemented a lasting brotherhood. I would have never opened up to anyone with the feelings that came pouring out.

Participants described the sense of social support primarily through a feeling of belonging and relatedness.

Belonging. The Operation Song experience created “closeness”, the realization that “I’m not alone”, and a further “compassion for fellow veterans. Feeling their hurt with them, crying with them. Letting them know other veterans cared.” The experience of Operation Song was described as intimate in the sense that participants were sharing very real and very personal stories with complete strangers for the most part. Operation Song created a sense of feeling understood.

So you know before, one of the big problems was. . .you think you're alone. You think you're crazy. You think the craziness you're feeling is unique to you and that's not at all. And that's the power of the [veteran facility] in the group being in a group of people like that. . .and the music just amplifies that. You hear how they see it - how other people, so but you understand their story and they're a close friend but they're a closer friendship.

Participants described Operation Song making it “much easier to meet, relate with/to and discuss particulars about our military service.” Friendships were developed in this setting that for some participants, have lasted years. These friendships were not limited just to peer friendships. Participants also described staying in touch with the founders of Operation Song and the songwriters. These relationships were described as an important source of retaining the sense of social support that was developed during the program. The camaraderie experienced during Operation Song was described as more

important than songwriting for Jamie. For him, the friendships developed in Operation Song were described as “probably” greater than those of service friendships:

We were all real tight, but it was probably not as much so as with the guys that I’ve known for the last four years in Operation Song. Operation Song has meant so much to me and to every one of those guys. I will guarantee you that every one of the guys that you talk to that’s out of the alumni group. . . will tell you the same thing. . . I’ve sat and listened to so many stories, some- and they’ll tell you that Operation Song saved their lives.

Relatedness. In addition to the sense of belonging that was created when participants felt they could relate to each other’s songs, participants also described a sense of relatedness as an outcome of the program. Many participants described the ability to hear their own stories in listening to other participants’ stories and songs. Buck told a story about a friend who recognized him as being in a “bad place in my head” and invited him to watch Operation Song. Buck stated that once one of the songs was played, “I lost it because he [songwriter/performer] was telling my story. And there’s a brotherly love that you have in combat that you can’t describe, you just gotta live through it. That made me feel so much better.” Other participants reiterated this feeling of “it’s like that’s everybody’s song. Everybody was there, everybody was around it, everybody saw.”

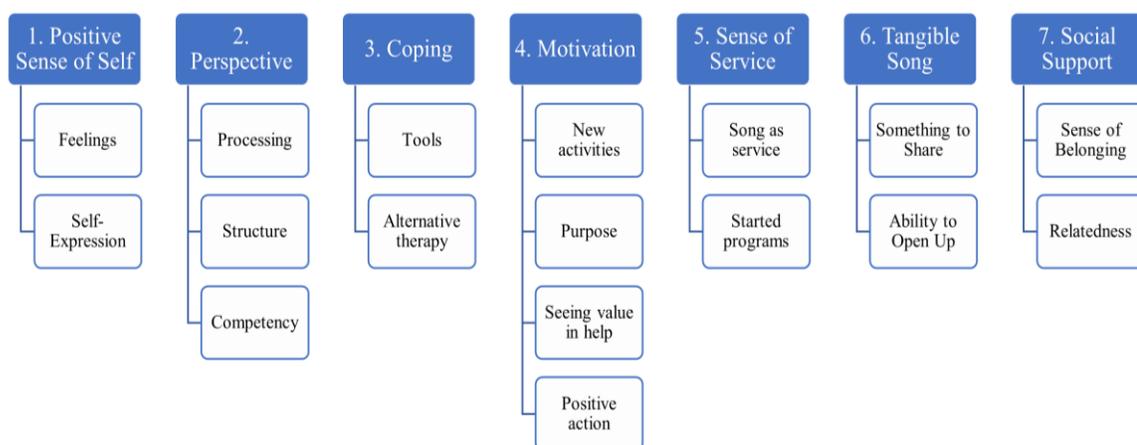
Participants described a feeling of reinforcement that “you’re not the only one that’s got this problem” through the listening of other people’s songs and not feeling “alone again because you’re not surrounded by military like you would be when you’re active duty.” Participants described the sense of belonging and understanding as one that led to “the feeling of knowing I am not the only one fighting demons.” Participants stated they have “seen it save lives” in other participants and described watching the process and experience of other veterans taking part in Operation Song as “magic”. Randy

described the importance of relatedness in terms of learning new coping skills by watching the process work for other people:

I wanna use the coping skills I've got and if I pick up more that's great. If I can see how something might not be working for somebody else, I can find out if it's working better for me than it is working for them, or am I doin that you know? Maybe just not realizing that you can see it on other people and you can kinda see yourself through them sometimes.

Figure 1.

Operation Song Outcome Themes



Note. These themes and subcategories describe the Operation Song qualitative outcomes constructed through analysis of participant perspectives.

Table 1.

Additional Quotes from Participant Interviews, Questionnaires, & Surveys

		Additional Quotes from Participant Interviews, Questionnaires, & Survey
Positive Sense of Self	Feelings	<p>"It enabled me the opportunity express my feelings in writing. A feeling of forever at ease sharing my daily struggles with severe PTSD...through song where as I get to tell my story the way I want to without explanation or judgment"</p> <p>"It was a lot different than I thought it would be. I don't get very emotional anymore for various number of reasons, but I got a little more emotional than I thought I would. So, it was very good."</p>
	Self-Expression	<p>"This is one of the most beneficial programs in which I have ever participated. My PTSD has kept me out of these kinds of programs in the past. I was lucky and a friend pushed me to join him. The group format helped a lot. [Founder] was amazing drawing us in and finding out stories. He was able to encourage the team spirit for support and still get our particular stories i.i. (I never spoke of the killing for 50 years, my song [song title] is about the killing.) The words the sounds they are me. Something about music and the soul."</p> <p>"It was very therapeutic and I know the individuals that collaborated with [songwriter] during that session are way more social now and better husbands to their wives. And they really come out of it with the experience to express their selves through song."</p>
	Processing	<p>"To write a song, there's different ways of looking at things"</p> <p>"Operation Song in and of itself is one of the most awesome experience I've ever-I'll cherish the rest of my life...it will change the way you think about a lot of stuff."</p>
Perspective	Structure	<p>"I've been lookin at different things since Operation Song. Operation Song's the first thing I did...it all started there, that's where it all started. It all started there and I know this because I know me and I know that had that not happened first and the I like that those guys have stayed in touch with me and they follow up say how you doin."</p> <p>"You might make your song make a little better sense, more clear...it's just with everybody, you're either putting into one song like we do or do in the group sometimes or write your song with a professional you know, it's just-they're not telling the story. They're helpin' you tell the story."</p>
	Competency	<p>"When you hear your thoughts come out over the radio or come out over a CD that was recorded or whatever, like, it's invigorating. It makes you feel productive and "look what I can do" kind of thing you know? Even though like you had a very small hand in just the lyrics and then everything else in Nashville was produced, you still had a hand in that and to know that I always have...it's still like damn, we wrote that. We made something you know?...It's still like part of me and I still feel like that's something that always will be. And so I think that people can have a sense of ownership in what they're doing and how they express themselves. It really can change your mental health outlook."</p> <p>"That was before Operation Song. That was before I knew how to construct a melody, how to construct a chorus and a verse and how to build all that out. And you know, [songwriter], helped with that. [Songwriter] helped give me the foundation and you know, it's not music theory. It's not how to play the guitar. It's simply like, this is how a song is structured. We could do it this way, that way, or another way and this is how you're gonna come out on top of know the best you could be at this level, right? I mean, just that encouragement...I think that encouragement is what kept a lot of us going"</p>
	Tools	<p>"A different tool to use in the healing and coping process. It was something about music that is different from anything that I have experienced before"</p> <p>"To me it's not a scientific answer at all. It's a-music is the language of the gods and when you're playing with music, you're playing with magic."</p>
Coping	Alternative Therapy	<p>"First you have to know yourself and you have to understand things about yourself. And I think that what happens when you don't get certain things out, is that you're unable to understand them and then mainly because some things there is no way to ever understand...You cannot make sense of senseless death, senseless violence, even if there is a purpose behind it. And the point when the violence happens, when the rubber meets the road, when the bullet meets the flesh - that moment a lot of the ideas of what you're fighting for no longer exist. There's just what's happening right there and it's chaos and it's hell and it's awful and there's no way to make sense of it. And I think for a lot of veterans who don't ever get it out, they lock it up and they-we-they don't accept that you can't make sense of it they just ignore it. They try to hide it. They try to hide from it and in doing so-in doing so, they are never able to know themselves again. And you can't. And this is where I believe Operation Song has had a lot of impact in my life, by helping me connect to see all of-so I can finally understand this, because I mean there's just no way to rationalize some of these things. Some things you just have to accept, but you truly have to accept them."</p> <p>"I have been able to accept my life and overcome some of my grief."</p>

