

BOOTS2SUITS: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES TRANSITIONING FROM THE
MILITARY INTO THE CIVILIAN PRIVATE SECTOR WORKPLACE

by

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DEDICATION

O Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship Hymnal Evening Prayer (2006, p. 13)

Thank you, God, for never leaving me nor forsaking me
as I embarked on a dream once deferred.

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ABSTRACT

Like many veterans, African American males return home from military service eager to embark in the world of work. This qualitative research examined the workplace experiences of eight veterans previously or currently employed in the civilian private sector. Because understanding the transition from Boots2Suits (from the military into the civilian workplace) can be challenging, documenting their experiences as employees in the private sector became crucial.

The research questions guiding the study were: (1) How (un)prepared are African American males transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace? (2) What are the workplace experiences of African American male veterans adapting to the civilian private sector? (3.a) What challenges do they face in their transition from Boots2Suits? and (3.b) How do they navigate these challenges? Data sources included a questionnaire, interviews, artifacts, field notes, and a research journal. The study built on military transition theory and intersectionality theory, as well as phenomenological data analysis procedures. Study findings are presented in Chapters III and IV. Chapter III outlines the participant profiles and the factors that impacted their transition preparedness into civilian life and the private sector workplace. Chapter IV describes how the Boots2Suits transition impacted their workplace experience. The participants discussed the military's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and offered suggestions for improvements. This dissertation explored how the intersections of race, gender, military service, and education impacted their experiences in the civilian private sector.

I. INTRODUCTION AND STUDY DESIGN

*Tell your story. That's the secret to immortality.
The one true way to live forever. (Meltzer, 2000)*

TAP provides you with the basic needs to prepare you for your transition from military to civilian life. TAP preps military personnel on how to write résumés according to the jobs they are applying for and preparing you to have confidence in your job interview. (Eddie Jones, 2016 Navy retiree)

The TAP program delivered an abundance of materials, but I didn't have adequate time to absorb all the information. A one-day class isn't sufficient time. (Al Smith, 1994 Air Force retiree)

In March 2017, San Antonio, Texas, was officially registered and trademarked as Military City USA. Nine African American male veterans living in San Antonio participated in a pilot study through a qualitative survey and an interview during summer 2019. The main goals of the pilot study were to explore data collection strategies and effective ways to document the participants' experiences transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace. Varying opinions arose regarding the benefits of the military's mandated Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for those retiring from the United States Armed Forces. For example, Eddie and Al (pseudonyms) had completely different points of view about the usefulness of TAP, which can be attributed to the period when they participated in such a program. Please consult Appendix A for a list of relevant terms and their definitions supporting this dissertation document.

Because most of the pilot participants came of age in their military branch, their narratives were charged with military lingo. There were differences in how they understood civilian workplace organizational structures, group dynamics, and how to maintain financial stability outside of the military. Pilot participants explained how difficult it was for them to leave the military environment where *duty before self* and

doing what you are told instead of making your own decisions was the norm in their personal and professional lives. Entering the civilian workplace brought new challenges for those who sought after positions outside of the military.

As a military wife and as a researcher, I have a personal and professional connection to this dissertation. I have first-hand experience witnessing the struggles that service members often encounter transitioning into the civilian private sector, as well as knowledge about the historical context of racism and discrimination towards African Americans. Thus, this qualitative study examined the workplace experiences of African American male veterans who previously or are currently employed in the civilian private sector.

Statement of the Problem

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 to integrate the United States Armed Forces. Although this monumental occasion has provided personal and professional opportunities for African Americans, there is limited research on the struggles male veterans encounter transitioning into civilian life, more specifically the civilian private sector workplace.

Transitioning from Boots2Suits (from the military into the civilian workplace) can be met with doubt and uncertainty. According to Yonkman and Bridgeland (2009), “only 13 percent of exiting service members believed their transition was going well after Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) conflicts” (p. 9). Furthermore, based on the results from the 2012 Prudential Veterans’ Employment Challenges study, it was concluded that finding employment was a major concern for 69% of veterans returning to civilian life. Based on the responses from the 1,845 post-

9/11 and Gulf-War era veterans, 44% responded they were not ready for their transition. “Among veterans who did not feel ready to transition, two-thirds indicated that they needed time to figure out what’s next or simply to decompress” (Prudential Financial, Inc., 2012, p. 5). The report also noted 46% of veterans felt they needed more education or technical training before entering the civilian workplace. Despite the determination to make a successful transition into civilian life, Holland et al. (2014) concluded that veterans often battle stressors as they attempt to gain marketable skills required by employers. This can be an extremely overwhelming time for veterans as they discover that the skills they obtained in the military are not transferrable to civilian positions (Community Salute, 2017). The stress of returning to school or taking vocational or technical courses to obtain professional development can make it difficult for veterans to cope. The side effects of these stressors often resulted in increased hypertension and alcohol use, as well as suicidal ideations and behaviors.

According to Clemens and Milsom (2008), those who enlist in the military: (1) often enter with only a high school diploma, (2) are not required to earn a college degree for promotions within the enlisted corps, and (3) have only worked within the confines of their unit or branch. Therefore, this may result in these individuals not being adequately prepared for the expectations of the civilian workplace. This lack of preparation could be attributed to their military training in being told *what to think* as opposed to *how to think* (Polson, 2010). With a focus on workplace dynamics, Rice and Liu (2016) explained that military service members “cannot choose to leave their job or assignment at their own will, do not have a voice in who their supervisor(s) will be, and typically cannot select the service members who will work with or for them” (p. 344). Redmond et al. (2015) added

that those who retire or separate from the military encounter difficulties adjusting to civilian life. Therefore, African American male veterans who are new to the private sector workplace may not understand how to effectively interact or communicate with their supervisor(s) or colleagues. In addition, civilian employers and colleagues may not be well versed in working with veterans engrained in military culture. It can also be suggested that working on a military installation unit as a federal, contracted general schedule (GS) employee can be a place of comfort and security for veterans. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2016), “there are several initiatives in place to actively recruit veterans for jobs in the federal government... and some veterans may find the transition from military to government easier or more comparable to their experiences than to the private sector” (p. 33). Although there is an assumption many veterans gravitate to military-affiliated employment opportunities, this study learned from those who completely separated from this environment and tried to establish professional opportunities as African American male civilians.

There are pervasive negative stereotypes of African American males in the workplace, which has continuously evolved through the years. After reviewing research related to African Americans in the workplace, Moss and Tilly (1996) noted that employers described African American males in the workplace as hostile, defensive, having a difficult attitude, and difficult to control. In support of this position, Kleykamp (2009) stated, “employers may hold stereotypes about recent military veterans, their experiences, and their estimated ‘employability’ based on political ideology, stereotypes of poor skills, or resumption of mental or emotional dysfunction, as happened with Vietnam veterans” (p. 268). Although the civilian employers reported a preference in

hiring African American veterans with military-transferrable skills over non-Black veterans, Kleykamp's (2009) research revealed employers often labeled African American males as lacking soft skills, communication skills, and motivation. Based on these statements, one can only wonder how African American males can be successful if they are set up for failure. To support this claim, Mong and Roscigno (2010) indicated African American males often walk into new jobs without adequate training and are subjected to "discriminatory firings, demotions, and related allegations of improper or inadequate job performance" (p. 12). Mong and Roscigno (2010) also stated the employers admitted their opinions of African American males were based on prior or current supervision experiences, the perceptions of their workplace, or hard and soft skills.

Subsequently, veteran populations face stereotypes upon entering the civilian workplace related to the belief they have "anger management issues and low frustration tolerance" (Kintzle & Castro, 2018, p. 123; Nagomy & Pick, 2020). The U. S. Department of Defense (2017) reported that African Americans are the largest minority group within the armed forces (17.3% or 223,481), and the majority are identified as enlisted service members (19%) as opposed to commissioned officers (9%). Because of the dehumanization some may have experienced during their wartime service (i.e., racism, lack of promotional opportunities, etc.), veterans will have a difficult time adjusting to the civilian workplace if they do not receive the appropriate resources to heal from their past. Negative encounters in the military have resulted in veterans dealing with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stressors. With approximately less than 0.5% of the United States population serving in the armed forces since September 11, 2001,

veterans enter work environments where employers are unaware of military, cultural competency, and triggers, which could contribute to their anger management and high frustration. Davis and Minnis (2017) acknowledged a disconnect can exist when employers do not have a clear understanding of the transferrable skills veterans possess. “The American public has been exposed to little information about the technical capabilities and work of the U.S. armed forces due to fewer number of Americans serving and the greatly increased security of information about technology and military work” (Davis & Minnis, 2017, p. 8). When we add these layers of concern with the overall stereotypes centered around African American males, there becomes a heightened interest in learning about their workplace experiences in the private sector.

Currently, there is limited data on the workplace experiences of African American males who separated or retired from the military after 2013. This time frame is extremely crucial to the study, as the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has been redeveloped into Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS). With a focus placed on career readiness, the goal of Transition GPS is to increase veteran success, retention, and persistence in the workplace. Following new norms, rules, languages, and cultures had its own set of challenges for approximately half of post-9/11 veterans who reported experiencing difficulties within their workforce reintegration (Wewiorski et al., 2018). This research provided an avenue for African American males to share their experiences acclimating to the workplace and what has impacted their transitions from Boots2Suits. The phenomenon under study was the past experiences of African American male veterans and how the Boots2suits transition has influenced their experiences in the civilian private sector.

Research Questions

Like many veterans, African American males return home from military service eager to embark in the world of work. This qualitative research study examined the workplace experiences of these veterans employed in the civilian private sector. As stated by Kintzle and Castro (2018), “The transition from military service to civilian employment is one of the most important factors related to post-service well-being and success. It is also one of the biggest challenges” (p. 117). The study focused on the experiences of eight African American male veterans who retired or separated from the United States Armed Forces after 2013 and worked a minimum of six months in the civilian private sector workplace after their military discharge. The research questions guiding the study included:

1. How (un)prepared are African American males transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace?
2. What are the workplace experiences of African American male veterans adapting to the civilian private sector?
3. What challenges do they face in their transition from Boots2Suits?
 - How do they navigate these challenges?

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the experiences of African American male veterans who entered the civilian private sector after 2013. With the support of the research questions, this study further examined how African American males view their levels of preparedness as well as the challenges they experience upon entering the civilian private sector.

In 2011, the Department of Defense (DoD) established the Veterans Opportunity to Work and Hire Heroes Act (VOW Act) with an emphasis placed on service members “finding and maintaining employment” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017, p. 2). Although there are numerous reports and statistics directed towards veterans in the federal workforce (VetsHQ, 2019), this study broadened the scope of the literature to include the workplace experiences of African American male veterans. The study focused on those who were previously or are currently employed in the civilian private sector and documented their experiences to inform other veterans who are preparing for their military discharge or currently navigating through the Boots2Suits transition.

To contribute to the body of research on African American male veterans, this study aims to be of benefit to the United States Armed Forces as well as employers who support or wish to expand their knowledge regarding Boots2Suits. Hattis’ (2015) report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics concluded that “among the 573,000 unemployed veterans in 2014, 59 percent were age 45 and over and 37 percent, age 25 to 44” (p. 93). As of 2015, unemployment rates amongst racial groups included “4.8 percent for White veterans, 6.6 for Black or African American veterans, 4.7 for Asian veterans, and 6.3 percent for veterans of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity” (Hattis, 2015, p. 93). Because the data shows African American veterans have the highest unemployment rate, this study highlighted the unique challenges that African American male veterans are facing that may differ from other races. Teachman (2011) concluded African American veterans encounter more employment and health challenges after they retire from the military compared to White veterans. Through hearing and documenting the stories of the African American male veterans, employers can gain a better understanding of the training,

professional development, and support initiatives that are needed in the private sector workplace.

Theoretical Framework

In a continued effort to gain a better understanding of the experience of African American male veterans, this study examined the experiences of African American male veterans who entered the civilian private sector after 2013. The study was supported by military transition theory (Castro & Kintzle, 2016; Kintzle & Castro, 2018; Stern, 2017) and intersectionality theory (Collins & Blige, 2016). Together, the military transition and intersectionality theories explained how service members prepare for their military transition, the challenges they encounter in civilian private sector work environments, and the support systems which assisted them in their *balance of two worlds*.

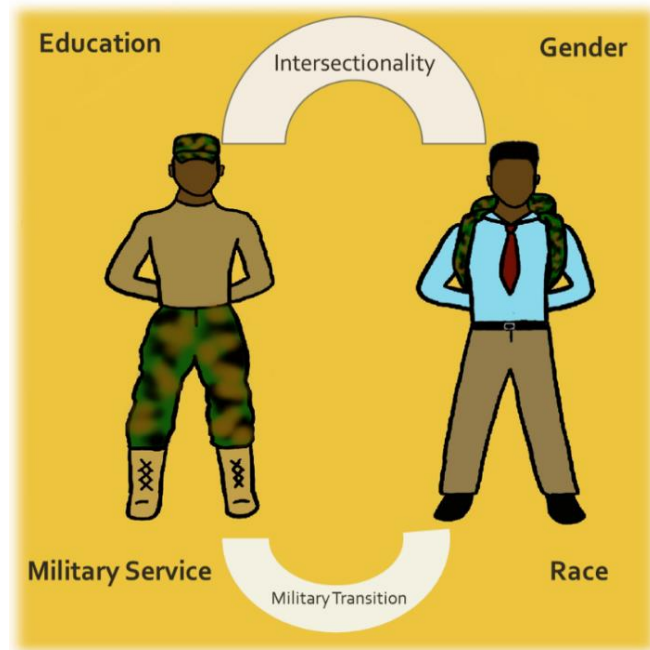


Figure 1. Illustration of the Boots2Suits Transition

For the sake of this research study, Boots2Suits has been defined as a *balance of two worlds* (military and civilian workplace). As illustrated in Figure 1, an African

American male veteran is in his military uniform and his workplace attire – signifying him leaving one life experience (military = Boots) and entering another one (civilian workplace = Suits). The veteran is dressed in workplace attire and he is carrying his military backpack into the civilian environment - signifying how his past continuously plays a vital role in his employment experiences. The beginning and end of two worlds occur concurrently. With the support of intersectionality theory, it was suggested that race, gender, education, and military service had a significant impact on a veteran's success and failure in the Boots2Suits transition.