Table 1. Continued

Additional Quotes from Participant Interviews, Questionnaires, & Surveys

Motivation	Purpose	<p>"It's just a great way to express your trauma in a way where you don't feel "put on the spot" like it feels during a typical therapy session. It also reminds me that I'm not alone by any means as others can relate. It's hard for adult men, especially combat veterans, to discuss their feelings. But when you use those feelings to write a song it's easier to open up...it helps you feel like you have purpose."</p> <p>"I became very busy and I wasn't that way before. Before Operation Song, I wasn't like that. It came and all of a sudden, Vroom...I don't think had it been for this, before that, I wouldn'ta done it because I wasn't ready to get out and about and do all this stuff. I was vising buddies here and there, but I was only keepin' it with my Army buddies...if it wasn't for Operation Song, I probably wouldn't have done the movie thing. I would have-I probably would have turned it down or something and just not done it. After that, I just felt this new life, especially after I met his family and I got-I guess I got a bit of closure from all that and I was like man, I'm ready, let's do something!"</p>
	Seeing value in help	<p>"It's a great, great little tool. I think, if a person applies themselves to Operation Song, they come out of Operation Song on the other end having accomplished something. Having something to show for it and having a new outlook on the values of therapy."</p> <p>"I could walk in to my therapist now and talk to her a whole lot more effectively because of Operation Song."</p>
	Positive Action	<p>"I didn't know how it was gonna help me let's put it that way but it did. It did in a big way and I guess it's opened me up I guess is what I'm sayin. It's-I don't know, I feel like a new person. I feel like a new person since that day. So, I feel more outgoing, I feel like I could talk about things easier."</p> <p>"The Operation Song experience helped to spark something in me that I didn't know I had – that is to write about my war experiences in the form of a song and maybe possibly help another fellow veteran along the way."</p> <p>"For me what's happened is I mean I quit drinking...I had actually decided that week because the gravity of what I was going to do to perform, I wasn't gonna go drink...I'm here for a different reason...and it's a big reason for me...I know that I don't want to give 100% of the thanks to that-to just straight to Operation Song, but I will say that that was a major catalyst. Again, connecting the dots and seeing what I need to do."</p>
Sense of Service	Song as Service	<p>"I had the heads up to think you know what, this is bigger than me-I need to get more and more people involved to see."</p> <p>"What was even more rewarding is the veterans who could relate to my experiences and were helped in some way by the song."</p> <p>"My song was more of a tribute to those that I had served with that did not make it back home alive."</p>
	Started Programs	<p>"Almost every other vet also wants another song and another song. So that's why the alumnus thing works, they get together and do the song"</p> <p>"We took it as a huge opportunity to maybe start a music program here in [city name] for other veterans."</p> <p>"I think that all these things have happened because of [founder] that I don't think he even knows about. That he's changed so many lives even in our little pocket. That we talk about him probably at least once a week and it comes up in our conversations about how we can...how to create a similar type thing on a smaller scale just for our local veterans here that want to get out of the house."</p>
Tangible Song	Something to Share	<p>"That's the power of Operation Song. You can't help but have somebody listen to your song. It's the creation. It's something you did. And something you did well, because they have all this professional help."</p> <p>"Operation Song is that warmup. That warmup to create you. To create that comfort zone to get you started you know, talking about what's wrong. It gives you a way to talk about it...sometimes that's the biggest issue, how do I, you know if I wanna tell you about this, if I wanna tell my mom, my daughter, or somebody like that about tit how do I even start this conversation? And I was able to hand my mom that cd and she listened...She had a nice little start. I mean, it meant a lot to her. She got a look into what I couldn't say. But it is, it's nice. It's almost like- I hate to use the word precursor, but I mean it it a precursor, but it's so much more than that you know? I mean it. I could walk into my therapist now and talk to her a whole lot more effectively because of Operation Song."</p>
	Ability to Open Up	<p>"The story's a short condensed version...it's got all the high points or the key points in it, you just don't have to go over every little thing all the time...that's the good thing about it, it's got mostly positive things in it."</p> <p>"I keep saying the magic and to me that's what it is. It's creating that magic each person's different but it's still the same. And we're getting a dose that we've not had in a long time. For me, it's 50 years."</p>

Table 1. Continued*Additional Quotes from Participant Interviews, Questionnaires, & Surveys*

Social Support	Sense of Belonging	<i>"Knowing other vets have same feelings" "They were all telling their stories - war stories. And I sat back and listened to those guys and I thought 'wow, I found somebody that knows how I feel about this'. So I got close to a lot of those guys. I call em buddies. I call them brothers now".</i>
	Relatedness	<i>"Bein' a veteran, when you meet a veteran after talkin' to 'em for like 5 minutes it feels like you've known 'em forever." "If I had to rate each one of em' on a basis of a 1-10 scale, camaraderie would be a number 9 and songwriting would be a 1. 10 would be the best, Camaraderie is a nine and the songwriting is on the low end of the scale."</i>

Note. This table provides additional quotes of relevance from participants that were not quoted or quoted in full throughout Chapter 4.

Research Question 2: Do these outcomes align with goals as defined by the founders of Operation Song?

The goals of Operation Song are defined in the developing 2020 Strategic Plan as:

“Our overall goal is to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies and opportunities for self-expression. We use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses, to improve the quality of their lives and facilitate successful transitions to civilian life” (Operation Song, 2020).

As described in Chapter II, these goals have been broken down into five more specific goals to be more easily measured as follows:

1. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies
2. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of opportunities for self-expression
3. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses

4. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals improve the quality of their lives
5. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals facilitate successful transitions to civilian life

Comparison of Outcomes with Goals

All goals of Operation Song positively relate to outcomes findings; however, several will need further measurement if detailed comparison is desired by the organization.

1. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies

This segmented goal is focused on process and is difficult to assess through the scope of this dissertation. This goal reflects the organization's intent on serving as a unique and complementary service that will benefit traditional veteran therapies. Types of traditional therapies range significantly based on different diagnoses, so the generalization of this specific goal is unable to be assessed in this dissertation. In order to truly measure whether or not Operation Song programs are achieving enhancements of traditional therapeutic interventions, a pre-test and post-test comparison would need to be made in collaboration with the entities providing the therapies. Longitudinal clinical monitoring of behaviors, medications, and other treatment influences would better assess this goal.

However, participants do describe the experience as unique. Participants also describe the programs in therapeutic terms throughout all themes. Some even go as far as to say the program changed their lives and the lives of peers they observe. Multiple

participants specifically described Operation Song as “therapeutic”. Several participants described an ability to open up to their therapists as a result of Operation Song and also described an increased awareness of the value of seeking help. These findings do support the potential for Operation Song to exist as a “unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies”, but a relationship cannot be fully measured at this time without additional data collection.

2. to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of opportunities for self-expression

This segmented goal is focused on an outcome. There are many scales that measure self-expression; however, the subjectivity of this concept can be adequately measured by reported participant perspectives. Self-expression is defined as “the expression of one’s own personality: assertion of one’s individual traits” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Self-expression was found to be a specifically defined subcategory of the theme “positive sense of self” in addition to a sense of release participants described in being able to experience and express emotions. *Perspective* is a second theme of outcomes found which held the subcategory of *competency* that relates specifically to this goal. Competency is the idea that an individual will find the internal motivation to act based on a positive sense of personal ability. Several participants described a sense of accomplishment in having created something in the act of songwriting through Operation Song. *The Tangible Song* is a physical form of self-expression that is created for every participant in every Operation Song program. In comparing these findings with this goal, Operation Song is found to not only enhance opportunities for self-expression but also creates the opportunities on its own.

3. *to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses*

Songwriting and music are both methods that can be defined as creative and integrative, which address the first part of this goal. Processing is the second part and can be complicated to measure. Processing can be defined as “a series of actions or operations taken toward achieving a particular end” (Shpancer, 2018). It is an attempt to take in or understand a concept. A therapeutic definition takes a more specific route; however, Operation Song is not traditional therapy, nor does this goal specify any therapeutic inclinations. This definition of processing as moving forward through the “service related issues, injuries and illnesses” is appropriate for evaluation. The subjectivity in this goal allows appropriate evaluation to take place through participant perspectives that provide insight into whether or not the participant felt they have experienced processing. Measuring changes on a quantitative level would be difficult to accomplish because there is too much reliance on the interpretation of what it means to process. Defining how any issue, injury, or illness is processed also can be difficult to measure because of the wide range of interpretations and meaning.

Thematic findings of Operation Song outcomes as Coping, Perspective, Motivation, and Tangible Song all support this definition. As a *coping* mechanism, Operation Song was described as helping veterans process by creating forward momentum in the “healing process”. This was also described as helping participants “connect dots” that helped determine steps needed to move forward in life or to connect the past with the present. In terms of *perspective*, the act of self-reflection and redirection of how the memories were held and experienced within the veterans’ realities was

described as creating a bridge in finding purpose or direction. As a *catalyst*, the outcomes of Operation Song were described as creating momentum in initiating positive activity both in participant homes and communities. Participants also described an enhanced value of seeking additional help or in recognizing potential services of benefit. The creation of the *tangible song* was described as a process in itself that transformed the stories participants wanted to tell into a cohesive, condensed, creative form. The experience of *social support* reduced a sense of isolation and increased an understanding that the participants were not alone.

In this goal, Operation Song is not claiming to be a soul source of processing for participants. It is identifying a goal of using “creative and integrative methods to help individuals” process service specific details. Based on the perspectives identified by veterans in this dissertation, these findings support Operation Song programs as helping individuals process service related issues, injuries, and illness.

4. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals improve the quality of their lives

Quality of life (QOL) is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “individuals' perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHO, 2012, p. 11). Quality of life can be measured by six domains: physical health, psychological health, level of independence, social relationships, environmental, and spirituality/religion/personal beliefs (WHO, 2012). WHO has developed specific scales that measure QOL through a pre-test/post-test analysis; however, this was not possible for this dissertation. A difficulty also lies in conducting this assessment with

participants in programs that take place over the course of a few days. It would be difficult to truly assess the change in quality of life during that time frame. It would also be an overall difficulty in standardized assessments truly assessing whether or not Operation Song was the only influence on these changes without participant interviews. Findings of this dissertation do suggest that all themes of Operation Song outcomes relate to the domains of QOL. The best way to depict these is through a visual. See Figure 3 below. Based on the perspectives provided in this dissertation, these findings suggest that Operation Song outcomes support this goal.

5. to use creative and integrative methods to help individuals facilitate successful transitions to civilian life

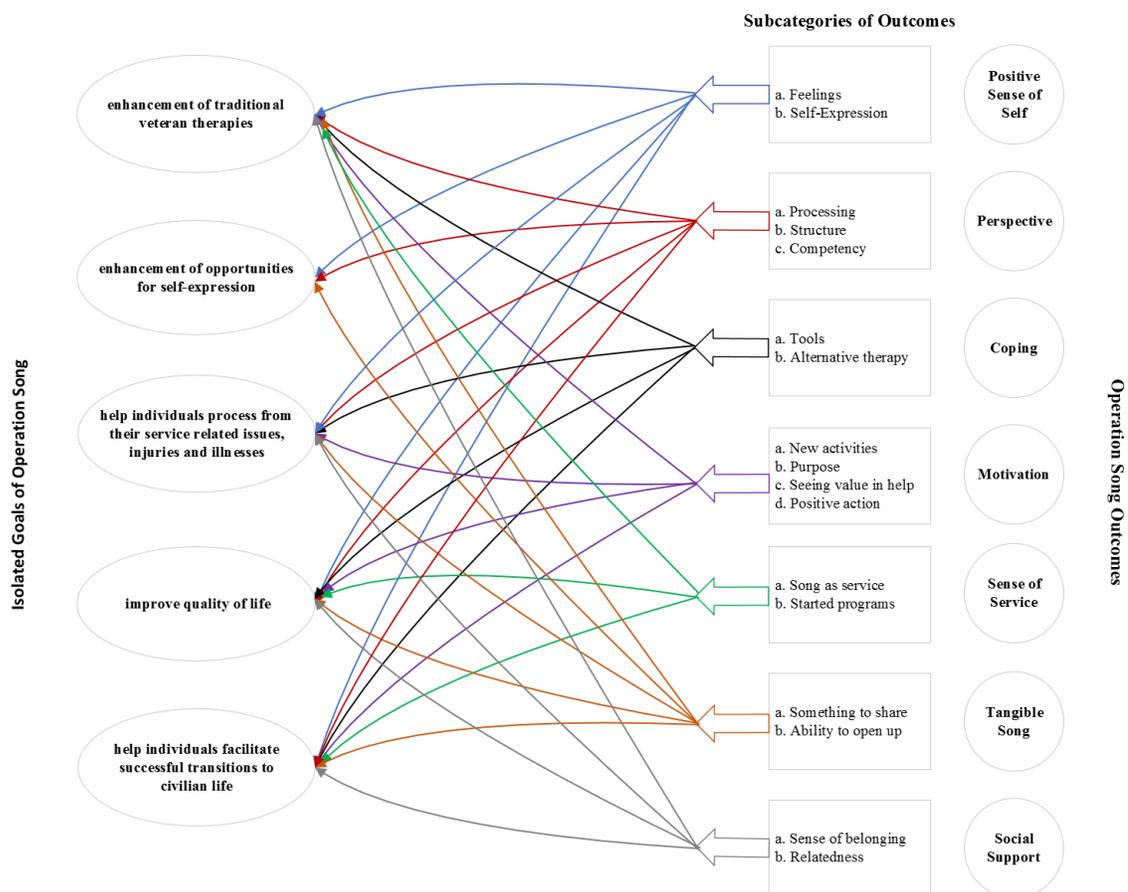
Assessing whether or not a program helps facilitate a successful transition from military to civilian life depends completely on what the participant's idea of a successful transition is. The transition to civilian life is ongoing and has great conflict in definition (Elnitsky et al, 2017), service goals, and measurement (Resnick et al, 2012). There are standardized assessment tools that measure community reintegration, but these are not widely or consistently used across military focused services. The specifications of this specific goal do not state that Operation Song seeks to function as the sole source of a successful transition. This goal states that the Operation Song methods seek to help facilitate the transition. It has a goal to be *a* factor that helps with the transition, not *the* factor.

The military to civilian transition can also be referred as community reintegration. Elnitsky et al (2017) offers the most comprehensive definition of community reintegration needs that I have been able to find through much research on the topic. All

themes of perceived outcomes described from Operation Song programs and retreats relate to these needs in respect to the subjective nature of transitional success (See Figure 4). Based on the perspectives provided in this dissertation, Operation Song outcomes support this goal.