Military Transition Theory

Developed in 2014 by Castro and Kintzle, the military transition theory identifies the various stages service members go through as they prepare to leave their designated branch and return to civilian life. These stages are consumed with successes and challenges, as these individuals balance physical and psychological health changes that could have been impacted by injury or combat, adjust and re-acclimate to family and community members, and find employment. According to Kintzle and Castro (2018), “the military transition theory illustrates how certain factors may create susceptibility to negative outcomes, including challenges to finding and keeping civilian employment” (p. 118). Castro and Kintzle highlighted how the military to civilian transition varies depending on if the service member's discharge is voluntary or involuntary. The discharge status can influence the amount of time service members have to prepare and seek employment outside of the military. As veterans strive to adjust to civilian workplace dynamics, Anderson and Goodman (2014) explained, this can be challenging for them and employers. With approximately less than 0.5% of the United States

population serving in the military over the past ten years, many are unable to understand the experiences and struggles that are attached to the Boots2Suits transition. Anderson and Goodman (2014) concluded veterans enter civilian workplaces with an emphasis placed on collective versus individual achievement. Being a part of a team was an integral part of their survival and success in the military. Because of these reasons, the military transition theory was viewed as the most appropriate theoretical framework to learn about the experiences of African American male veterans working in the civilian private sector.

The military transition theory is divided into three overlapping segments which describe the journey of service members as they prepare and settle into their new civilian lives. The three segments are divided into (1) approaching the military transition, (2) transition trajectories, and (3) assessing the transition (see Figure 2).

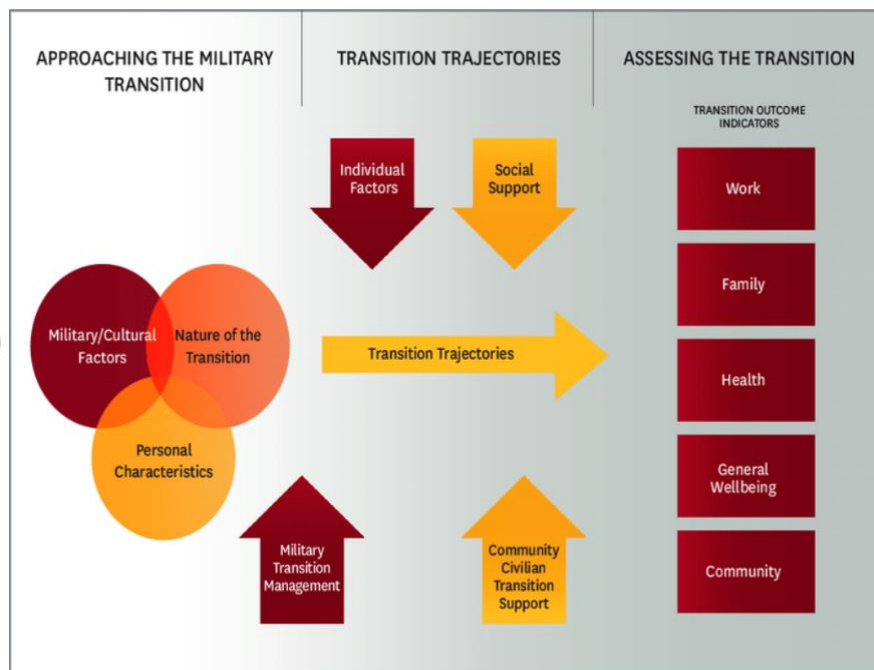


Figure 2. Illustration of Castro and Kintzle's Military Transition Theory

Approaching the Military Transition

The first segment includes looking at military skills the veterans obtained while serving, discharge and health status, combat history, and how they feel when their separation or retirement is involuntary or voluntary. It is during this time that service members give special attention to their military identity which has been based on their rank and job status. Kintzle and Castro (2018) discovered "...military identity can have a significant impact on the post-service transition as individuals often experience 'warring identities' between a strong sense of self as a service member and the new identity as a veteran" (p. 120). Based on this conclusion, Kintzle and Castro (2018) further suggested that veterans may have a difficult time retaining and persisting in civilian work environments.

Transition Trajectories

The second segment takes a closer look at how service members view their coping styles, attitudes, and beliefs as they progress through their transitions. Furthermore, attention is directed towards the people or factors the service members must consider during their transition (i.e., finances, children, and spouses/partners). Throughout this phase, service members begin to learn how to access their U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, identify social support (i.e., family, friends, and community members), and focus on financial and career planning.

Assessing the Transition

The third and final segment is based on how veterans personally view the roles they now have within the overall community as a civilian. The authors designed this segment to describe the efforts made by service members to successfully find and retain

employment, the adjustment(s) made within their family's dynamics, the establishment of new social networks, and what is needed to sustain or improve physical and psychological health.

Kintzle and Castro's (2018) theory provides additional insight on the misconceptions service members often carry about the Boots2Suits transitions. Some have experienced frustration and disappointment once they learn it may take time to find employment and that they will not automatically be given a position based on their military service. The authors commented that some veterans are unaware of how the pay grade scales differ between civilian and private sector positions and how a college degree or additional certifications are needed in specific upper-level civilian management positions. Further, the biggest struggle for veterans is not in obtaining employment, but maintaining their positions (Keeling et al., 2017; Maury et al., 2014). Unfortunately, psychological illness and lack of housing can make it difficult for veterans to successfully transition into the world of work (Keeling et al., 2017). Military Transition Theory is deemed the most appropriate for this research study because it examined the "challenging and rewarding" (Castro, 2018) realities of veterans who transition from the military into civilian life. As more veterans continue to seek employment opportunities within the private sector, it was essential to utilize a theory that is specifically targeted towards them, their lived experiences, and the obstacles which occur during their transitional periods.

Intersectionality Theory

Multiple factors shape an individual's identity; for example, Bowleg et al. (2013) stated:

Considerable gaps in knowledge exist about how Black men's multiple intersecting social identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status [SES], and sexual orientation) reveal interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism) at the social structural level. (p. 26)

Originally developed in 1989 by legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality is rooted in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995). It has expanded beyond the original intent of analyzing the discrimination and complexities of African American women in the United States. In Crenshaw's work, she reveals how an individual's identity can be shaped by a multitude of factors. Therefore, it can be difficult to select one thing that can attribute to an individual's feelings and experiences of discrimination and oppression. According to Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019), "within the social sciences, intersectionality has been used to study micro-level experiences and macro-level interactions between groups, their structural placement, and their representation in discourses" (p. 411). Thus, the work of Collins and Blige (2016) identifies six core concepts of intersectionality theory, which include: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice.

Social inequality looks beyond the framework's original focus on the intersection of race and sex. It recognizes there is more than one factor that attributes to an individual or collective hardship.

Power acknowledges there are many layers an individual can carry with them to shape their identity. One identity does not have to be greater or maintain a higher level of significance than another.

Relationality transitions ones thinking from an either/or to a both/and mentality. Using the term as such, there is an acknowledgement that an individual's identities are working together and not against one another.

Social context looks at the impact that social inequality, power, and relationality have on someone's experience. Individuals who participate in similar activities and share common space can leave with varying perspectives on what occurred. One experience is not greater or better than another; therefore, the feelings that are carried should be honored and further reviewed through intersectional analysis.

Complexity is the acknowledgement that intersectional analysis is difficult to grasp, specifically within the social sciences. There is no clear definition or instructions on how to effectively apply intersectionality theory in areas such as methodological research or initiating policy change.

Social justice involves the commitment of scholars and supporters to challenge the status quo and acknowledge societal injustices in our society. Further, social justice looks at how people are negatively impacted by policies and procedures which have been perceived to benefit or improve current conditions.

Many scholars have used intersectionality theory to explain the similar yet different experiences of African American males and females. Butler (2013) commented, "Black male intersectionality is a more accurate way of conceptualizing issues. It acknowledges that Black men have specific issues, but they are not 'worse' than Black women's..." (p. 507). With a focus placed on military transition, Smith (2014) described how intersectionality impacted her life as an African American, female, medically discharged, student veteran. She described how being subjected to marginalized veteran

identities in the armed forces makes it difficult for service members to develop a sense of belonging or acceptance within a group. Veterans have social insider and outsider groups based on such areas as their military branch and rank, the number of deployments or combat missions, disability, religion, and sexual orientation that subject them to a level of discrimination. “Membership in two mutually stigmatizing groups may cause the individual to be more socially isolated than by identifying with either group alone. Choosing between the groups may be the only way for the individual to cope with isolation or stigmatization” (Smith, 2014, p. 233). Like student veterans, veterans in the workplace may encounter difficulties adjusting to civilian life when they are forced to juggle or chose between one of their identities. Butler (2013) defined African American males as being “exceptionally burdened and marginalized” (p. 485). This heightens the urgency to learn how intersectionality can bring awareness to their workplace interactions and the group(s) they gravitate to for a sense of belonging and privilege.

Despite the limited research directly related to African American male veterans working in the private sector, Hirudayaraj and Clay (2019) used critical feminism to describe the intersection of being a veteran and a woman in the civilian private sector workplace. The study explored (a) the treatment women veterans received as employees, not in upper-level management and (b) how their gender influenced their feelings of marginalization and domination in the workplace. It was discovered that African American females were subjected to being called “the tiger lady” and “the angry Black woman” (p. 481). “African American women veterans carried the extra burden of having to confront the ‘angry Black woman syndrome’ when they tried to stand up for themselves or be assertive” (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019, p. 481). Regardless of gender,

research has revealed similarities between the descriptions which are used to describe how African American *male* (Kleykamp, 2009; Mong & Roseigno, 2010; Moss & Tilly, 1996) and African American *female veterans* (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019, p. 481) are perceived in the workplace.

Inspired by Collins and Blige's (2016) belief that intersectionality is "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience" (p. 2), this dissertation examines the African American male veteran experience in relation to race, gender, education, and military service. Intersectionality theory helped describe the interconnectedness that shapes the reality of these men as well as provided insight on their journeys within the civilian private sector workplace.

Researcher's Perspective

Growing up in Miami, Florida, I remember listening to African American males share stories of their days as service members in the Korean (June 25, 1950-July 27, 1953) and Vietnam (November 1, 1955-April 30, 1975) wars. For many, it was evident their enlistment into the United States Armed Forces was not a choice but an obligation they had to serve their country. As veterans, some of them shared a desire to visit the VA to access the free medical services and resources they were promised, while others clearly stated they wanted no part of the military upon their return from the war. This is where the conversation ends. I have no knowledge or recollection of what it meant for these gentlemen to return home as African American veterans. As the years go by and the stories remain untold, I often look at Figure 3 as a reminder of what life could have been for African American males returning home from combat. Further, how the military impacted my father, who was a Korean War veteran and Black-owned business owner.

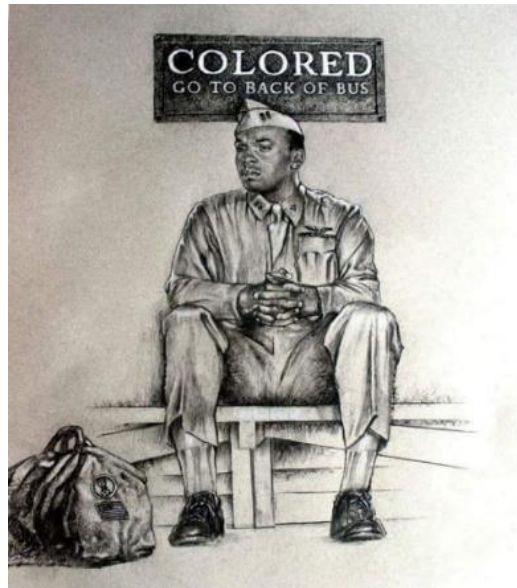


Figure 3. Good to Be Home and Still They Served

Image retrieved from <https://www.redtail.org/artifacts/good-to-be-home/>

As I embarked on this research journey, there were so many thoughts that ran through my mind – so many unanswered questions I wish I could have asked my father before he passed away on May 26, 1990 (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). As an inner-city Miami barbershop owner, did my father have mentors or other veterans he would share his worries and concerns with upon returning from combat? Did he become an entrepreneur because he did not feel comfortable or adequately prepared to work in the civilian private sector? Did anyone from the military offer him tips on how to make a successful civilian transition? Or, direct him to resources he could access outside of VA related appointments? Were there moments when he suffered in silence? According to Community Salute (2017), “The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) only records veterans who voluntarily and pro-actively connect with them. And that is a fairly limited number, as only 27.5 % veterans nationwide use the healthcare benefits they may be eligible to receive by the VA” (p. 4). By not having an accurate account of the

whereabouts of veterans, it becomes extremely difficult to understand their lived experience unless they are intentionally sought after, or they make an intentional effort to remain involved in military-centered communities.



Figure 4. Robert Louis Pitts (October 7, 1939 – May 26, 1990)



Figure 5. Robert Louis Pitts, owner of People's Barber Shop in Miami, Florida

As we fast forward in time, I met an amazing Marine Corps (a military branch

where African Americans were unable to enlist between 1798-1942) and Air Force veteran, and I married him on June 17, 2011 (see Figure 6). As a military spouse, I often feel I entered a secret society filled with titles and acronyms by those who have embarked in boot camps, deployments, and constant relocations. There has never been a time I could say to military-connected friends, church members, or neighbors that I understood the frustration of juggling full-time employment and veteran affairs related appointments or how it feels to be negatively labeled or judged in the workplace for being a veteran. How can I understand their journey if I am not a male, and I have never served in the United States Armed Forces?



Figure 6. Rodricus O. Harvey photograph and certificate

I have learned there is a life after the military that is not often discussed from an African American male perspective, and I valued serving as a researcher and as a learner. Glesne (1999) stated that a researcher as a researcher entails “all of the places in which you present yourself and communicate to others how a researcher acts” (p. 41). Because

of this, my role throughout this process remained professional and respectful of all that I heard and saw. Regarding a researcher as a learner, Glesne (1999) further explained that researchers must come to the experience with questions and be open to allowing the participants to guide the experience. “As a learner, you are expected to listen; as an expert or authority, you are expected to talk. The differences between these two roles are enormous” (p. 41). This research journey was a shared experience between the participants and me, and its success was based on mutual honesty and respect.