Figure 2

Relationship between Operation Song Findings & Organizational Goals

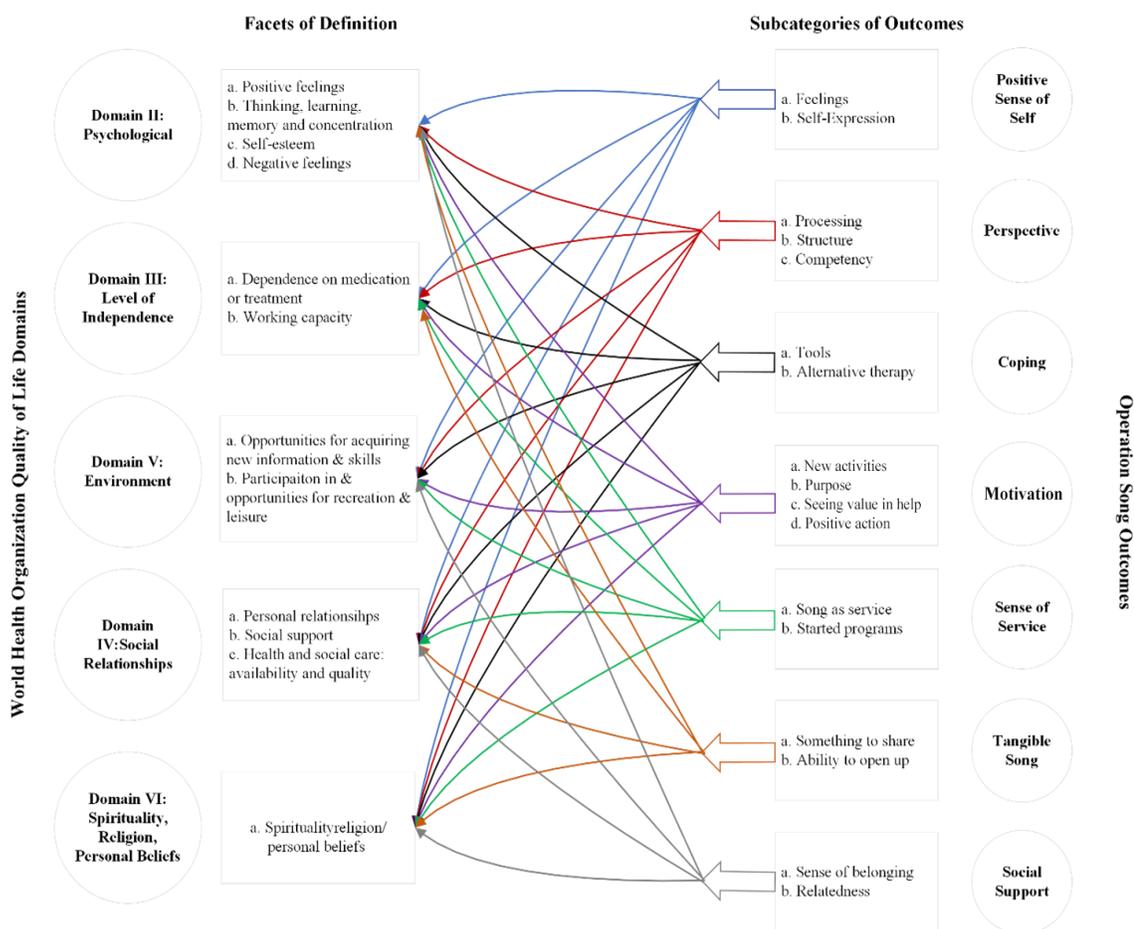


Note. This figure shows the relationship of each of the seven themes of Operation Song outcomes discovered in this thesis to the isolated sections of the goal of Operation Song.

The arrows represent a positive connection of each outcome category on the right to goals on the left. All findings connect to organizational goals and suggest positive merit.

Figure 3

Connections Between QOL & Operation Song Outcomes



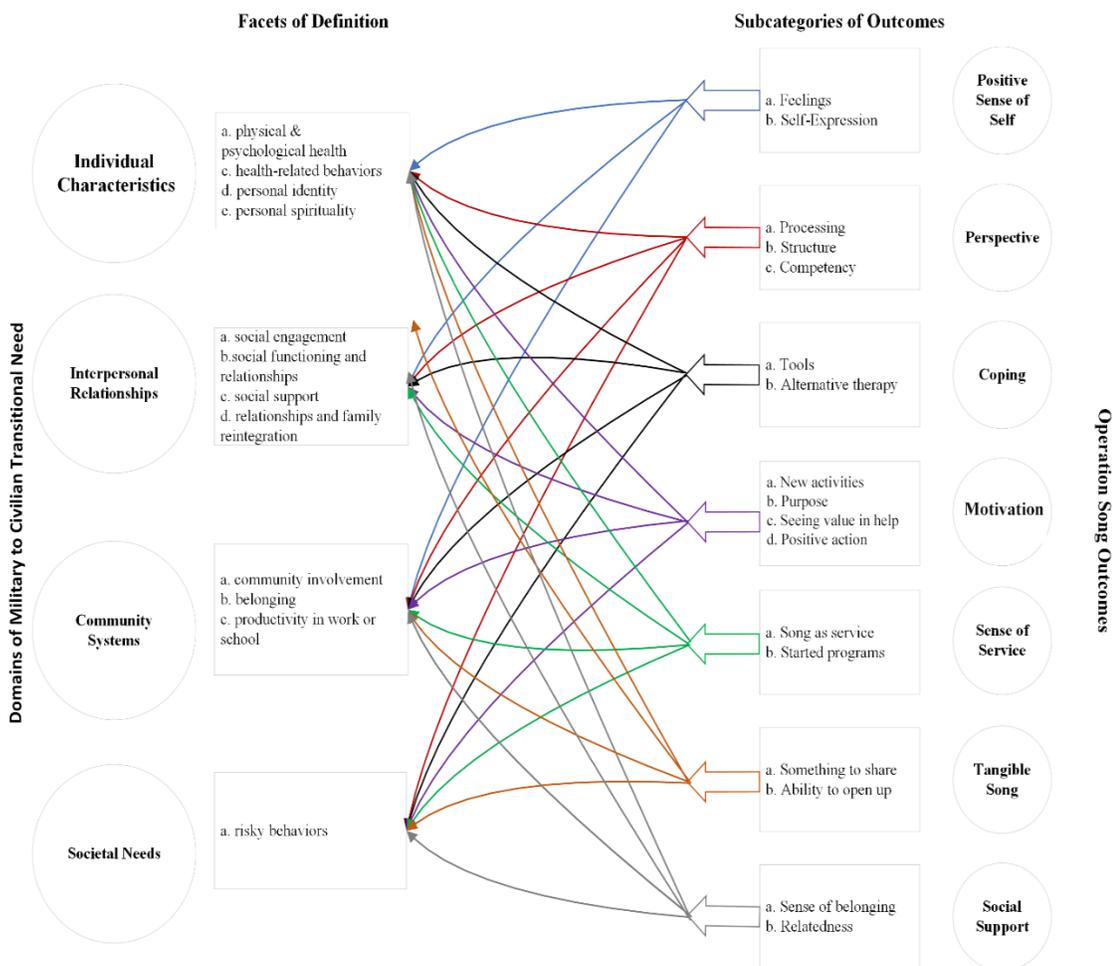
Note. This figure shows the relationship of Operation Song outcomes to the relevant domains of quality of life as defined by the World Health Organization. The arrows represent a positive connection of each outcome category on the right to the quality of life facets on the left that could be positively influenced. Positive Sense of Self,

Perspective, Coping, Motivation, and Sense of Service categories positively connect to all five of the domains. Tangible Song connects to all except Domain V: Environment. Social Support connects to all except Domain III: Level of Independence (WHO, 2012, pp. 58-67).

Social Support connects to all except Domain III: Level of Independence (WHO, 2012, pp. 58-67).

Figure 4.

Connections between Operation Song outcomes and military to civilian transition challenges



Note. This figure shows the relationship of Operation Song outcomes to the relevant categories of needs and difficulties as synthesized by Elnitsky et al (2017, p. 6). More categories of need are defined by Elnitsky; however, they do not relate to Operation Song outcomes and are not identified in this figure. The arrows represent a positive connection of each outcome category on the right to the transitional difficulty facets on the left that could be positively influenced (WHO, 2012, pp. 58-67). Based on participant descriptions, all outcomes except a Positive Sense of Self relate to all areas of transitional need. The theme of Positive Sense of Self and subcategories were not specifically described by participants as influencing risky behaviors and therefore could not be connected at this level of analysis.

Case Highlights

In answering the research questions of this dissertation, context has been provided that describe the participant perspectives of Operation Song outcomes through quotes embedded into the earlier section of this chapter that substantiate the themes and subcategories. These findings have been compared to the overall goals of the organization and the relationships have also been described. Although these outcomes were able to establish a theory of what Operation Song is doing by combining individual perspectives into categorized themes, the findings still exist as perspective driven experiences. Each individual lives the different outcomes of shared experiences as a unique and independent meaning no matter how similar they may be to other participants' experiences. Although this study is not a case study design, four unique participant stories have been chosen to further highlight of the outcomes of the Operation Song experience. I do not wish for this section to misconstrue the fact that this

dissertation could not have been completed without every perspective that was provided. Every story told in this dissertation and each piece of information provided through all sources of data is important. Every single perspective adds a unique and important contribution to the connection of Operation Song experiences and outcomes. The presentation of these specific participant's stories simply seeks to add additional context to the outcomes of Operation Song.

Rufus

"I don't know what it was when I left that day. I don't know, something felt different...I felt different. I felt good."

Rufus is a military veteran who participated in an Operation Song retreat approximately one year prior to being interviewed. During our interview, Rufus went into great detail sharing stories of military service both overseas and stateside, during combat and after, and the difficulties returning to both a non-combat stateside position and later to a civilian lifestyle. The conversation of his experience with Operation Song was highlighted by a story about what happened after Rufus wrote a song during Operation Song that honored a fallen comrade and friend. Rufus described how the experience was a significantly positive catalyst in many aspects of his life, but one particular "unreal day" stood out after finishing Operation Song. Approximately one month after writing the song, Rufus decided to drive to the state where this friend was buried because this had not been something he had done before this point in time.