Furthermore, I committed to remaining ethical, disclosing my intentions, and ensuring the participants understood my goal was to challenge the way society views their treatment of veterans. I was also aware that by sharing their stories, this may illuminate memories of the past that may not often be discussed by these veterans. Therefore, military and community support resources were provided, and the participants were allowed to remove themselves from the research study at any time. As a researcher, my ultimate goal was to walk away from this experience offering help and not harm and providing a voice to the unsung African American male heroes of our military’s past, present, and future. Without hesitation, I believe my mission was accomplished.

The benefit of qualitative data collection is that it provides an avenue for participants to tell their stories in their own ways. Qualitative research was the most appropriate method for this study due to its ability to focus on “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Additionally, qualitative research is less structured and allows for more flexibility throughout the interview process than what is required in quantitative research. Although African American male veterans share

commonalities based on race, gender, education, and military service, their individual stories as service members, veterans, and private sector employees were different and explored throughout the research study.

Phenomenology

Originally developed by German mathematician and philosopher, Edmund H. Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is classified as a theory, philosophy, and research methodology (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology requires the researcher to go into the study without preconceptions so that study participants can communicate their direct experiences with a phenomenon, in this case, the workplace experiences of African American male veterans in the civilian private sector. Moustakas (1994) defined phenomenology as “a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear in our consciousness” (p. 103). Other researchers (Neubauer, et al., 2019; Patton; 2002; Patton, 2015) agree that the focus is centered on what was experienced, how it was experienced, and how meaning is derived individually and collectively.

A phenomenological study acknowledges participants’ reflections as *retrospective*, highlighting how they previously navigated through an experience and their ability to interpret and reflect upon the lessons learned (Patton, 2002). Such reflections provide rich, valuable data that can create meaning throughout the research process (Van Manen, 1990). There are two distinct types of phenomenological studies: hermeneutical and transcendental. Credited for its ability to interpret historical and biblical documents, hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on moving beyond describing one’s lived experiences to interpreting the *texts of life* (Creswell, 2013; Gadamer, 2000).

However, transcendental phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019) is closely aligned with Husserl as it describes the experiences of the participants based on their personal perceptions or *inner evidence*.

For the sake of this research, the phenomenon under study relates to the past experiences of African American male veterans and how the Boots2Suits transition has influenced their experiences in the civilian workplace. Phenomenology is used as a methodology where the researcher is aware of the importance of documenting the participants' realities. To this effect, Patton (2002) suggested researchers must engage in in-depth interviewing with the use of broad and open-ended questions to learn about a phenomenon.

Further, Bevan (2015) noted bracketing, commonly utilized in transcendental phenomenology, should occur early in the interview process. Bracketing requires the researcher to ignore their prior knowledge and expertise as well as acknowledge personal feelings, beliefs, and prejudices/biases that are related to the topic (Bevan, 2015, p. 138). To gain the most from the experience, engaging in active listening and asking descriptive questions was crucial to ensure there is an acknowledgement of how the participants perceive the phenomenon in "how they describe it, feel about it, judge it, make sense of it, and talk about with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). To bring merit to this topic, it was invaluable to learn how the participants past has impacted their present and potentially their future. Because there is limited data directly related to African American male veterans who are previously or currently employed in the civilian private sector, phenomenology was deemed the most appropriate research method.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Central Texas where there is a fast-growing military population both active and retired from the service. For example, the City of San Antonio has been registered and trademarked as Military City USA since 2017. During the same year, San Antonio was rated second by the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics as having the highest number of veterans (1,603,328) living in the area. The report also indicated the second highest number of minority veterans (564,675) reside in Texas. To further investigate the whereabouts of African American male veterans, the United States Census Bureau (2018) concluded the veteran population in San Antonio was 105,608. It is important to note the overall population of San Antonio residents included 80% White, 64% Hispanic or of Latinx descent, 7% African American, 2.7% Asian, 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. According to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs Minority Veterans Report (2016), there are 14.8% Non-White Non-Hispanic male veterans (i.e., African Americans, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander) compared to 78% White Non-Hispanic and 7.1% Hispanic male veterans.

Although the overall number of African American male veterans is lower compared to other racial groups, participants were recruited through criterion-based sampling and referrals. Patton (2002) described criterion-based sampling as the selection of individuals who must have specific qualifications prior to participating in the research study. To become a study participant, the African American male veteran fulfilled the following characteristics: (a) be 25 or older, (b) served in one or more of the U.S. military branches, (c) completed Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) after 2013, and (d)

worked at least six months in a civilian private sector workplace after their military discharge. By hearing from those who completed Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) after 2013, the researcher can assess their level of preparation and the challenges they encountered in the Boots2Suits transition.

Because each participant was required to possess all the listed characteristics, referrals were crucial to the research study. Snowball sampling was also essential in “locating a few key participants who easily met the criteria” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). Participants were recruited through flyers posted at LinkedIn, Facebook, student veteran list serves, and National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) alumni list serves (e.g., Alpha Phi Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Phi Beta Sigma). Please see Appendix B for the research participation invitation flyer. Thus, eight participants accepted the invitation to take part in this dissertation study.

After receiving referrals, a detailed overview of the research purpose and participation expectations was carefully discussed with the participants as soon as they showed interest in taking part in the study. The individual informed consent was obtained prior to the start of the project (see Appendix C).

Data Collection

The data sources for this dissertation included an open-ended questionnaire, conversational interviews, artifacts, field notes, and a research journal. See Table 1 for a summary.

Table 1

Data Collection Sources

	Qualtrics Questionnaire	Conversational Interviews	Artifacts	Research Journal
When/How often	Online 40-minute questionnaire	2 individual 60-minute interviews with 10 African American male veterans	Provided by participants during the second interview	Fieldnotes and records after interviews
Type of data	Demographic information and open-ended questions	Narratives transitioning into the civilian workplace	Photographs, clothing, awards, and memorabilia	Descriptive and reflective journal entries
Purpose	Collect data before to the interview	Document the participants' experiences and stories	Prompt participants' memories	Having a space for ongoing analysis and reflection
Method of Capture	Qualtrics software	Oral interview via videoconference	Photographs	Notebook

Qualtrics Questionnaire

The first data collection source included an open-ended online Qualtrics questionnaire for study participants (see Appendix D). Research participants who met the required characteristics and were selected to participate in the research study were asked to complete a 40-minute online Qualtrics questionnaire. The Qualtrics questionnaire included multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The questionnaire collected data on the (a) participants' demographics, (b) the veterans' years of service within their military branch, (c) their enlistment and separation/retirement ages, (d) the city and state to which they retired or from which they separated from the military, (e) the resources they used to find civilian employment prior to retiring or separating from the military, (f) how military enlisted personnel position differs from civilian employment, and (g) their experiences

attending Transition GPS. After conducting the summer 2019 pilot study, it was evident the veterans valued the flexibility to complete the online questionnaire during their leisure time. By choice, all participants responded to every question, and the questionnaire was completed between 11:00 pm-2:00 am. It seemed these time blocks did not interfere with their work schedules. The questionnaire was accessible for those veterans who have insomnia or other sleep-related struggles (as explained by Babson et al., 2012; Lian et al., 2015). The open-ended questionnaire served as a great opportunity to learn about the participants prior to conducting the first interview.

Conversational Interview I

Bevan (2015) noted, “interview is by far the most dominant method for data collection in phenomenological research...” (p. 137) and should be done using words and terms that are appropriate for the participants. The summer 2019 pilot study provided insight into how conversational interviews can be a friendly, genuine way of getting to know others. After sharing the purpose of the research study with the African American male veterans, I explained what I hoped to achieve through my efforts. There was an immediate enthusiasm to assist me in any way possible. I was moved by their level of excitement that someone wanted to hear their stories while further expressing how honored they were to represent both their race and military branch in the study. Accordingly, Merriam (2009) states that interviewing is an effective data collection tool for researchers who “are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 88).

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dissertation interviews were conducted via video conference and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The first audio-recorded interview began with an icebreaker where, as the researcher, I shared and discussed three

artifacts that describe my husband's military to the civilian workplace transition. Because I do not have direct personal experience in this area, it was vital for me to show transparency as a military wife while providing the veterans an opportunity to learn more about my husband's journey. Once the icebreaker was completed, the conversational interview began (see Appendix E). The semi-structured nature of the interview provided flexibility for the questions to be asked in no specific order and for the conversation to organically evolve based on the comfort level between the researcher and the participants. The conversational interview questions focused on (a) the role the military had in their civilian lives and workplace transitions, (b) their reasoning for pursuing employment opportunities in the civilian private sector, (c) the impact Transition GPS had on the civilian workplace transitions, and (d) their civilian workplace experiences. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to bring three artifacts that describe their military to civilian workplace transitions. The participants shared and discussed the artifacts as the icebreaker for the second conversational interview.

Conversational Interview II

After the artifact icebreaker, the participants were asked questions related to (a) civilian workplace professional development provided by employers, colleagues, or team members, (b) what Boots2Suits means to them, (c) military-related illness or injuries that have impacted the military to civilian workplace transition, and (d) how being an African American male veteran has influenced the military to civilian workplace transition (see Appendix E). At the end of the interview, clarification and follow up questions were asked, and participants shared additional information related to the research study.

Artifacts

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “artifacts are usually three-dimensional physical ‘things’ or objects...meaningful to participants and/or the settings” (p. 162). Sharing and discussing the three artifacts served as a way for the participants to reflect and describe their military to civilian workplace transition. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined artifacts as “collections of items that trigger memories of important times, people, and events” (p. 114) that can influence how the participants reflect on their lived journeys. Examples of these artifacts can include letters, photographs, print materials (i.e., flyers, posters, newspapers, or magazines), awards, clothing, and memorabilia. Furthermore, “artifacts can be a valuable source of data that can be captured in symbols as well as words” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 174). For this research study, the participants artifacts included real objects the veterans have in their home or workplace that reflected their emotions, relationships, and further expand on what was discussed during their interviews. The materials provided by the research participants were shared via video conference, photographed, and submitted by email.

Research Journal

The research journal served as the main depository of field notes and reflections. Borg (2001) described this journal as “assisting the researcher in acknowledging the emotions, expressing them, and particularly where these emotions threaten the progress of the research” (p. 164). The research journal chronicled the personal experiences I encountered as a researcher, which made me aware of how I viewed the present and future state of this work. Being aware that as a researcher, I may walk away from this experience being completely wrong in my assumptions. Thus, journal writing allowed me

to bracket and monitor my assumptions and biases throughout the study while identifying critical events that had a substantial impact on the research. According to Mertova (2013), a critical event is defined as one that “has been selected because of its unique, illustrative and confirmatory nature in relation to the studied phenomenon” (p. 119). The research journal was a central location for compiling descriptive and reflective field notes.

Descriptive Field Notes. These notes included factual and specific details about the interview setting and the individual’s actions, appearances, and conversation during the interview. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) outlined six elements that should be included in descriptive field notes. *Portraits of the subjects* provided in-depth details of the participants’ attire, appearance, and delivery of information through the interview process. This information is not intended to label or stereotype the participants, but to identify the distinct characteristics, traits, differences, and similarities each person possesses. *Reconstruction of the dialogue* identified body language and facial expressions as well as key quotes and statements made by the participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted these points should be highlighted in quotation marks indicating “a close approximation of what was said” (p. 121) as opposed to writing each comment or statement verbatim. *Description of the physical setting* provided a hardcopy, visual sketch of the interview space. Elements such as wall art, advertisements or messaging, and room décor are noted in the field notes. *Accounts of particular events* chronicled which was present for the interview and the nature of their role throughout the conversation (i.e., translator, support system). *Depiction of activities* showed the correlation between the participants’ behaviors and their responses to the interview

questions. *The observer's behavior* is a moment of self-reflection and constructive feedback on how, as the researcher, I walked into the interview and the attitudes and beliefs I now carry away towards the participants.

Reflective Field Notes. The reflective notes outlined personal thoughts and beliefs as well as the key takeaways gained from each encounter throughout the research experience. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) highlighted reflective field notes that can be used in five ways. *Reflections on analysis* include “themes that are emerging, patterns that may be present, connections between pieces of data, additional ideas, and thoughts that pop up” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 121). *Reflections on method* acknowledged the achievements which had been made throughout the study while noting steps that were taken to work through problems. *Reflections on ethical dilemmas and conflicts* provided a safe space to outline how my values and perspectives did not align with those of the subjects and the overall profession. *Reflections on the observer's frame of mind* documented the journey of my “opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices” (p. 123) prior to the beginning and upon the completion of the study. *Points of clarification* identified sections in the notes which are confusing and the correction(s) or further explanation which is needed.

The field notes were recorded in a notebook immediately after each interview. After compiling the field notes, topics that required further attention or additional clarification were identified.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the study followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven steps for the phenomenological data analysis process. The seven steps in this process included:

1. Developing an understanding of the protocol.
2. Reviewing the protocol and extracting significant statements.
3. Formulating meaning based on the participants' responses.
4. Organizing the formulated meanings into clusters of themes.
5. Describing the investigated topic.
6. Stating the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.
7. Asking the participants to review the findings for validation purposes.

Step one required me to become comfortable and familiar with the data received from the African American male veterans. By doing so, a priority was placed on listening to the conversational interviews several times and becoming familiar with the participants' stories before initiating the analysis process.

Step two included identifying key statements that were directly related to their experiences as African American male veterans. Special attention was given to comments directly related to workplace experiences, military preparation, support systems, and challenges.

Step three required my role as a researcher to leap from what the participants narrated to what they meant. By doing so, I developed an understanding of what the African American male veterans were saying while being intentional to not embellish or change their original stories.

Step four grouped the participants' statements into distinct categories and developed themes based on the typical responses. During this process, new clusters were developed based on merging themes.

Step five involved a description of the participants' responses to clearly define what was discovered and how the results align with the dissertation research questions. During this phase, a detailed accounting for each participant's narrative was created and their artifacts were used to show a connection to direct quotes.

Step six provided an explanation of the themes which emerged from the data analysis process, the meaning that was derived, and the identified themes which shaped the trajectory of the participants' overall experiences.

Step seven included going back to the participants, sharing the results of the study, and listening to their feedback.

After compiling the data for the study, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional company. Once I received the transcriptions, I listened and read through the document to correct any errors and provide additional clarification where information was needed.

Furthermore, as a qualitative researcher, it was essential to have a reliable and efficient method for tracking and organizing data as well as data analysis. MAXQDA was used to code, organize, and categorize the data. Developed in 1989, MAXQDA is a Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis (CASQDAS) software program which allows researchers to upload and store various forms of data while also "carrying out the analysis process" and "searching for patterns in the material" (Peters & Wester, 2007, pp. 636-637). MAXQDA is a great source in following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three stages of data analysis: open coding (divide data into small chunks), axial coding (place data into categories), and selective coding (develop themes based on the findings).

Building Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2000) suggested that trustworthiness is reinforced through the implementation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility can ensure the information and data collected by the researcher provide an accurate account of the content delivered by the participants (Shenton, 2004). Providing accurate data and creating narratives that capture the true essence of what was said by the participants was a way to fulfill this level of trustworthiness. In support of this statement, Patton (2015) noted credibility urges the researcher to consider the internal biases that can be reflected in the findings. Therefore, I followed the requirements outlined by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB) and provided member checks. The study also followed Shenton's (2004) recommendation on "tactics to help ensure honesty in informants" (p. 66). In doing so, the participants were able to stop the conversational interview at any time, skip interview questions that made them feel uncomfortable, withdraw completely from the overall study, and receive referrals for veteran support resources.

Likewise, in support of Colazzi's (1978) seventh step of data analysis, member checks were conducted to confirm the credibility and validity of the study findings. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) described the member check as "...the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on..." (p. 245). For the dissertation study, the results of the study were emailed to the participants and they were encouraged to contact me if there were questions, concerns, or a request to contribute additional

insight. The member check process provided the participants with an opportunity to ensure their story was being accurately told and as the researcher, I understood the message they were seeking to convey. Once this process was complete, three of the participants suggested edits and five were satisfied with the narratives. Additionally, Patton (2015) notes "...triangulation really pays off, not only in providing diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon but in adding to credibility by strengthening confidence in whatever conclusions are drawn" (p. 556). Triangulation included using the various data collection methods (i.e., questionnaire, artifacts, and conversational interviews) to assist me with identifying the emerging themes throughout the dissertation study.

Transferability refers to the ability of the study to be implemented in a similar context with similar results (Patton, 2015). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), transferability occurs when "...another researcher wants to apply findings of the population of interest to a second population..." (p. 193). Therefore, it was necessary to provide detailed information, direct quotations, and thick, rich descriptions that future readers and researchers can follow.

Dependability and *confirmability* ensure the research data represent the participants' views and not the researcher's biases or beliefs. By consistently checking field notes, interview transcriptions, and the research journal, this affirmed an alignment between the participants' perceptions and depiction of their experiences.

In this dissertation, the participants' narratives are weaved together to show the contrast and comparison of their lived experiences. To further confirm trustworthiness was enforced, Christians' (2000) code of ethics was used to enforce proper measures

were taken for *consent*, *no deception*, *confidentiality*, and *accuracy* throughout the research study.

Prior to the start of data collection, each of the participants received an online *consent* form that provided a detailed explanation of the research study. This was a necessity, as Christians (2000) advised “subjects must agree voluntarily to participate – that is, without physical or psychological concern” (p. 38). *Deception* was not considered a factor in this study. At the beginning and ending of each of the conversational interviews, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the research and how the data would be used and stored throughout the duration of the study. According to Christians (2000), “*confidentiality* must be assured as the primary safeguard against unwanted exposure” (p. 139). Based on this requirement, the eight participants were assigned a pseudonym that was unveiled during their review of the preliminary findings and emergent themes. Throughout the dissertation study, Byron, Colonel Taylor, Dorian, Dwayne, Mr. Gaines, Ron, Shazza, and Walter were engaged and willing to share their stories in the Qualtrics questionnaire and two conversational interviews. Yet, some were concerned about their identity being disclosed. To safeguard their identity, photos were pixelated and names and personal identifiers were removed from the artifacts. Finally, *accuracy* was fulfilled through the member check process.

It is important to acknowledge the research study was conducted in Summer 2020 during the height of Black Lives Matter and nationwide protests and responses brought about by the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and other African Americans. With political and social events in the forefront, the participants were assured the

conversational interviews were a safe space to share their experiences as African American male veterans in the private sector, without censorship and judgment.

Ethical Considerations

Upholding the ethical standards throughout the data collection process included seeking approval from Texas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Also, in maintaining confidentiality, all research participants were assigned a pseudonym which is used throughout the entire research process.

For the open-ended questionnaire and the two conversational interviews, a detailed overview of the research purpose and participation expectations were carefully discussed with the participants as soon as they expressed interest in taking part in the study.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the consent form was sent to the participants via email. The participants were asked to read the consent form and contact me if they had any questions or concerns about the research study. Once the veterans received the Qualtrics questionnaire, they had the option to complete the questionnaire or decline participation. Prior to the start of the conversational interviews, all eight participants provided a verbal consent and agreed to participate in the video conference and allow for audio recording to take place. The verbal consents were documented in the audio recordings.

Fraenkel et al. (2014) stated that the researcher is responsible to protect the participants from "harm, discomfort, or danger that may arise due to research procedures" (p. 63). If a question on the online questionnaire or the video conference interview made the participants uncomfortable, they were able to skip or decline to answer. They could

also stop participation in the study at any time without consequences. At the end of the conversational interviews, the research participants were advised to contact the local U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Hospital and the hotline number to speak with a counselor if they experienced any emotional discomfort. I provided specific information in the study consent form to make sure they had access to support resources.

Safeguarding data is a priority. All the interview recordings (i.e., questionnaire, interview transcriptions, artifacts, and the research journal) were stored in a university owned password-protected computer. In addition, information was stored on an encrypted internal hard drive and in a password-protected file transfer system (Texas State University Share Drive). Only the members in the research team had access to the dissertation data.

Dissertation Roadmap

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I provides the context for the study and presents the research design. Chapter II presents a review of the literature related to several topics such as the discharge process and separation from the military, transition assistance programs, the meaning of Boots2Suits, transitioning into civilian life, African American males in the civilian workplace, the intersection of race, gender, education, military service, and connections to adult learning. Chapter III outlines the participant profiles and the factors that impacted their transition preparedness into civilian life and the private sector workplace. Chapter IV describes how the Boots2Suits transition impacted their workplace experience in the civilian private sector. As the final chapter of the dissertation, Chapter V presents the study highlights and conclusion.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This qualitative phenomenological study examines the experiences of African American male veterans who entered the civilian private sector after 2013. The review of the literature is divided into seven sections. The first section, “Discharge Process and Separation from the Military,” describes the information all military personnel are required to receive prior to leaving the military and the challenges many encounters while searching for civilian employment opportunities. The second section, “Transition Assistance Program (TAP),” outlines the evolution of the course curriculum and the topics covered to assist with life after military service. The third section, “Transitioning into Civilian Life,” identifies the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts that negatively impact veterans’ personal and professional life as well as the support programs which have been designed to assist those in need.

The fourth section, “African American Males in the Civilian Workplace,” presents historical stereotypes that continuously haunt African American males and ultimately bring feelings of discomfort and alienation within the civilian private sector. The fifth section, “Intersection of Race, Gender, Education, and Military,” describes the impact multiple identities can have on African American male veterans and *the leap of faith* taken to pursue positions in the civilian private workplace. The sixth section, “Connection to Adult Learning,” explains the connection situated cognition, on-the-job training (OTJ), and Schlossberg’s Transition Theory have on adult education and the impact it has on veterans. The seventh and final section, “Summary and Gap in the Literature,” provides what was discussed and learned from the literature review and how the study proposes to contribute to the literature.

As there continues to be an influx of service members retiring and separating from the United States Armed Forces, this section surveys literature related to the transition from the military into civilian life and the workplace and the impact it has had on African American male veterans. Because this work is heavily engrained in military affairs, some of the literature does not come from academia. To provide context for the research study, information from the literature review was drawn from military and government documents, reports, online newspaper articles, and websites.

In 2015, McGregor's report included the following statement from Nicholas Armstrong, senior director of Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (a central depository for military research data), "... just over half of the veterans leave their first post-military job within a year...leading to costly and time-consuming amounts of turnover for companies" (n.d., para. 11). Between 2013-2014, VetAdvisor, and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University administered an online Veteran Job Retention Survey to learn the reasons why veterans leave their civilian jobs. Based on the responses from 1,400 participants, (a) veterans were unable to find positions that matched their military experience (68.24%), (b) employment opportunities were limited in their area (58.5%), and they did not have the required education for the positions (53.65%). To gain a better understanding of the factors which impact such outcomes, Keeling et al. (2018) revealed the personal, organizational, and societal barriers which are associated with veteran unemployment.

Keeling et al. (2018) described veteran *personal barriers* as a lack of preparation for life outside of the military (they are waiting for their leader/commander to tell them specifically what to do to begin the planning process). The *organizational barriers* focus

on the disconnect experienced between veterans and those in the civilian workplace. *Societal barriers* are based upon a service member's discharge status (honorable or dishonorable), the dissatisfaction of services provided by nonveteran providers, feelings of discrimination, and the lack of emphasis placed on the significance of transition support resources. Keeling et al. (2018) discovered some veterans did not have access to TAP during their tenure in the military. Subsequently, others encountered "their leaders' disinterest once they knew they were leaving, prioritizing their attention on those continuing to serve" (p. 66). In understanding that the transition from Boots2Suits can be concerning for service members who enter into it alone or without adequate resources, there is a necessity to understand the challenges (or lack thereof) the veterans experience while employed in the private sector.

Discharge Process and Separation from the Military

The discharge process and the separation from the military are much more than requiring the completion of paperwork and returning equipment to a unit. Although each military branch has certain measures in place, there is a collective understanding that veterans need time to prepare for life outside of a military setting (Blackburn, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). Before military personnel members officially become veterans, it is important to note their journey within the United States Armed Forces begins once an oath is taken to become a soldier (Army), marine (Marine Corps), sailor (Navy), airman (Air Force), guardian (Space Force), or coast guardsman (Coast Guard). During one's time in basic training or boot camp, service members learn military lingo and are conditioned to neglect their civilian mindset to embrace one that focuses on *duty before self*. This state of being is carried by military personnel throughout

their tenure and can be extremely difficult for them to forget when returning to civilian life.

Because basic training or boot camp is designed to resocialize those in the military to embrace a we vs. I mentality, Demers (2011) suggested they participate in a basic training or boot camp style program designed to reintegrate them back into civilian life. This ultimately has become an area of interest as more military personnel are retiring or separating from their unit.

On October 20, 2011, President Obama announced the official withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan by the end of the year (Fauer et al., 2014; Landler, 2011). During this time, Congress and the Department of Defense (DoD) also announced a ten-year reduction in the number of enlisted service members due to a \$1.05 trillion-dollar budgetary cut (Fauer et al., 2014). It was during this time these service members began to acknowledge the days of staying and having a career in the military were fading away, and they needed to seek civilian employment opportunities.

As military personnel members prepare for the official discharge, the process is led by their commanding officer. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2003), the commanding officer must provide counseling 15-90 days after an individual has been notified of their military separation date. Cleymans and Conlon (2014) defined pre-separation counseling as “an information session designed to provide service members facts about how their personal situations will change after they leave the military” (p. 155). During this meeting, the service members are introduced to the Individual Transition Plan (ITP), which encourages them to begin thinking about financial goals, Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) benefit eligibility, life balance,

educational attainment, and career aspirations. During this time, the commanding officer is required to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the need for the service members to complete the course prior to their discharge date. Despite the development of TAP in 1990, the transition into civilian life has not been an easy process, especially for the large influx of veterans who were unable to find work.

As of 2015, unemployment rates amongst racial groups included “4.8 percent for White veterans, 6.6 percent for Black or African-American veterans, 4.7 percent for Asian veterans, and 6.3 percent for veterans of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity” (Hattis, 2015, p. 93). The data shows African American veterans have the highest unemployment rate. Because it is difficult to distinguish if these statistics reflect those who could not find employment, were fired, or quit their job, Harrod et al. (2017) and Wewiorski et al. (2018) concluded some service members were unable to retain and persist in the workplace due to post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and depression. In Kintzle and Castro’s (2018) military transition theory, the authors highlighted service members often encounter difficulties translating their military experiences into terms and transferrable skills which could be understood by civilian employers. This same sentiment can be seen in how military members translate their Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (DD214) into a document suitable outside of the military.

The DD214 not only provides proof of military service, but it is a résumé that chronicles their discharge status, educational attainment, employment positions, certifications, and training awards. Therefore, it becomes vital for the veterans to explain how the skills they obtained in the military are relevant and transferrable to what is requested in a civilian work environment.

Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2010) took a closer look into the control variables and theoretical frameworks that have had a significant impact on the persistence and retention of service members entering a new career environment. “Good retirement preparation will allow the retirees to better understand second career reality. The preparation will affect expectation from the new organization and will enable retirees to overcome difficulties and frustrations in their new career workplace” (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2010, p. 383). Retirement preparation prior to discharge, trust within the workplace environment, mentors, the ability to balance work and family obligations, and commitment and politics within the organization are examples of key elements that were highlighted throughout the study conducted by Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2010). While starting something new can bring its own challenges and setbacks, the authors provide an awareness that veterans enter a civilian workplace concerned about accessible resources, support systems, and no longer working in a bureaucratic, authoritative leadership setting (top-down organizational structure) to one that promotes transformational leadership (employee involvement in decision-making).