It's the 5th anniversary of him passing away, so I said I think it's time to go out there and I don't know what I'm gonna do or who, what, but at least I'm gonna go out there and visit his resting place. It's been long enough. . .I drive through the night. I get to [town name] like at just before sunrise and I go to the cemetery where he was at. It was a big cemetery and I look at a map and I have a lady kinda

show me. . .and I brought my campin' chair, brought some beers, and. . .I finally see his grave. And so the sun's comin' up, and then I felt guilty. I had this guilt feeling. I said man, it took so long to get here you know. And five years is not a long time, but it is long enough I guess. But then all of a sudden this pickup truck pulls up and this guy gets out and it's like a ghost. It looks like [friend]. It's his uncle, looks just like him. His Uncle [name omitted] he just pulls up and gets out. He doesn't say a word to me. I'm standin there, I have a camp chair I'd already put it down. So I'm standin there and he walks up and just stands next to me and I didn't know it was him. But him, I thought gosh, he looks like [friend]. And I thought it was just another soldier that had served at some point that had come to pay his respects. So I was like 'did you- did you serve with [friend] also?' And he goes, 'no, I'm his uncle' and I'm like. He goes, 'I'm [uncle]' and we shook hands. We ended up talkin for 3 hours, we kept talkin...And I said its taken me 5 years and I said I served with him, he was one of my guys the second time we went to Iraq and this and that. So we talked for a while then I bring up the song. I said 'I'd love for you to hear this song'. I said, 'I just wrote a song a few months ago with [songwriter] about [fallen friend] in Nashville' and every time I'd bring it up, he'd change the subject

Rufus goes on to describe how the uncle eventually had to leave but invited him over to meet the rest of his friends' family where Rufus was able to not only meet the family, but also ended up with the opportunity to share the song that he had written about his friend with the family.

So, I pull out my phone, nervous, shaking, and I pull it up. I pull the file up and I hand her[grandmother] my phone. And she-she laid down and she closed her eyes and she listened to it. And of course, tears runnin' down her face, and uh, it was it was a moment.

Rufus did not have the intent of meeting this friend's family when vising the grave, but it happened and he was able to share this song with the family of his fallen friend as well. Rufus described Operation Song as giving him the ability to do this. For Rufus, the outcomes of Operation Song were not only impacts to his self, but also impacted the family of his fallen friend. The majority of conversation on outcomes with Rufus were focused on this story and on the new sense of motivation he felt in the refreshed sense of who he was.

Chad

Chad is a military veteran who traveled to participate in an Operation Song retreat approximately one year prior to completing this interview. Chad is a unique case, because although many positive outcomes were described, he specifically mentioned several opposite experiences in areas that many participants swore by. When asked about Operation Song giving a sense of purpose, Chad responded:

I definitely didn't feel like this gives me a purpose. I mean, it makes you-when you talk about stuff, it makes you think about things and stuff like that but I mean, maybe some people felt that way. I guess it would just depend on what their song was about or what their thoughts are about.

For Chad, the overall experience of Operation Song did not create a sense of purpose, but it was found in a new ability to open up and “express your trauma in a way where you don’t feel “put on the spot” like it feels during a typical therapy session.” Chad further specified by writing:

It also reminds me that I’m not alone by any means as others can relate. It’s hard for adult men, especially combat veterans, to discuss their feelings. But when you use those feelings to write a song it’s easier to open up...it helps you feel like you have purpose

Songwriting became an outlet to give Chad the ability to take control of how his feelings were shared did. When asked about whether songwriting as a function of telling his story had any effect on his ability to talk about his traumatic experiences, Chad responded:

I don't know that it did for me personally, because I got out in [early 2000's], so I'm kinda used to tellin' my story a lot. And like I said before, it was like a cooler way to tell my story. To hear it. . .was pretty cool. To let my family and stuff listen to it was pretty cool. . .maybe my family can understand it this way.

Chad brought a unique perspective into the analysis of Operation Song outcomes because he had already told his story and was not looking for this as a goal of participation in the program. He described the ability to turn his story into a song as a “cooler” way to tell the story, but he mostly described the act of songwriting as a way to offer his story to family and help enhance their understanding. “I believe a song helps them better understand than me telling stories.”

When Chad was asked if Operation Song had an impact on self-worth, abilities, or a sense of who he was, he responded that it did not.

It's hard to explain, but I didn't. I thought it was a great experience and I loved it. I loved every minute of it. It was awesome. I loved goin' to Nashville, I loved bein with other veterans. So us talkin-I loved talkin you know. It was a great experience, I wouldn't change it for the world, but did it make me any different because I went? I mean maybe for like fun.

Operation Song was not described as having a significant impact on his sense of self or who he felt he was. Instead, Chad described the outcomes of the experience more as an opportunity to be part of a positive social environment. He described this as a reprieve from isolation, which can very impactful for military veterans with PTSD, depression, and any number of related issues. Chad described how a huge impact of the experience was the opportunity to not be isolated while the retreat was taking place. Each participant was out of their local home area during this particular program and he identified this as particularly important.

Chad described Operation Song as creating an environment that encouraged social inclusion and engagement. He shared a story of how one of the peers who was also participating in the retreat told him that Operation Song was that peer's first experience getting out and talking about trauma. This reduction of isolation created by the Operation

Song experience was a major outcome described by Chad's perspective that was more important for him than a sense of changed perception.

It was good to get me out of the house and to look at it that way, and everybody in our group made sure to mention that. There wasn't one person in our group, even the [peer participant] that kind of liked to hide out, even he was like 'this was an amazing experience for me'...It'd be like you going to Disney World...it's cool and it's fun to be the one that gets to go, but as far as it specifically changing like my perceptions of stuff in the end, I don't think it did any of that, no.

In addition to many other participants, Chad specifically mentioned the Operation Song songwriters as influential to outcomes.

From what I gather from myself and what I've gathered from everybody else, people actually kinda' like doin' that. So telling your story and thinking that people are actually interested...I'm not saying that people that work at the VA aren't interested, but I don't know. It just seems like somebody that doesn't just sit around and listen to VA stories all day is more interested.

Chad mentioned that he and his songwriter stay in touch even a year after the program was completed. He shared a story about how the songwriter actually dedicated the song they wrote to a "battle buddy (close friend in military lingo) that had recently lost his battle with PTSD/trauma by taking his own life." He identified a "feeling of importance" knowing that this songwriter continued to play the song and that the song

touched other lives, people I've never met, that means a lot to me and let's me know that I'm not the only one experiencing the trauma. PTSD and depression have their way of making you feel alone. But to see that two years (?) later that not only does my songwriter still sing it during live shows, but that other veterans understand it and can relate.

Chad's story does a fantastic job of highlighting the importance of taking individual perspectives into account when looking at qualitative outcomes evaluation where even answers to yes or no questions such as "*Did Operation Song give you a sense of purpose?*" may have deeper meanings.

Wyatt

Wyatt initially participated in Operation Song through an extended weekly program of unknown time prior to interviewing. This was not specified in the interview. Wyatt offered a story that helps provide perspective on how programs like Operation Song have an opportunity to serve as an “organic” program that can help the military to civilian transition. Wyatt provides a detailed description of what the “battle rhythm” and pace can be like during active duty. He describes this as a transition in itself and relates this to the difficulties experienced when active duty military is expected to turn off that mentality which took years to create and transition into a life as whatever it means to be a civilian.