The discharge process and the separation from the military can be faced with mixed emotions as military personnel members are both excited and anxious about embarking on a new chapter as a veteran. For those who are leaving the military voluntarily, TAP was designed to give them the required tools and resources needed to be successful adult learners, business owners, employees, and community members.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Established in 1990 by the Department of Defense (DoD), TAP supports military personnel members with obtaining employment and educational opportunities upon their

retirement or separation from the United States Armed Forces (Cleymans & Conlon, 2014). According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (2002), the original structure of TAP included mandatory pre-separation counseling, and service members were invited to attend a veteran benefit or employment assistance workshop. However, the accounting office reported, “not all service members receive the required pre-separation counseling or participated in the workshops” (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 5). Interestingly, Clemens and Milsom’s (2008) assessment of transition support programs mirrored the U.S. General Accounting Office (2002) report as they stated: “many enlisted servicemembers are not participating in transition assistance workshops, and therefore, are not receiving task-based information on resume writing and job search strategies” (Clemens & Milsom, 2008, p. 247). Another area to consider is the number of service members who took advantage of TAP outside of its original delivery mode.

Based on information from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2003), the United States Coast Guard provided opportunities for service members who had served less than six years in the military to complete a self-paced TAP program. For those who did not attend TAP due to active-duty obligations, they had up to six months after their retirement to complete the program. However, they were responsible for their travel cost to the training. Zogas (2017) argued that TAP can be ineffective to service members who take the course when they are focusing primarily on fulfilling the duties within their military contract, therefore remaining hopeful an employment opportunity will be available immediately upon becoming a civilian. In support of Zogas’ statement, Kintzle and Castro (2018) added, “...post-9/11 veterans described the TAP process as a ‘box checking exercise’ (p. 124). Therefore, it can be understood that military service

members are enrolling in transition assistance programs at a time when they are unaware of the actual needs and challenges that they will face transitioning into the new work environment.

Because of the concerns related to TAP's effectiveness coupled with the rising numbers of unemployed veterans, in 2009 the departments of Defense, Labor, Veteran Affairs, and Homeland Security were charged with taking a close look at the current structure of TAP since its establishment in 1990 (Cleymans & Conlon, 2014). In 2011, "the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act required the U.S Department of Labor to redesign its employment workshop, the largest component of the TAP curriculum, to be more applicable to the realities of today's job market" (U. S. Department of Labor, 2019). It was during this time that President Obama requested the DoD and VA work together to restructure TAP within the next 20 years.

Effective 2013, with an emphasis placed on *career readiness*, TAP was redeveloped into Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS), a mandatory course that is overseen by the Department of Veteran Affairs, Department of Labor, Department of Education, the Small Business Administration and the President's Economic Domestic Policy teams (Cleyman & Conlon, 2014; DoD, 2017). With the use of Transition GPS (see Table 2), there is an intentional effort to help military service personnel find civilian employment opportunities that are aligned with the skills and experiences they obtained during their military service. Further, they can enroll in optional sessions related to becoming veteran business owners or returning to school to receive additional training, certifications, or licensures. Although the new Transition GPS curriculum addresses the challenges many service members succumb to in the civilian environment, the military

branches must make an intentional effort to ensure they are keeping an accurate record of those who are completing the program. Based on the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2017), maintaining records of TAP completion is a struggle in the military. The U. S. Government Accountability Office (2005) stated, “limited data are available on the effectiveness, outcomes, and perceptions of service members of TAP” (p. 5). Therefore, as the military continues to place a priority on the completion of Transition GPS, improvements and new developments need to formalize the program assessment process as well as the follow-up measures that need to be in place to learn how veterans are doing in civilian private sector work environments.

Table 2

Transition GPS Course Curriculum

Topic (Mandatory)
Pre-separation counseling with Individual Transition Plan (ITP)
VA benefits briefing I (educational benefits; disability rating; burial and life insurance, etc.)
VA benefits briefing I (learn e-Benefits portal)
Military Occupational Specialty Crosswalk module (career exploration)
Financial planning module
Resilience training (self-care and life balance)
Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Workshop (civilian job search and hiring process): those who have served more than 20 years can request an exemption
Capstone Activity (fulfill Career Readiness Standards—CRS)
Topic (Optional)
Entrepreneurship
Higher Education

For over 40 years, TAP has been viewed as key in helping military personnel members with their reentry into civilian life. Based on the literature, this journey has not been an easy one, and updates and changes to the program’s curriculum were based

heavily on the number of veterans who were unable to find employment and were no longer connected to the resources they had while fulfilling their military contract.

Hausmann et al. (2013) estimated there are approximately 87 support programs sponsored by the DoD and VA. However, moving forward, additional attention should be given to such programs as Hire Our Heroes internships. They have been credited for offering 12-week internships for the Marine Corps (Kitchen, 2017) and The Air Force's Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (AF COOL) program that allows active-duty members to earn licenses and certifications which can be used in their current position as well as help them develop transferrable skills for the civilian job force (Military.com, 2015). Because each military branch has its own programs and "institutional language" (Zogas, 2017), it can be difficult to identify and track all the transition support efforts which have been developed by military retirees, community organizations, and non-profit support groups.

To further understand the journey of the military personnel members who have received veteran status, the next section describes the highs and lows of redefining themselves outside of uniform, healing old wounds, and finding satisfaction and acceptance in the workplace.

Transitioning into Civilian Life

Home is where one starts from...The home is the place to which a man intends to return when he is away from it...The home is the starting point—point as well as terminus. Where I happen to be is my "abode;" where I intend to stay is my "residence." (Schuetz, 1945, p. 370)

Schuetz illustrated the struggles of a veteran returning home from combat. Although the return home is anticipated to be filled with excitement, veterans are faced with reestablishing personal and social relationships with those who carry memories of their life prior to their enlistment. According to Schuetz (1945), a disconnect can arise as veterans attempt (or decline) to describe their military experience to whom the author refers to as *listeners*. Straits-Troster et al. (2012) emphasized the existence of an added layer of concern when civilians try to interact with an “emotionally numb” combat veteran (p. 54) who has been negatively impacted physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Because civilians may have misconceptions of what occurs during military service, this can result in levels of discomfort and uncertainty on how to interact with veterans when they return home and enter the workplace.

Life after a military separation or retirement is not a simple task for veterans who were “stripped of their civilian identity and replaced it with a military identity” (Demers, 2011, p. 162). Unfortunately, adjusting to this new identity has resulted in veterans experiencing difficulties related to relationships, alcohol and substance abuse, finances, legal issues, homelessness, employment, and suicide (Stern, 2014). Moreover, the reintegration process is faced with more difficulties by service members who are/were married, did not have a college degree, served in combat, sustained an injury, and knew someone killed or injured during their enlistment (Morin, 2011). Veterans who join the military in their late teens are estimated to retire between ages 38-40. Unfortunately, for service members who did not serve 20 years in an active-duty capacity, they will not receive their military pension until age 65 or older. Therefore, securing employment becomes a top priority for these veterans, especially if they have family obligations. In

2014, the median personal income of an African American veteran was \$29,986 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016), and, for those who have personal and family obligations, this is not enough for a sustainable life. Understanding all that is required, the stressors of adjusting to civilian life can take a toll on African American male veterans and can ultimately lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

The United States' Selective Service System was formed on May 18, 1917, under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson. The Selective Service System, also known as "the draft," requires U.S. male citizens to register 30 days prior to their 18th birthday. As service members returned from the Vietnam War, the DoD became concerned with the increase of reported alcohol and drug-related injuries and deaths. In 1971, Title V of the Military Selective Service Act (P.L. 92-129) was implemented to provide treatment to military personnel with alcohol and drug dependences, and, in 1972, the DoD issued a mandate "to assist those who could not or would not be rehabilitated in making the transition to civilian life" (Bray et al., 1992, p. 478). The United States Armed Forces dissolved the draft, and the military became an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973.

For those who join the military between the ages of 18-25 years old, this is deemed a period where the experimentation of drugs and alcohol is prevalent (Teachman & Tedrow, 2007). Based upon a culture that views alcohol as a social norm, "before 1982, active-duty military personnel could consume alcohol on military bases regardless of the legal drinking age off base" (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 619). Alcohol use in the military is perceived as a way for service members to gain acceptance by peer groups

(Teachman et al., 2015), adjust to being away from loved ones and friends, and handle physical pain and workplace stressors (Ames & Cunradi, 2004).

To learn about the substance abuse and mental health trends amongst those who served in the United States Armed Forces between 1980-2008, Bray et al. (2010) identified the habits and addictions military personnel has before joining and after leaving their unit. The survey, which is administered every three years, showed an increase in alcohol consumption and substance abuse in 2005 and 2008 in males (85.2% to 85.8%), service members who did not graduate but had enrolled in college courses (44.1% to 45.1%), and those who were ranked E4 to E6 (49.6% to 51.7%). The military enlisted paygrade scale is listed from an E1 to E9 (E1 as the lowest to E9 as the highest). E4 to E6 are classified as midlevel enlisted personnel who are no longer E1 to E3 junior enlisted service members, but service members working towards earning a senior advisory position (DoD, n.d.). Despite a decline from 2005 to 2008, African American males (17.6%-16.3%) ranked second to White Males (64.4%-64.3%) in high rates of alcohol consumption and substance abuse. Golub and Bennett (2013) explained that in addition to alcohol, African American and White active-duty service members admitted to using marijuana, heroin, opioids, and illicit drugs, and there was an increased usage in males (85.1.%) who had been deployed at least once (54.3%). African Americans (70.2%) ranked higher than Whites (13%) in their use of marijuana, cocaine, or a hallucinogen prior to joining the military and since their military discharge (pp. 450-453). In general, there is also a rise in veterans experiencing misuse of prescription painkillers.

Prescription drugs have been recommended to 50% of the post-9/11 combat veterans who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic

brain injury (TBI), trauma, and mental illness, to help them function through their military to civilian adjustment (Liu & Miller, 2014; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). PTSD is prevalent in veterans who have been in combat, witnessed or been wounded or tortured, and have had multiple deployments (Institute of Medicine, 2012). TBI, also known as the “signature injury of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts” (Lindquist et al., 2017, p. 254) has impacted over 195,000 service members who have been exposed to blasts, falls, or being hit in the head during training exercises or combat (Boyd & Asmussen, 2012; Lindquist et al., 2017). While not all veterans will experience challenges with civilian integration, these findings suggest that alcohol and drug consumption is used to subdue the physical and emotional injuries of the past (Maguen et al., 2011). Therefore, alcohol and substance abuse can ultimately impact how veterans adjust to civilian life, and subsequently, their performance, success, and retention in the workplace. According to Cooper et al. (2018), military service members have masculinities, a variety of traits men use to define what it means to be a man in a military, dangerous environment. Such traits include “physical and emotional hardness, self-reliance, aggressiveness, a robust sense of heterosexual identity” (Cooper et al., 2018, p. 159). The ability to ask for help can be a daunting task for anyone, but for a male veteran, this is viewed as a sign of weakness, and some prefer to suffer in silence. For an African American male veteran, the hesitancy to utilize the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) services is embedded in a historical mistrust of health care professionals, and a reluctance to admit support is needed as they navigate through their new normal as a civilian.

Accessing VA Services

The support of veterans dates to 1636 when the pilgrims developed a law to care for all who were injured and disabled in the war with the Pequot Indians (VA, 2021). The United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), originally named the Veterans Bureau, was founded on July 21, 1930, and is responsible for providing health care, housing assistance, educational and career counseling, and burial services for veterans. Furthermore, the VA is credited for providing a series of support services for military spouses, dependents, caregivers, and widows. Veterans who fulfill the following conditions are provided a lifetime of free health care and support resources: An active-duty honorable discharge, enlisted after September 7, 1980, or entered active duty after October 16, 1981, and current or former member of the National Guard.

According to the VA (2019) regulations, Veterans who are in the following categories can apply for a *discharge upgrade*: (a) other than dishonorable, (b) bad conduct, or (c) dishonorable discharge. Doing so will allow them to access health care for injuries they sustained while serving, or because they were victims of sexual assault or were subjected to discrimination in the military based on sexual orientation. The VA also reported serving approximately 9 million veterans each year, and they are in a continuous battle to process disability claims, disability benefits appeals, and schedule patient appointments in a timely manner.

As an example, Sayer et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study to learn about the experiences of Iraq-Afghanistan combat veterans who utilized medical care through the VA system. Out of the 754 surveyed veterans, 403 (53%) had been diagnosed with depression or PTSD and expressed difficulties completing required tasks in the

workplace (35%), finding or keeping a job (25%), or losing a job (24%). These statistics support the recommendation that the VA and other support networks should not only assist veterans with finding employment but also on how to maintain their position (Harrod et al., 2017). This is vital, as Ford (2017) stated veterans are valuable contributors to the civilian private sector.

Also, Teachman (2011) noted being in a civilian workplace can be challenging for veterans who have poor to deteriorating mental and physical health due to working in hazardous war zones, being exposed to diseases at the various duty stations, acquiring injuries from training exercises or equipment, and being in environments that could impact their hearing. Because of their belief that asking for help is a sign of weakness, difficulties can arise when veterans are not transparent with their employers about the need for workplace accommodations. In Stern (2017), post-9/11 Marine Corps and Army veterans refused to disclose their disabilities “for fear they would be perceived as weak (65%), treated differently by leadership (63%), or others would have less confidence in them” (p. 71). To alleviate the pressure of the new workplace demands and not undervalue a veteran’s contributions, Wewiorski et al. (2018) suggested employers to develop a revised work plan for veterans with disabilities. Such efforts must include veterans working in teams (a structure they are accustomed to in the military) or reassigning or readjusting duties in their position description.

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Job Accommodation Network (JAN) has guidelines and resources that can assist supervisors and employers who work alongside service members and veterans with PTSD (i.e., providing mentoring opportunities, honoring mental health days, allowing frequent breaks, etc.) (Ostovary & Dapprich,

2011). Unfortunately, there is limited literature outlining how many civilian employers are utilizing information from JAN, and how they measure the effect it has had in the workplace. Additionally, how African American male veterans are hesitant to seek medical assistance based on their mistrust of the health care system is not detailed (Murray, 2015). African Americans' mistrust of the health care system can be dated back to slavery (Murray, 2015). Because African Americans were viewed as property, health care was provided primarily to ensure continued productivity rather than the slave owners' best interest at heart. Because of the magnitude of this mistrust, African Americans would visit "granny doctors" (Murray, 2015) or utilize home remedies to treat illnesses or diseases.