They take us and put us through 13 weeks of bootcamp, completely break us down, build us up into a completely different psyche that is tough, hardheaded, stubborn, almost set in our ways. A willingness to obey instant orders and then you know, after that 13 weeks of bootcamp then you do a-you go to your unit, and I am only speaking from an infantry standpoint, but they send us out to school like advanced infantry training and that was eight weeks. Then they send us to our unit and let's see, by now you're lookin at let's see, that was three-four-five, you go to your unit for another two to three months, so now we're at 8 consecutive months before deployment that we have been building and changing and molding into something different so that we can be an effective soldier, an effective marine, an effective warfighter. And then we start deploying. As a marine, we're gone for 8 months in a combat zone, wired for 220, the whole thing you know. We're angry, we're pissed off, we're fightin, we're shootin, we're killin. All this stuff is being reciprocated upon us. So there's another-so right now we're already at 16 months, 16 months non-stop in this-in this new mindset alright. Then we come home. I know like my unit we were on a crazy rotation. It was 8 months gone, we come home for 5, then you know in that 5 months, 4 of those months were dedicated straight to another workup and we were gone again. Gone for another 8 months, come back home for 5 months...And yep, just nonstop over, over, over, and I was-I loved my job. I loved what I do and I would do it all again, but you know, that kind of-that kind of battle rhythm, that kind of pace, that kind of mentality for 4 consecutive years and then when your EAS [end of active service] comes, you separate you know. End active service. See ya! I mean don't get me wrong, they give us pamphlets, paperwork, phone numbers. They give you all this information and tell you you know, go be a civilian again. You spent 4 years turning this thing

on and now I'm supposed to just drop it on my own. And like I said, they do give us lots of information, but in today's society, that's with that need for instant gratification. I think what's the easiest quickest route from point a to point b...I think that's where our biggest issue lies. And then once you get a person like me who spent 4 years trying to turn that off on your own, which you know it's inevitable that you're going to turn into unhealthy coping mechanisms. Something to make you feel or something to make you not feel. How do I suppress this. How do I, you know for me it was how can I make these feelings go away even if for just a little bit? And we positively reinforce ourselves by getting blitz drunk or for some, blitzed high to the point nothin matters. We just don't care because we're so inebriated, and then it wears off. What's the quickest way I can make all this shit not matter again?...it just becomes a viscous-that viscous cycle. And it's not until...I just got so sick and tired of it that I-I don't want to say-I don't like the word surrender, but surrender's what I did. That's basically what I did. Whatever ya'll tell me to do, that's what I'm gonna do. And I went in...I've been working at this and just in the last year and a half I really-I mean my life is on track. I'm' doing really really good, but it's because I am willing to try...Something that actually requires tangible effort and work will always pay bigger dividends than quick and easy...Because of things like Operation Song, journaling, meditations...I think that's why I am so happy you know, I just accept it. Acceptance is key. I've taken those things like Op-you know what I was sayin? And I've been able to reduce my medications by more than half. I still do take [medication name] and my [medication]. I no longer take the mood stabilizer, I no longer have to take sleep medications. The nightmare meds-I haven't been on nightmare meds in six months, you know. And it's all because of the organic stuff that I do.

For Wyatt, Operation Song was one of the “organic” programs/actions that built up to an ability of finding acceptance that led to an interest in positive coping mechanisms and a reduced dependence on certain medications. This story shows a good example of how military veterans may spend years building and creating an identity that is necessary while they are active duty and how programs like Operation Song can help redirect this identity when needed through productive activity. Wyatt made an interesting point in describing the Operation Song experience as one that required effort and interest.

I don't think anybody will ever just walk into a situation like that [Operation Song] and will immediately be spillin guts. I think there's a buildup process you know? I mean getting to know who else is in the room and I think that becomes our hybrid nature. We essentially now are hybrid. We're civilian and military and

we're tryin to get through life being some of what is understood and a whole shitload of what's not understood...now we're tryin to get through a world with two faces. You've got a civilian face and you've got a military face and it just depends on which one you feed, what situation you're in, what situation you're not in, as to what side comes through."

Wyatt's story was reiterated by several individuals who conferred that Operation Song was not always easy but was worth it in the end if one is "willing to try".

Ira

Ira is a military veteran that participated in an Operation Song retreat approximately four years prior to the interview. He offers a unique case based on a multi-layer involvement with Operation Song. Ira has been a participant in Operation Song programming but also has represented the organization in live concerts performing songs. During our conversation, Ira shared a unique story that describes how Operation Song helped release a sense of guilt during one experience.

When we did the [concert venue] the first time and I went out and at the end of it they gave us a standing ovation, and when I went home I felt guilt, just-I felt so guilty. [Fellow performing musician] had said 'you know, what are you doin? This is for you, you need to embrace the audience.' And I didn't want it to be for me. It was supposed to be a song about the fallen, it's a Memorial Day song. It's not about cheering for [Ira] on the stage, that's not what I-that's not why I'm there. I am a musician and I've always wanted to sing at the [concert venue]. I've always wanted to get up there and now everybody's cheering for me and not the people that I wanted them to cheer for when I was up there. And I felt really very guilty the next day. It had the exact opposite-I think if anybody else, if they had sang at the [concert venue] for the first time in their life, they would have been out running around in- you know, just happy as could be. I locked myself in my room and I did not want to leave. I was very overwhelmed and I felt just truly guilty, because I have all of these brothers who are dead who I am singing about in this song. And [musician] is celebrating saying this is for me, this cheers, this applause is for me. . .and that hit me hard. And that's when I sat down and we wrote [song written during Operation Song]. That's where the bridges, that's where the gap connected for me was that, you know, look I -here I am walking out of Arlington Cemetery, and yeah it sucks. It's-my heart is broken because I realize that all the things that I thought were real maybe aren't and that life is very fragile and that I've lost so much. . .cuz gosh, so many paid the ultimate price and

look at their families. These are just-I mean I call them my brothers but somebody else might just call them a coworker, you know? . . .When you know the concept of that song is that. . .they're in my heart and my heart might be broken but I have a mission still, I have somethin' that I still have to go do. And the next time I went to the [concert venue] I didn't feel guilty the next day. . .it's just you know, it really reaches people that's why. And I had to realize that's why everybody cheers at the end is not because they're up there cheering for me, but they're cheering because they got brought to the point of nearly crying. When the lights are down and I can't see that, there are tears in their eyes. They're all feeling it and when the song is over and they start cheering it's because we've moved them to that place and we've caused them to remember. And I didn't realize that before I wrote that song with [Operation Song songwriter]. So I don't think I had put that gap together.

Ira describes the experience of writing this specific song during Operation Song that told this specific story as one that helped with the realization that when he had sung at the previously mentioned concert venue, the song was what moved the audience to the emotional state that led to the cheering. Ira stated this realization was that the cheering was not for he and the other individuals performing, instead it was because the audience was moved by the lyrics and what they heard. Once he realized this, he did not feel guilty after the next performance he made that venue. Ira shares a unique example of how Operation Song was described as helping participants change how they look at situations. By helping them “connect dots” in thoughts, participants were described as being able to change perspectives in ways they might not have been able to see without Operation Song.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to identify the outcomes of Operation Song's veteran specific programs and to compare those outcomes with the goals of the organization as envisioned by the program's founders. The goal of the organization is:

“to establish Operation Song™ as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies and opportunities for self-expression. We use creative and integrative methods to help individuals process from their service related issues, injuries and illnesses, to improve the quality of their lives and facilitate successful transitions to civilian life. (Operation Song, 2020).

This dissertation broke each of these goals down into five individual goals that were compared to the outcomes findings. Through a mixed-methods approach and constant comparative analysis between collection and findings, seven key themes were constructed through data analysis that describe the outcomes of Operation Song programs and retreats as: positive sense of self, perspective, coping, motivation, sense of service, tangible song, and social support. These findings were then compared to the isolated goals of the organization. All outcomes were found to either fully or partially support organizational goals in their isolated forms. This suggests that Operation Song is consistent in the execution of programs with the goals set forth for these programs as described by participants.

Expansion of Results and Connection with Literature

For Operation Song, songwriting is the key activity implemented throughout all services. Previous literature has found that songwriting can help individuals restructure memories of trauma (Orth, 2005), stimulate memory and increase motivation (Tamplin et al., 2016), and create meaning (Baker et al., 2015). Songwriting can improve self-concept, decrease depression, and decrease anxiety (Baker et al., 2015) Songwriting has

been found to enhance an individual's "exploration of self" (Tamplin et al., 2016, p. 124) and was previously found to be a key component to the Operation Song experience (Lauber, 2018). This dissertation found that songwriting influenced self-expression, the experience of emotions, a change in perspective, a sense of processing, an understanding of one's purpose and sense of direction, coping capabilities, posttraumatic growth, leisure opportunities, a sense of competency, and a tangible outcome in the creation of a song.

In addition to songwriting, Operation Song has an inherent nature of social support existing throughout all programming. Social support has been linked to PTSD symptom severity (Smith et al., 2017; Vella et al., 2013; Cai et al., 2014; Caddick et al., 2015) and improvement in "psychosocial well-being" (Vella et al., 2013, pp 259). Acceptance, a sense of belonging, a sense of normalcy, and a sense of "legitimising suffering" (Caddick et al., 2015 p. 296) have been found for MSMV as a result of participation in social recreation settings. The social aspects of Operation Song were described as directly influencing a positive sense of self, self-expression, the ability to open up and share, a sense of relatedness, a change in perspective, a sense of clarity, an awareness of positive coping tools, an increased value in therapy or complementary programs, an increase in community activity, the ability to relate to other veterans and civilians, a sense of purpose, a sense of service, and a sense of belonging.

Program evaluation is a useful tool for programs like Operation Song. The mission of the organization is "to empower veterans and active-duty military to tell their stories through the process of songwriting" (Operation Song, n.d.). Findings of this dissertation suggest that Operation Song programs and retreats have merit in achieving the goals and mission set forth by the organization.

For participants that experienced a *positive sense of self* as an outcome, an ability to feel emotions freely and to express those emotions was created through Operation Song programs and retreats. Self-expression is culturally defined, but generally means an expression of one's personality. Kim & Sherman (2007) describe this best: "through self-expression people define who they are by making their thoughts tangible" (p. 2). Self-expression is often repressed for individuals who have difficulty processing traumatic experiences and the acknowledgment or expression of feelings is often more inhibited. Operation Song programs helped individuals express a positive sense of self through creative methods they most often described as never have participated in before. Operation Song also helped participants express and feel emotions through a setting that was described as genuine and comfortable. There was an impact in the fact that these programs were facilitated by professional songwriters and not professional therapists. Professional therapists clearly serve a valid purpose for a variety of reasons and this dissertation is not disputing their value; however, the uniqueness of the Operation Song professional songwriters and Operation Song itself was described as therapeutic in and of itself from participant perspectives.

Operation Song created a change in *perspective* for participants. This was created through a connection between songs and stories. Songs have beginnings, middles, and ends. Songs have music. Songs have consistency. The words of songs do not change based on who is listening. The meanings heard by individuals may be different, but the words are the same. Individual stories are different. The beginnings, middles, and ends exist, but there are no absolute measurements when it comes to memory. Stories can change based on who we tell them to and why we are telling them. The process of

Operation Song created consistency between the two through a sense of structure in the act of songwriting that enabled participants an ability to envision their experiences in a different light. Through self-reflection and the restructuring provided by the songwriters, a new perspective was created that helped participants process something.

This change in perspective was also driven by the development of competency as an outcome of the programs. The description of competency achieved in creating the songs and learning a new skill are consistent with Ryan & Deci's (2020) definition of competency as a "feeling of mastery" (p. 1). This sense of personal ability and accomplishment is imperative to concept of self-determination. When an individual feels like they are competent, they are able to envision a future based on a confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks and goals. This is essential for military veterans and any individual who is transitioning through times of change.

Participants developed new *coping* mechanisms as a result of Operation Song and some felt strongly enough about these positive outcomes to describe the organization as life changing. Eighty-three% ($n=15$) of questionnaire respondents stated that Operation Song helped them find a sense of closure and 87% ($n=41$) felt they were better able to cope with life after Operation Song. Positive coping skills can impact resiliency, which is has been studied as an influential factor in the success or failure of community reintegration for MSMV (Castillo et al 2019; Simmons & Yoder, 2013; Elnitsky et al., 2017). Resiliency is an individual's ability to draw upon his or her established coping mechanisms in order to adapt and persevere through times of change. It is a "will to live" (Simmons & Yoder, 2013, p.19). Several participants in this dissertation described Operation Song as giving them this will to live and described the experience as

therapeutic in and of itself. For MSMV, higher levels of resilience has been associated with less perceived difficulty reintegrating back into their communities following military service (Castillo et al., 2019). This is important to understand in measuring whether or not Operation Song can impact the transition from military to civilian lifestyles.

Operation Song became *motivation* or a catalyst of action. Participants became more active in their homes and in their communities as a result of their experience with Operation Song. Songwriting and playing music became leisure activities participants were maintaining after they left Operation Song. Participants also described being more social, less isolated, and having better relationships. Participants were able to maintain songwriting and the music activities they learned in Operation Song as leisure and recreation activities, which have more benefit than just providing enjoyment. Lundberg et al. (2011) found that recreation can provide a sense of freedom in escaping the negatives of disability and can create a sense of freedom to explore personal abilities. This sense of “free choice” is enabled by self-determination and helps individuals find the capabilities to process stress (Chang, 2017, p. 520). Being able to feel independently in control of one’s own life and to be able to manage stress as independently as possible is important in maintaining quality of life, which these findings confirm is a successful aspect of Operation Song’s organizational goal.

The enjoyable experience of Operation Song also led participants to see therapeutic value in the benefits gained. This awareness of the value in services that can help was not limited to just Operation Song. Participants described a new awareness of the benefits of non-traditional therapies as well as in speaking with their own therapists in traditional therapies. Being able to see this value is especially important for a population

where only 23%-40% of veterans who may benefit from mental health services were found to actually seek treatment within a given year (Hoge et al., 2004). This is an important point to be made in looking at Operation Song's goal of establishing itself as "as a unique and viable enhancement of traditional veteran therapies" (Operation Song, 2020).

The motivation of action created by Operation Song also enabled a sense of purpose for participants. This is important because "finding meaning or purpose in life" was described by 42% of veterans in one study as an area of continued difficulty (Sayer et al., 2010). Participation in Operation Song is voluntary and is described by participants as enjoyable. When looking at voluntary, enjoyable participation as a form of leisure, personally expressive leisure such as Operation Song programs can increase a sense of "meaning and direction" (Kleiber et al, 2002, p. 228). Participation in Operation Song was described as fun, enjoyable, and creating meaning. Choosing to engage in meaningful activities can increase motivation during the transition from military to civilian life by promoting a sense of hope, optimism, purpose, belonging, acceptance, competence, and independence (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Outcomes of this study support these previous findings by Hutchinson et al. (2003) and Kleiber et al., (2002).

A sense of service was experienced by many participants as an outcome that led them to want to further support the organization, to use their songs as something that could help others, and to start their own programs to continue the benefits received. A sense of service and community was created that extended beyond the hours or days of Operation Song programming. This sense of community is important for military service

members and veterans. A sense of community can best be defined by McMillin & Chavis (1986) as follows:

Our proposed definition has four elements. The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences (p. 9).

All four of these elements are reflected throughout the outcomes of this dissertation suggesting that Operation Song improves a sense of community for participants.

Bowen et al. (2001) found that a sense of community on an Air Force base was influenced by the amount of participation in community activities, the ease in connecting to others in a community, and a "shared responsibility and collective competence existing among community members" (p. 87). Volunteering has been found to statistically significantly influence military veterans' "overall health rating, level of emotional difficulty, PTSD and depression symptoms, purpose in life, self-efficacy, social isolation, and the perceived availability of social support" (Matthieu et al., 2017, p. 111). The sense of service created for participants by Operation Song programs existed both in the songs on their own and in the inspiration participants felt to start programs on their own to help other veterans. This outcome has benefits to both the individuals and the communities in which they associate and live. This is important for all aspects of the Operation Song goals and mission.

The ultimate product of Operation Song is the creation of a *tangible song*. Every participant leaves the program with a song that was created and finished during their time

in the program. They have something they can see, feel, hear, and share as an outcome. This improved their ability to share by giving them something to share and by serving as a creative and unique outlet for the ability to share. One hundred percent of participants ($n=21$) who responded to the questionnaire question “Were you able to open up and share your story?” said yes. Many therapies and non-profit organizations focused on mental health improvements and internalized concepts such as self-expression and personal transition experiences produce wonderful results for their participants, but there is no objective thing that says “Here, this is what I did.” Operation Song gives this to participants. This gave participants a way to talk to family and friends. It gave the family and friends an opportunity to try to understand in a different way. This gave participants something to talk about with civilians and others who did not experience the story they chose to tell. This can directly help bridge the gap between military and civilian worlds by creating a shared connection through the ability to listen to these songs.

Social support was the final outcome of Operation Song that for some had lasting effects greater than five years. A sense of belonging and a feeling of relatedness were created in the experience of Operation Song. Relatedness is a concept found within the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) where an individual feels a positive sense of belonging and connection with others as an integral part of their motivation. This is important in thinking about how programs like Operation Song can help military veterans find a sense of shared connectedness and identity in a culture they can relate to. This sense of social support can also be understood as a shared military culture. Military culture is as a critical factor understood in the concept of resiliency because of its "essential role" in development during service (Simmons & Yoder). Operation Song

focuses all programming on active duty military, veterans, and/or their families which creates a common military theme that already has a naturally existing sense of relatedness and shared purpose for participants. Operation Song increased the ability of some participants to relate to civilians because of the social support experienced in the interactions with the songwriters. Operation Song enhanced social support or created a new social support in and of itself. This reduced isolation, increased an ability to relate to others, changed the perception that participants were alone in their struggles, and created friendships.