Despite the abolishment of slavery on January 1, 1863, African Americans continued to encounter hardships and inequality, especially within the health care system. In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service implemented the Tuskegee Study, also known as Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male (Russert, 2009, p. 155) that impacted over 600 African American men from Macon County, Alabama between 1932-1972. Despite the discovery of penicillin in 1947, African American males were denied access to medication, which could have prevented them from spreading the disease to their spouses and children. Hoehn (2018) discussed how mistrust in the health care system has encouraged the Milwaukee VA Medical Center to offer informational sessions on serving African American veterans during their sixth annual VA Mental Health Summit. Thus, Dr. Michael Bride, Milwaukee VA psychiatrist explained:

The reason we have chosen to focus on the African American community is that historically there has been troubles with communicating our message to that

community as far as what we can provide, as far as services they can trust, and to make sure that those Veterans are getting the care they need. (Hoehn, 2018, para 10)

In a recent study examining the reasons why veterans do not utilize the VA system, Derefinko et al. (2019) surveyed 90 veterans who served at least 12 months in the United States Armed Forces and had been out of the military for a minimum of six months. Based on the survey, 43 veterans (48%) were unemployed and aware that PTSD was negatively impacting their personal and professional relationships. The study revealed veterans are hesitant to access VA services when they must travel longer distances for appointments. Veterans from rural areas are subjected to further distances when accessing specialty care services at urban area VAs. In Messer et al. (2004), Army and Marine Corps combat units who attended “study group sessions” highlighted service members are hesitant to seek health care if they do not have reliable transportation and their employer does not honor their leave request for a doctor’s appointment.

After conducting part one of a three-layered survey with 10,334 active-duty veterans using The Veterans Metrics Initiative, it was concluded that E1 to E4s were less likely to access VA services 90 days after their military separation (Aronson et al., 2019). As the lowest ranking military officials, the participants shared they did not need the VA’s support in their military to a civilian life transition. Despite awareness of their “ongoing physical and mental health problems,” E1 to E4 veterans perceive asking for help as a sign of weakness yet admitted they understand the benefits of utilizing VA related support programs (Aronson et al., 2019, p. 643). The survey participants included 82% males, and 14% were African American (ranked second to Whites). The military to

civilian workplace transition can be overwhelming for veterans who were trained for a career assigned to them by their branch to now being in spaces where employees may not have the same work ethic and commitment (Demers, 2011). Additionally, workplace training is built upon meeting organizational as opposed to individual goals (Smith & True, 2014). Hardships are inevitable when veterans carry personal expectations of what they are supposed to be and feel; this is a shared mindset within the civilian workplace. Veterans who are told they will be assets to the civilian workplace environment because of their military training and experience are subjected to feeling disconnected and believe assimilation is a necessity as they continue to balance two worlds (see Figure 1).

Veteran Identity Strain

Veteran Identity Strain brings an added layer of stress to African American males who are both a minority and veteran in the civilian private sector (McAllister et al., 2015). Veteran Identity Strain is defined as “the incongruence between a veteran’s identity as former military personnel and a new employee in a civilian work environment” (Stern, 2017, p. 70). Veteran Identity Strain occurs when veterans do not feel adequately trained or prepared to embrace life as a civilian (Gonzalez et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2015; Stern, 2017). With the use of social identity theory, Gonzalez et al. (2019) looked at what hinders veterans with VA documented disabilities to request workplace accommodations. Veterans’ identities are shaped during boot camp when service members are taught the policies, protocols, and procedures of their units as well as the armed forces. The authors noted values such as honor, sacrifice, and *duty before self* is constantly reinforced as the way of life everyone must adhere to within this new community. After leaving the military, veterans become overwhelmed when they enter

civilian workspaces and feel undervalued. This can occur when veterans realize the training and skills they obtained in the military may not be comparable to what is required by their employers.

According to Gonzalez et al. (2019), “veteran identity strain can decrease feelings of psychological safety in the workplace and limit the extent to which a veteran with a disability is likely to seek out assistance” (p. 5). The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) were designed by the Department of Veteran Affairs to help service members secure employment opportunities prior to their military separation or retirement. Using the Military Occupational Specialty Crosswalk module in Transition GPS, veterans can search for employment opportunities that are aligned with the positions they held in the military. Gonzalez et al. (2019) recognized the Military Occupational Specialty Crosswalk to be a helpful resource; however, it should be used with an understanding the assessment provides suggestions and cannot guarantee workplace satisfaction and personnel fit.

To further expand on this topic, McAllister et al. (2015) examined how military rank can impact the political skill veterans utilize in the civilian workplace. Political skill is defined as “an interpersonal effectiveness construct that reflects individuals’ abilities to secure resources and influence others” (p. 93). In a quantitative study of 251 veterans working in civilian related positions, there were significant differences in how enlisted members and officers were able to build connections and see connections between their new civilian position and their military training.

Officers have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and received training in such areas as leadership, supervision, effective communication, ethical reasoning, critical

thinking, etc. Enlisted members, especially those ranked E1-E4, had “blue collar tasks” that were assigned to them as a “military occupational specialty (MOS) (i.e., tank or radio operator)” (McAllister et al., 2015, p. 97). The study further revealed that veteran identity strain may be more prevalent in combat war veterans versus veterans who did not see combat. To help civilian employers understand what veterans can bring into the civilian workplace, Hardison and Shanley (2016) described the skills E1 to E7 Marine Corps, and Army veterans obtain from their military training course. Working under stressful conditions and becoming dependable are both reinforced during the Marine Corps and Army boot camps or basic training. However, there is a large disconnect in the type of experience Marine Corps and Army mid to high-level enlisted personnel (E4-E7) have related to managing and supervising others, thinking critically, writing communications, and planning projects. Therefore, it is vital for civilian employers to not assume all veterans have the same transferrable skills. Utilizing this information can meet veterans where they are, whether they chose to disclose a documented disability or request workplace accommodations.

Historically, African Americans have encountered difficulties earning promotions within the military (Smith, 2010) and may be subjected to the veteran identity strain described in this section, especially for those E1-E4s who did not earn a college degree. Cooper (2020) reported,

Some 43 percent of the 1.3 million men and women on active duty in the United States military are people of color. But the people making crucial decisions, such as how to respond to the coronavirus crisis and how many troops to send to Afghanistan or Syria, are almost entirely White males. (para. 4)

Cooper further commented that the hesitation to promote African Americans is haunted by the 1925 *Employment of negro man power in war* report. In the 33-page document, U.S. Army Major General, H. E. Ely described the physical, mental, moral, and psychological deficits that would prevent African Americans from serving in a military leadership position. In addition to using such words as *inferior mentality* and *inherently weak in character*, Ely believed African Americans would be inadequate military leaders because “the cranial cavity of the negro is smaller than the White; his brain weighing 36 ounces contrasted with 45 for the White” (Ely, 1925, pp. 6-9). Such beliefs contribute to the limited number of African Americans who have received military promotions.

Currently, there is limited research identifying where African American male veterans are placed within this spectrum or how many of them utilized additional military support resources after their military retirement or separation. As previously stated, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is designed to assist military personnel members while they are still fulfilling their military contracts. Because TAP has been criticized for offering information at a time when military personnel members are focused in other directions, outside constituents have taken on the charge to develop programs to help veterans adjust to civilian life at a time when it is the most relevant.

Meaning of Boots to Suits and Boots2Suits

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term Boots2Suits describes the military to civilian workplace transition. It is important to note Boots to Suits and Boots2Suits are terms commonly used within military communities and not often found in scholarly research. Furthermore, the terms *Boots to Suits* and *Boots2Suits* are used differently

within programs and non-profit, charitable organizations designed to support veterans and spouses. Because there is limited research focusing on the development of Boots to Suits and Boots2Suits initiatives, it can be assumed these programs were designed by those who have personal experience or an understanding of the challenges that veterans encounter upon their military discharge.

Boots to Suits

Founded in 2014 in Richmond, VA, Boots to Suits: *They Served Us. Now Let's Serve Them*, offers two complimentary career outfits to military personnel and spouses of wounded warriors (Boots to Suits, n.d.). To promote community involvement and engagement, Boots to Suits works closely with the Virginia TAP, the Virginia Employment Commission, and the McGuire Veteran Medical Center - Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program.

Further, the Boots to Suits marker has been used within higher education to describe how student veterans are being supported on their campuses before graduation. For example, in the PBS News Hour Special (2012) *From 'Boots to Suits,' Transitioning from Military Service to Civilian Life*, the University of Colorado in Denver was acknowledged for its military mentoring partnership with the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. In 2018, the University of Colorado Denver was ranked eleventh on the *Best College for Veterans* list by Military Times Best and their mentorship program has set the tone for community partners to build connections with student veterans. In 2019, The Ohio State University was awarded a \$69,000 grant to provide support services for student veterans. In March 2019, the institution announced their Infectious Disease Institute developed the Veteran and Military Student Mentorship Program to connect

student veterans with other veterans, spouses, and military personnel members who are in the medical field (The Ohio State University, 2019). In addition to assisting student veterans with their transitions into college environments, the program is designed for adult learners who are typically the first in their family to attend college while balancing academics, work, and family obligations (The Ohio State University, 2019).

In a continuous effort to support student veterans, the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs developed a transition support program that includes a mentoring component, the development of a LinkedIn profile, interview and networking workshops, and more. Once student veterans complete the program, they are awarded with an appreciation breakfast and receive a new professional suit (University of Colorado Colorado Springs, n.d.). With the increased usage of technology to build professional networks, the National Student Veterans Association (SVA) partnered with Veterati, a free online platform that connects veterans with professionals within their major or field of interests. Founded in 2015 by entrepreneur Diana Tsai Rau and her husband and former marine, Daniel Rau, Veterati uses an algorithm to pair student veterans with mentors that can assist with résumé reviews, mock interviews, and answering questions and provide guidance related to the Boots to Suits transition.

Boots2Suits

Through a different perspective, Boots2Suits has been used to describe veteran-centered professional development training programs. Based in Rockville, MD, since 2014, NS2 Serves (National Security Services) “trains and employs veterans in high tech careers” (NS2 Serves, n.d.). The three-month program is specifically designed for post 9/11 veterans and reservists, disabled veterans, and Gold Star spouses (their husbands or

wives passed away serving in the United States military). The course tracks are based on workplace demands during the class offerings. NS2 provides free tuition, room and board, travel, and a \$1,000 monthly stipend due to the high-level commitment required throughout the accelerated face-to-face program.

Boots2Suits has taken on the reputation of helping veterans prepare for entrepreneurship. In 1996, retired army veteran Sgt. Omar Burgos co-founded Boot2Suits which is currently based in Orlando, FL (Boots2Suits, n.d.). With the support of his business partner and Boots2Suits co-founder, Mike Warren, the company offers online training to military service members who aspire to become business owners and the steps to achieve this goal. Moreover, for disabled veterans who wish to become business owners, Wewiorski et al. (2018) explored how the VA's individual placement and support - supported employment model has been promoted to allow disabled veterans with assistance to work in spaces where they can utilize the management and leadership skills they obtained in the military.

This section of the literature review was developed to explain how the title Boots to Suits and Boots2Suits has been used interchangeably when focusing on military personnel transition. Most importantly, how these organizations were designed to pick up where the armed forces may have left off or to fill in the gap when they were unable to provide desired or requested services. In Demers (2011), the author conducted a 2006-2008 qualitative study with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who transitioned into civilian life after combat. "Veterans described three key challenges to returning home: lack of respect from civilians, holding themselves to a higher standard than civilians, and not fitting into the civilian world" (Demers, 2011, p. 170). Therefore, the Boots to Suits and

Boots2Suits initiatives are an additional layer of support for service members upon their retirement or separation from the military. The civilian to military transition has its own unique challenges and varies for each veteran, especially African Americans.

African American Males in the Civilian Workplace

Service in the United States Armed Forces is the *only* experience open to the Negro American in which he is truly treated as an equal: not as a Negro equal to a White, but as one man equal to any other man in a world where the category “Negro” and “White” do not exist. (Moynihan, 1965, p. 42)

Moynihan suggested the United States Armed Forces was the one place African American males could obtain The American Dream. Unfortunately, after leaving the military, World War II, African American male veterans found their military service could not shield them from discrimination as G.I. Bill entitlement and unemployment compensation were designated for White veterans (Onkst, 1998). Moore et al. (2016) reported that out of the 22,328,000 veterans in the United States, 10.8% were African American. Being an African American male veteran entering the civilian private workplace is a difficult state for those African American males who defined themselves by veteran identity and not their racial identity. Gade and Wilkins (2013) found that individuals who have low-status racial identities find comfort in a veteran identity based on “war era, location, length of service, combat exposure, a service-connected disability, and rank” (p. 273). For African American males, this low-status racial identity is engrained in discrimination and stereotypes dating back to slavery and is still prevalent today.

Research has shown African American males feel targeted and labeled at an early age. Bell (2015) conducted a qualitative research study with 18 elementary and middle-school aged African American males to learn about the acceptance (or lack thereof) they receive in the classroom and the treatment they receive from their teachers. The students indicated the misbehavior of White students was often ignored, and teachers accused African Americans students of being insubordinate. Bell (2015) noted African Americans “may still be experiencing the residual effects of slavery,” which ultimately impacts the feelings they have about their talents and ability to be successful in the future (p. 1260). Furthermore, it is necessary to note African American males are labeled as “members of the negatively stereotyped group” (Appel & Kronberger, 2012, p. 609) because of images seen in such mediums as television and social media. The beliefs and reservations that African American males establish in youth can remain with them through adulthood.

As African American males prepare to enter the workforce, some obstacles await them before the start of the position. Whitaker (2019) explained how racial discrimination towards African Americans can begin as early as the pre-employment screening process. During this phase, African Americans are negatively judged by their first names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), their gaps of unemployment or employment history, and the desire for hiring managers to “surround themselves with people they believe have a shared commonality and reject those who may make them uncomfortable” (Whitaker, 2019, p. 24). Regardless of the belief that “male privilege” (Guy, 2014, p. 21) is prominent in the workplace, the author revealed that African American males do not feel they have the same access and opportunity as White males. As stated in Guy (2014), African Americans males have been told their workplace

success is contingent on them improving their attitudes and behaviors. In a mixed-methods study focused on discrimination suits filed to the Ohio Civil Rights Commission between 1986-2003, middle-class African Americans stated they were subjected to racial harassment (i.e., bullying), discriminatory firing, earned less wages and lacked opportunities to receive promotions. Mong and Roscigno (2010) reinforced how professional growth is limited for African American males because they are unaware of promotions they could apply for because they did not see the advertisement, nor do they have someone in the workplace they trusted to seek guidance and support. This statement aligns with McAllister et al.'s (2015) discussion on political skills. Workplace stress can be lessened when African American male veterans establish connections and mentoring relationships with those who can take them underneath their wings. By building these relationships, they become aware of the *unspoken spoken* within the workplace culture.

In Assari and Lankarani (2018), compared to African American females, African American males felt they were subject to increased discrimination and poor mental health in “predominantly White work environments” (p. 1). For African American male veterans, this poor mental health (i.e., depression and PTSD) could be attributed to adjusting to life while still upholding the responsibilities of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The Uniform Code Military Justice outlines all the orders service members must follow, including, Article 115: Malingering. Under Article 115, it is unlawful for military personnel to pretend to be sick or injured to avoid work-related responsibilities (Redmond et al., 2015). Service members are expected to be committed to their military assignments, and a failure to do so could result in lost wages, confinement, or a dishonorable discharge. This disciplined way of life can be overwhelming when African

American male veterans are placed in “racialized... highly unstructured jobs” (Roscigno et al., 2012, p. 698), where others do not share the same work ethic and commitment.

Because of limited resources related to African American male veterans in the civilian private sector, this section of the literature review provided research studies that reinforced the importance of this study. Many African American males face challenges that begin from childhood and continue throughout their adulthood. Since the Civil War, African American male veterans have served in the military to prove their worth as well as gain equality. However, hardships are inevitable when re-entering a society that continues to uphold the historical stereotypes of African American males.

Intersection of Race, Gender, Education, and Military Service

Their genius is that they have survived. The psyche of Black men has been distorted, but out of that, deformity has risen a majesty. (Grier & Cobbs, 1968, p. 38)

As illustrated above, the African American male veteran has had their share of challenges; however, they have persisted. Race, gender, education, and military service are layered and often intertwined as African American male veterans try to find their way as civilians. It is important to continuously highlight every veteran is unique and has distinctive experiences.

Out of all the racial and ethnic groups, African Americans gravitate to the military for economic stability (Harris & Lewis, 2019). For example, Teachman (2011) credited the United States Armed Forces for providing service members with stability, leadership skills, and opportunities they may not have been available to them in the civilian environment. Once African American male service members leave the military

(voluntarily or involuntarily), they re-establish themselves while potentially facing stereotypes based on being both a veteran and African American.

Childs (2014) acknowledged media and pop culture have played a large role in how society views African American males. This author reports that students in a social studies classroom associated African American identity with "...violence, misogyny, deviancy, materialism, criminal behavior..." (p. 299). These are negative perceptions of African American shared by youth who have not been exposed to positive role models. Bell (2015) noted there are added pressures when African American males are further described as being "lazy and irresponsible" (p. 1260). Because discrimination is prohibited in the United States Armed Forces, it is overwhelming to return to civilian life learning "unemployment and underemployment of Black males continues to be higher than Whites" (Guy, 2014, p. 19). Job security is not an issue for service members who are assigned to positions by their commanding officers and are given the necessary tools and training to be successful in their positions. As civilians, they must go through the "wait and see" cycle of applying, interviewing, and hoping their military status is more of an advantage versus a disadvantage.

According to Clemens and Milsom (2008), those who enlist in the military: (1) often enter with only a high school diploma, (2) are not required to earn a college degree for promotions within the enlisted corps, and (3) have only worked within the confines of their unit or branch. Therefore, African American male veterans, specifically enlisted members, often return to school or take vocational or technical courses to gain or maintain employment. This is a trend typically found in adult learners who chose to attend college based on a career change or career advancement (Kasworm et al., 2002, p.

23). Veterans who are recipients of the post-9/11 GI Bill have access to educational benefits which covers 100% of their tuition for 36 months at a public, in-state institution, a stipend for textbooks and course materials, a housing allowance and they are able to transfer their remaining benefits to spouses and dependent(s) (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

African American male veterans view military service as a way of life and have faced racism and discrimination since their arrival in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 – the same location that would not allow slaves to serve because they did not want them to have access to military equipment (Harris & Lewis, 2019, p. 4). Since the Civil War, African American males view military service as a way to attain freedom and to prove their American citizenship. Because of these factors, civilian employers need to be aware of the background and multiple identities African American male veterans carry and how this can impact their persistence and retention in the workplace.

Because of the military's connection to the United States government, it is not surprising that veterans gravitate to federal workforce positions upon their military retirement or separation. However, this research study addresses the reasons African American male veterans to take a leap of faith to work within the private sector.

Leap of Faith

On August 8, 1969, President Richard M. Nixon issued Executive Order 11478 to prohibit hiring discrimination towards individuals applying for federal government positions based on race, gender, religion, and national origin. During this time, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Section was established and charged with ensuring the order was partnered with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Section 717) and Section 501 Rehabilitation Act 1973. With the support of Executive Order

11478, the VA's Office of Diversity and Inclusion developed an African American Employment Program "to help identify and eliminate actual recruitment and employment inequalities (if any exists)...and identify areas with less than expected participation or under-utilization of African Americans in the VA's workforce" (VA, 2019).

It is important to address the "leap of faith" African American males are taking by leaving the federal government system to seek civilian employment opportunities. Executive Order 11478 does not guarantee African American males' employment or will not be subjected to discrimination. However, the African American Employment Program was designed to identify the barriers that the federal government could help remove so that African American veterans are able navigate and be successful in the workplace.

Connection to Adult Learning

This portion of the dissertation explains possible connection between the topic at hand and different types of adult learning. It begins with a discussion on informal learning followed by situated cognition, on-the-job training, effects of workplace environment, and Schlossberg's transition theory.

Informal Learning

In the context of this research study, African American male veterans have a level of training, leadership, and experiences that allow them to obtain employment. Through informal learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) and on-the-job training (Matsuo, 2014), they are expected to learn about the new job. Coombs et al. (1973) defined learning as *formal* (in a traditional classroom setting for educational or technical training), *informal* (lessons learned through daily interactions), and *nonformal* (an

educational encounter outside of the classroom) occurrences. The expectation is that employers in the civilian private sector can be both informal coaches and mentors working alongside veterans. Merriam and Bierema (2014) described informal learning as the “most difficult to capture and understand,” (p. 19) yet “78% of learning in the workplace is informal” (p. 18). To this end, employers should become knowledgeable of the transferrable skills they bring into the workplace depending on the type of military training and experience of their employees. Employers are not being asked to give veterans special privileges but on the job training as it relates to workplace culture and systems. Informal learning in the workplace environment may occur through veterans asking questions or seeking help, working individually and collaboratively with others, and completing assigned tasks by transferring skills they bring as veterans. Further, there is a period of adjustment to how learning occurs since they are no longer in a military environment.

Being groomed in an environment based upon *doing what you are told instead of making your own decisions* may result in difficulties with how African American male veterans learn the workplace culture and expectations within the private sector. Schatz et al. (2017) described the future of military learning as a combination of informal and formal training, education, and experience. Although the article was targeted towards Army soldiers, the overall message suggests the military is nothing without its human capital (military personnel members); without adequate and proper training, failure and defeat is inevitable. This same mantra can be applied to the civilian work environments inviting African American male veterans into their spaces. Civilian employers who hire

African American male veterans are getting individuals with diverse views and perspectives who have been subject to different ways of learning information.

Situated Cognition

The military environment is built on discipline and structure. Instruction is provided through classroom lectures as well as drills and field experiences that focus on how to utilize equipment and machinery, survival skills, and self-defense (Zogas, 2017). In adult education, situated cognition is credited for providing learning opportunities through daily social interactions as learners are gradually stepping away from the ways of knowing to which they are accustomed. Merriam and Bierema (2014) noted that “context and social interactions are culturally and politically defined” (p. 118). For example, veterans are accustomed to protocols and chains of command they must follow in the military. Therefore, silence and hesitancy to initiate ideas in the workplace should not be attributed to their lack of knowledge or interest, but as a level of respect. Knowledge can be discovered once veterans understand how their transferrable skills benefit the workplace environment and its mission. Through job shadowing, mentoring, and when possible, interacting with other veterans within the workplace, veterans learn new customs and norms which can help them build connections with the new colleagues.

In Gade and Wilkins (2013), the authors noted identity plays a role in how veterans view themselves, their inclination to utilize VA resources and services, and interactions with the vocational rehabilitation and employment counselors. Through telephone interviews with eleven counselors (veteran and non-veteran), they shared how military status and veteran identity was instrumental in building relationships with clients. Veterans felt counselors who served in the military had their best interest at heart

because they understood the sacrifice associated with serving ones' country and the difficulties of establishing a new life once it all ends. An integral piece of this study is when non-veteran counselors admitted to their clients, they did not have the honor of serving in the military yet appreciate and respect their sacrifice.

With approximately less than 0.5% of the United States population serving in the armed forces since September 11, 2001, veterans walk into work environments where employers are unaware of how they are handling their military to civilian life transition. By engaging in veterans in *communities of practice* (or learning communities), learning can be established through teambuilding, professional development, and where the sharing of information over time helps newcomers become more active and engaged (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). These opportunities allow veterans as well as civilian employers and employees to learn individual strengths and identify ways to support those in need.

Learning is further disseminated and enriched when adults, in this case veterans in the workplace, are encouraged to share their knowledge to establish understanding within the workplace – showing the assets they possess as newcomers (Stein & Imel, 2002). Adults thrive when included in the learning process. On-the-job training (OJT) is an example of how adults learn through active participation and being hands-on in an environment where they can be the most efficient – a familiar concept that is the premise for military culture.

On-the-Job Training

On-the-job training (OJT) is associated with apprenticeships due to its focus on hands-on learning (Matsuo, 2014). OJT is credited as another way for veterans to learn

information in the civilian private sector workplace. In the United States Armed Forces, military personnel members embark in scaffold learning, where they are taught a specific action, task, or behavior by their commanding officer or higher ranked official, and they duplicate what they are taught while the commanding officer or higher ranked official observes. The feedback the military personnel member receives is essential as their goals are to become proficient and ultimately master their assignments. Coaching, feedback, and directives are not foreign concepts to veterans. In support of this claim, in a quantitative research study on what motivates employees to bring new ideas into the workplace, Fernandez and Pitts (2011) found employees are more likely to improve their skills when they understand the purpose and how their efforts contribute to the goal and mission of the organization.

Matsuo (2014) credited on-the-job training (OJT) for being cost effective and helpful in addressing the needs of novice employees. Through his work, he identified the differences between structured and unstructured OJT. Structured OJT follows a specific curriculum for those enrolled in technical training. The training courses are taught by someone experienced in the subject matter, and they provide specific details on how to complete the task(s). Structured OJT closely aligns with the training enlisted service members received as non-reflective learners – directed to complete a task in the same order or *being told what to do*. Unstructured OJT, which is more common, is unplanned and can happen through workplace conversations centered around shared best practices (Matsuo, 2014, p. 227). The value of OJT is its availability to show employees how the lessons learned, and the skills obtained help them achieve multiple tasks within the workplace.

With roots planted in the Training Within Industry (TWI) and Job Instruction Training war effort programs, OJT deemed appropriate to highlight in the literature because of its early connections to the military (Matsuo, 2014). For veterans, location is also vital to OJT; as new employees they observe movements and how things are arranged in the workplace environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Subsequently, these nonverbal elements tell veterans if their new space is safe, welcoming, and veteran-friendly. Veterans who engage in OJT in the civilian workplace can be successful when they have supervisors and experienced colleagues who are willing to take them underneath their wings.

Effects of Workplace Environment

In addition, the stress that veterans experience adjusting to their civilian life can impact both attitude and performance while juggling the physical, psychological, and organizational demands of the workplace. According to Meurs and Perrewé (2011), for veterans with disabilities, the stressors of a workplace environment can be detrimental to their health which results in decreased performance. Marsick et al. (1999) identify how informal learning can negatively or positively impact the four frames that describe a workplace environment.

The structural frame. The workplace is based on a chain of command, and there are specific policies and procedures everyone must follow. New employees are told “how things are done” (p. 82), and there is a focus on maintaining the work culture as opposed to changing it. Furthermore, workplace conflicts are traditionally resolved by supervisors or those in authority. The authors argue that informal learning can be overwhelming when individuals enter a work setting, and there is no one to help them. They are forced

to learned expected practices on their own. Because veterans are accustomed to the philosophy of *doing what you are told instead of making your own decisions*, they can become overwhelmed when they do not receive a clear directive from their supervisors.

The human resources frame. The workplace values its employees and the talents that they bring. There is a desire to build community, family, and friendship amongst colleagues. However, conflicts are resolved by “helping others get what they need psychologically and emotionally, through such things as job enrichment, personal development, and career progression” (Marsick et al., 1999, p. 83).

The political frame. The workplace is filled with employees who have an interest in helping only themselves and not caring about the success and safety of others. The organization is consumed with coercion, power struggles, and employees who are pushing against the status quo when decisions are made that they do not agree with.

The symbolic frame. Despite chaos and hidden agendas by its leader, the workplace appearance sets a positive tone for employee buy-in and to encourage commitment to the organization’s goals and objectives. The workplace is filled with humor and laughter to provide security and remove anxiety.