Implications for practice

Human happiness essentially depends on social and cultural interactions (Kringebach & Berridge, 2010). For MSMV experiencing difficulties in the transition to civilian life, finding groups of shared values is important. Operation Song exists as an organization that helps military service members and veterans find this group of shared values through an enjoyable activity. Ryan & Deci (2000) proposes that individuals are more likely to adopt the activities valued among various social groups when they feel successful and valuable at those activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The sense of competency, accomplishment, and self-expression found as outcomes of the Operation Song experience support previous literature where socially and culturally focused reintegration programs have been found to create meaning through shared military experiences (Caddick et al., 2015; Lundberg et al., 2016). Operation Song further creates this feeling of success and value by encouraging a positive sense of self, helping participants adjust their perspectives, and in teaching positive coping mechanisms. The organization is a catalyst that leads to positive change and gives participants a sense of

service, social support, and an actual song they can show as the tangible outcome of their journey.

Ninety-four percent of questionnaire participants ($n=45$) said that they were able to see immediate changes from participating in Operation Song at the completion of their program. One hundred percent of participants ($n=21$) said they were able to open up and share their story. In a world where “confiding or sharing personal thoughts and feelings” and “finding meaning or purpose in life” have been identified as areas of “extreme difficulty over the past 30 days” for combat veterans (Sayer et al., 2010, p. 593), programs like Operation Song offer an opportunity to create a sense of meaning through a unique platform of creative expression that can achieve a wide variety of goals. The findings of this dissertation suggest a positive connection between the goals Operation Song is trying to achieve and the outcomes participants feel they are experiencing. Findings may help programs such as Operation Song establish strategies of evaluation to successfully determine outcomes and correlate these to organizational goals. This may further help the federal systems serving MSMV by enhancing the existing research on these complementary and alternative services. Overall, this study’s findings hope to add to the body of evidence-based knowledge that emphasizes the value of outcomes stemming from activity-based community programs that focus on assisting MSMV populations.

Operation Song Program Recommendations

This dissertation confirms a positive relationship between the organizational goal of Operation Song and the outcomes described by participants. The combination of creative and unique methods of service led participants to experience self-expression, a

sense of processing, an improved quality of life, and to develop skills necessary to benefit that successful transitions to civilian lives.

Several suggestions can be made following completion of this program evaluation that are specific to the organization.

1. If the organization wishes to identify the relationship between services and a measurement of being a unique and viable enhancement to traditional veteran therapies, further evaluation would need to be conducted in collaboration with the clinical programs and organizations they already partner with. This dissertation has findings that do suggest the merit of Operation Song weekly or monthly programs and retreats in enhancing traditional therapies. Some participants specifically stated that Operation Song either enhanced other therapies or was more successful than other therapies. It is clear in the outcomes that Operation Song has therapeutic benefit. However, if the organization determined a need to more fully identify the impact of these veteran specific programs as an enhancement of traditional therapies, additional research would need to be conducted in collaboration with the participants' treatment facilities to determine merit in more detail than the perspectives collected for this dissertation.
2. Quality of life could also be more specifically correlated through completion of the WHO-QOL pre, post, and at a later determined date if the organization determined this as an evaluation need.

3. If Operation Song was interested in revising the organizational goals to be more measurable, the original goal could be reworded based on Doran's (1981) concept of SMART goals and objectives.

Recommendations of future research and evaluation

Recommendations of future research and evaluation are as follows:

1. There seemed to be a difference in outcomes for the older veterans in comparison to the younger veterans. Older veterans seemed to describe outcomes in terms of camaraderie, relationships, and an interest in service or continuation/expansion of the programs. The younger veterans seemed to describe outcomes in terms of processing and coping. Since the comparison of these populations was not the purpose of this dissertation, I did not pursue the inquiry; however, an interesting future study could utilize activity preference scales for age groups based on military service eras to determine if differences exist. Findings could both guide direction of future Operation Song programs and add to a body of knowledge that looks at generational differences in preferred activities.
2. Operation Song now facilitates three types of programming: extended weekly or monthly programs, retreats, and virtual services. Comparing the differences in outcomes and determining if differences exist could help Operation Song with future planning purposes. This information could also add to a body of evidence that measures impacts of retreat style and virtual programs.
3. Operation Song could partner with the Department of Veterans Affairs and other treatment facilities that work with the Operation Song participants on a

long-term basis to look at specific measurements that look at both qualitative and quantitative therapeutic changes taking place as a result of participation in the programs.

4. One participant in this dissertation described the fact that the songs created in Operation Song were actual products, which differentiated the program from any other veteran centric non-profit organization. A comparison of Operation Song to other programs that incorporate activities but do not create tangible outcomes would be interesting. Does the fact that Operation Song has a product differentiate the benefits from other veteran non-profit organizations? Does the activity used by the organizations such as songwriting, fly fishing, or paddling sports matter? Is it the experience that is creating the benefits? Is it the influence of personal preference that makes the difference?
5. Analysis of Operation Song programs focused on non-veteran participants such as Gold Star family members, spouses, caregivers, and active-duty service members would be interesting for purposes of organizational planning for the organization. Are outcomes the same? How is the program experienced by these populations? How does participation impact the family as a unit?
6. In both this dissertation and Lauber (2018) the songwriters were described in great detail to be a significant and primary reason for positive outcomes with participants. Exploring what traits and skills these songwriters possess would be an interesting study that could help both Operation Song as the organization moves through the future and could provide suggestion of

staffing qualities for other community-based programs looking at staff or volunteer recruitment and development.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Friday, March 20, 2020

Principal Investigator	Danielle Lauber (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Steven Estes
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	<i>del32@mtmail.mtsu.edu; steven.estes@mtsu.edu</i>
Department	Health and Human Performance
Protocol Title	<i>Operation Song: Exploring Social Factors of Community Reintegration</i>
Protocol ID	20-2142

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	APPROVED for ONE YEAR		
Date of Expiration	3/31/2021	Date of Approval	3/20/20
Sample Size	100 (ONE HUNDRED)		
Participant Pool	Target Population: Primary Classification: Healthy Adults (18 or older) Specific Classification: Veterans		
Exceptions	1. Contact information is permitted to coordinate the study. 2. Audio recording is allowed with restriction (refer below). 3. Online consent via Qualtrics is permitted.		
Restrictions	1. Mandatory ACTIVE informed consent. 2. Identifiable data/artifacts, such as, audio/video data, photographs, handwriting samples, personal address, driving records, social security number, and etc., must be used for research purposes as described in the protocol. The data must be destroyed or deidentified once the data processing is complete. 3. Mandatory Final report (refer last page).		
Approved Templates	MTSU templates: NONE Non-MTSU Templates: Online Informed Consent and Recruitment Script		
Comments	Refer to Post-Approval Actions for important COVID-19 Actions		

Post-approval Actions

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions related to this approval (*refer Quick Links below*). Any unanticipated harms to participants, adverse events or compliance breach must be reported to the Office of Compliance by calling 615-494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. All amendments to this protocol, including adding/removing researchers, must be approved by the IRB before they can be implemented.

Continuing Review (The PI has requested early termination)

Although this protocol can be continued for up to THREE years, The PI has opted to end the study by **3/31/2021**. The PI must close-out this protocol by submitting a final report before **3/31/2021**. Failure to close-out may result in penalties including cancellation of the data collected using this protocol.

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Only two procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. In addition, the researchers can request amendments during continuing review. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel. .

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

Other Post-approval Actions:

Date	IRB Action(s)	IRB Comments
03/20/2020	Due to a "disaster-like" situation, the Office of Compliance grants administrative authority to the faculty investigator to make the necessary changes or revisions to the protocol in the best interest of the health and welfare of the participants and student workers.	COVID-19

Mandatory Data Storage Requirement: All research-related records (signed consent forms, investigator training and etc.) must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data must be stored for at least three (3) years after the study is closed. Additional Tennessee State data retention requirement may apply (*refer "Quick Links" for MTSU policy 129 below*). Subsequently, the data may be destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects.

The MTSU IRB reserves the right to modify/update the approval criteria or change/cancel the terms listed in this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

- Post-approval Responsibilities: <http://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/PostApprovalResponsibilities.php>
- Expedited Procedures: <https://mtsu.edu/irb/ExpeditedProcedures.php>
- MTSU Policy 129: Records retention & Disposal: <https://www.mtsu.edu/policies/general/129.php>