The workplace environment is key to a veteran’s overall well-being. Veterans are conditioned to adhere to the policies in the Uniform Code of Military Justice that outlines a chain of command that must be followed at all times. Current literature related to workplace learning for veterans focuses primarily on the training and professional development for the supervisors (Hammer et al., 2020; Hammer, et al., 2019). Through the use of the Veteran Supportive Supervisor Training, “a computer-based training using theory-based learning principles such as a self-paced instruction with intermittent quiz

questions” (Hammer et al., 2019, p. 4), employers are learning how to provide a comfortable, safe atmosphere to retain veteran employees. The 1- to 2-hour training is self-paced and is divided into three modules: (1) address personal views and opinions about veterans as well as learning about the skills and talents they bring to the civilian workplace, (2) receive suggestions on how to be a supportive/veteran-friendly supervisor, and (3) develop an action plan on how to work through the lessons learned and takeaways from the online training. Once the supervisors complete the course, for two weeks, they submit an online reflection of their behaviors and interactions with their veteran employees to note their progress or areas of improvement. Hammer et al. (2019) noted that although this training is designed for veterans, it can be useful for working with marginalized populations and those with disabilities in the workplace.

The workplace is a setting where individuals can showcase their talents while living out their calling. For veterans, the civilian workplace environment is an opportunity for them to return to a previous employer or find a completely new career path as they work through the stages of transition.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

Nancy K. Schlossberg is credited for analyzing how adults adapt to job and career transitions and the perceptions they carry with them into the workplace environment (Schlossberg, 2011). Her theory is comprised of the 4 S’s (i.e., situation, self, support, and strategies). *Situation* describes the current state an individual is in during the time of the transition. *Self* identifies how the person individually handles the transition. *Support* looks at the elements in place to provide balance and encouragement. *Strategies* are the ways an individual works through the transition and the potential stressors that can be

associated with this process. In using the 4 S's, Schlossberg (2011) states that "becoming a new worker adds a role and changes relationships with family and others, alters routines, and affects one's assumption about self and life" (p. 159). Schlossberg's focus on the workplace acknowledges that the transition process is not an easy one, however the 4 S's can assist with employee persistence and retention.

Anderson and Goodman (2014) used Schlossberg's theory to describe the events which occur when a veteran is transitioning into civilian life. The authors believe veterans *situation* is dictated by how the military separation or retirement occurs. "A 'crisis' situation is viewed as unexpected, therefore resulting in veterans having limited time for planning. Whereas a 'non-event' is when veterans are in a holding state waiting for the transition to take place" (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 43). *Self* is how veterans view themselves outside of their military identities. As a civilian, veterans must learn how to readjust to new roles within their families, communities, and workplaces. *Support* is significant for veterans who are no longer living and working alongside veterans in their unit. Because feelings of isolation and depression begin to heighten, veterans are encouraged to build relationships and seek social support within their new environment. *Strategies* involves identifying veterans needs based on their current state of being. Anderson and Goodman (2014) acknowledged the importance of treating each veteran as an individual and not assuming that civilians know what is in their best interest.

Summary and Gap in the Literature

The literature review discussed various aspects related to veterans and their transitions into the civilian workplace. It began with an overview of the military discharge and separation process, outlined the transition assistance program designed to

help military service members find employment, described the experiences of re-entry into civilian life and civilian workplace, identified the intersectionality of identities of African American male veterans, and presented the areas that establish possible connection to adult learning.

Upon conducting this literature review it became evident that strides have been made to learn more about the impact of the military transition, yet there is still much more that needs to be done. First, as more veterans continue to retire and separate from the United States Armed Forces, there is little data directed towards veterans working in the civilian private sector. Ironically, there continues to be an assumption that veterans automatically pursue federal, contracted general schedule (GS) positions upon retiring or separating from the military. However, this is not the case as veterans can be found in a variety of fields. Secondly, because of the military's connection to the federal government, a large amount of literature and documents were only accessible on government agency websites and on websites from those who coordinate veteran support services.

Thirdly, the majority of the literature focused on the veteran military rank than on race, which made it difficult to learn about the hardships and experiences of African American male veterans after the Civil War. Fourthly, in veteran-related research, there is a concern with the accuracy of data primarily because the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) only tracks individuals who have contacted them or are utilizing services. Data are missing to account for African American males who have mistrust of the health care system. Finally, research studies have focused on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), trauma, and mental illness as the causes for veterans'

struggles in the civilian workplace. Undeniably, these are issues which have impacted many veterans, including those who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF). However, there are other reasons contributing to veterans' workplace struggles (i.e., alcohol and substance abuse, accessing VA services, veteran identity strain).

An important gap in the literature relates to the lack of representation of African American male veterans' experiences transitioning into the civilian private sector workplace. Moreover, there is a need to provide data specifically related to African American males that can be included in Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). The IVMF has been designated "higher education's first interdisciplinary academic institute, singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military veterans and their families" (IVMF, 2018). Since its founding in 2011, IVMF prides itself in providing professional development for veterans who chose to become entrepreneurs or decide to utilize their military leadership skills in civilian work environments, including the private sector.

III. PARTICIPANTS AND TRANSITION PREPAREDNESS

This dissertation documents the experiences of African American male veterans as they transition into the civilian workplace. This chapter presents the participant profiles and reports study findings related to their level of preparedness transitioning from the military into the civilian private sector workplace. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The names assigned to the study participants were inspired by the television series *A Different World*, which was a spinoff of the iconic TV program *The Cosby Show*. Both shows ran from the early 1980s to the 1990s and were important because they depicted African Americans from an assets point of view and the possibilities to participate in higher education. Cliff and Claire Huxtable represented what was attainable for the African American family that aspired to live *The American Dream*. They introduced the world to a husband who was an obstetrician and a wife that was a lawyer, bringing an awareness that African Americans could be successful in such career fields. They raised five children that experienced the significance of being in a two-parent household while being nurtured by a support network of family members, friends, and African American role models. With conversations centered on the positive impacts of attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), there was no surprise when one of the Huxtable children decided to attend Hillman College, continuing the family legacy.

According to Matabane and Merritt (2014) “*A Different World* consistently depicted higher education, including HBCUs, as pathways to success in life” (p. 454). This TV show lasted six seasons and the male characters illustrated strong role models on the college campus. They were depicted as change agents, social justice advocates, and

mentors for African American students. Their names were Byron, Colonel Taylor, Dorian, Dwayne, Mr. Gaines, Ron, Shazza, and Walter. Every week, in the show, they provided teachable moments depicting the joys and struggles of being an African American male in the United States. For this dissertation, the study participants were assigned a pseudonym based on the characters of *A Different World* and in connection to the narratives they shared during the conversational interviews.

Table 3

Study Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age When Joined the Military	Military Branch	Years of Service	Current Occupation
Byron	18	Air Force	10	Licensed Insurance Agent & Business Owner
Colonel Taylor	18	Air Force	29	Family Medicine Physician Assistant
Dorian	19	Marine Corps	5	Security Personnel
Dwayne	18	Army	24	Real Estate Agent
Mr. Gaines	21	Air Force	22	Veteran Support Volunteer
Ron	20	Marine Corps	8	Branch Manager
Shazza	21	Air Force	4	Educator & Coach
Walter	16	Army	31	Field IT Analyst

Byron



Figure 7. Back in the Day

This military shadow box has the Air Force's new wings and the metals and ribbons I earned during my 10 years. Inside has the coin I received when I got out of the Chaplain's Corps and the two badges I earned as a Chaplain's Assistant. I have an original badge they phased out and made into a new one. You can't wear both of the badges on the uniform at the same time because it would be counterproductive and redundant.

I have a small little deal that is a V with an S for volunteer services. When I was a Chaplain's Assistant, I chose to put in some volunteer hours after work at the hospital when I worked at Wilford Hall to get some hands-on training in counseling, social work, and social services. In fact, they made me a pseudo understudy of a social worker for three months at Wilford Hall. I got some really good hands-on experience on top of what I did as a chaplain's assistant!

The military ribbon argalet whistle is for the special duty I picked up as an active-duty military training leader. I was working on a Security Forces Training Squadron where they brought in the military police for a 13-week training course.

I had to drag this shadow box out of mothballs. It was on the closet floor with the other military frames and pictures I had put away. But I knew this is the one that

really spoke the most. It put the cherry on top, the proverbial cherry on top of that part of my life in the Air Force.

Byron found that networking was extremely vital in finding employment in the civilian private sector workplace. Although he has spent countless hours maintaining his certifications so he can sell insurance, his true passion lies in a lawn company he owns with his wife. At the age of 11, the participant's father taught him how to cut grass, and today those skills have allowed him to provide a supplemental income for his family and to build a legacy. Whether they are his children or those of his clients, Byron explains "you don't only have to be the employee, you can be the owner!" As he reminisces on his life, he realized he has never been able to take his boots off since leaving the military – whether he is wearing his zip up boots in the office, or the lawn service boots he hoses down after working outdoors.

Colonel Taylor



Figure 8. Fly like an Eagle

I take pride in my flight jacket. I have had my jacket since 2003. This jacket is worn by individuals who fly or work in aviation or pilots, navigators, and medical crew. This is what I wear sometimes when I travel. Not everybody gets to wear

flight suits, but this is the jacket we wear when we fly, especially when the weather gets a little chilly and cold. This instilled in me a lot of pride taking care of the aviators in flight and when I went to Army Flight Medicine School. Not everybody in medicine gets to do flight medicine. It's just a different layer and level of camaraderie ship when you are taking care of pilots.

When you think about the Air Force, I think about air. We fly, fight, and we win. I am a part of that whole aviation community to bid my support. Although I'm not a flyer, I take care of the flyers and their families. Being able to fly with them occasionally is just a different mindset. In school, I had to learn about aviation and medicine in the air, because it's different than on the ground. There's certain physiology that takes place in the air versus when you're on the ground. There's a lot of dynamics that are going on in the body, that we have to be mindful of when they land and complain with symptoms. We have to think about the pathophysiology differently.

Colonel Taylor takes prides in taking care of patients “from cradle to grave”. As the son of a former Marine, the participant credits his father for sharing the following, “Son, take one class a semester. With your military duty, working odd hours, deployments, change of duty station, etc., you just never know what you're going to do after four years. You don't know if you're going to stick around or get out, so no matter what, at least you would have some education towards an undergraduate degree of your selection.” As a traffic management specialist who was responsible for shipping anything from an ink pen to an aircraft wing during his first three years of service, Colonel Taylor began his medical career as a hospital radiology technologist for eight and a half years. The participant was fortunate to get his commission, practice medicine, and earn his PhD. In addition to having a private practice, he works in flight medicine where he treats Air Force pilots and their families. Being one of the few African American males in his profession has been “daunting”, yet rewarding, because the field of medicine has opened doors. He believes his life has allowed him to build a “bridge” that other veterans can walk across and gain support from as they enter the civilian private sector workplace.

Dorian



Figure 9. A Marine's Farewell

This was a going away gift built by the people that I worked with in the Marine Corps air frames shop. Inside are the ribbons I earned while in the Marine Corps, and that's pretty much the awards or campaigns that I've been in. In the middle, the big Black spot, it has some writing in there talking about what I did in the shop, the day I joined, and when I'm getting out. Another part of the uniform is the patch in the middle. That was for the air wing. There are some parts of the camouflage and dress uniforms that are in there.

Dorian is the son of immigrants and learned about the U. S. Marine Corps via television commercials. In entering the military, Dorian decided if he was not promoted to Sergeant, he would leave the military and return to college. Dorian completed his associate degree and works part-time while pursuing a bachelor's. After leaving the military and prior to his security personnel position, Dorian supervised veterans living with PTSD and facing difficulties adjusting to civilian life. "I know there are plenty of vets suffering and they're not getting the help that they need. They're dealing with PTSD, depression, anxiety, stuff like that. The VA isn't helping...the VA isn't doing their job,"

he stated. Dorian credits his family for the success of his military to civilian transition and prior to leaving the military, having a plan for life beyond the uniform.

Dwayne



Figure 10. Alpha and Omega

These photos represent the beginning, and the end, of my 24-year military career. At an early age, I grew up around ethnicities from all over the world and I learned how to deal with different people. Fast forward into the military...what is the military made up of? People from all walks of life. So, for me dealing with people was not a struggle. It just came naturally.

I decided to retire for stability. My wife and I are dual military and we're both E8 senior personnel. It was to the position where out of 24 months, we lived together as a family for six months. With a little child at home, that was a major impact on the family.

A small picture of why I decided to retire was because I didn't like seeing the direction that the Army was going in. So, it's the old saying, "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of The Way." I did all three.

Dwayne believes in the power of leadership. Today, he can vividly and clearly recite the Army's definition of leadership the way he learned it in 1993. "Leadership is the ability to get a soldier to accomplish the mission by providing three things: purpose, direction, and motivation. I am retired, but I still remember that from 1993. It explained

to me how to be a leader.” Dwayne challenges civilian employers to think about what it means when they say, “we love veterans.” He often wonders if civilian employers understand the value veterans bring to a position and if they are prepared to welcome senior level military to positions in their workplace. Dwayne credits the military for helping him sharpen the skills that were already inside of him when he joined the Army in 1989. There were many accomplishments in his position as light wheeled vehicle mechanic, instructor, and noncommissioned officer in the military. These achievements set the stage for Dwayne to become a successful realtor that believes, “If you meet a person who knows everything, you just met a fool. There's always something to learn.”

Mr. Gaines



Figure 11. It's A New Day

I picked the portfolio because it reminded me of my career change from being a law enforcement official to a paralegal. This was the first gift I was given. When I was pursuing my new career, I saw that portfolio and it reminded me of not knowing what the journey will be. I don't know if that's the military background in me, but it was something that just felt home, it just felt like me. My focus was, I don't know what's the journey ahead, but I was very excited about it.

Mr. Gaines never thought about going into the military until his best friend encouraged him to enlist. Throughout his tenure, he believed that mentorship played a vital role in his success and progression into one of the largest departments in the Air

Force. However, the lack of mentorship and an understanding of workplace dynamics in the civilian private sector brought tremendous challenges, which eventually led to him leaving the private sector. To put things into perspective, he stated “I felt that if I was passionate about something in that environment, they felt like that I was being disrespectful. I'm like, I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I just love what I do. It was a different and challenging environment for me.” Because of this experience, Mr. Gaines has decided not to return to work. He focuses primarily on supporting his wife, raising his children, and mentoring veterans across the country preparing to enter the workforce.

Ron



Figure 12. Undefeated

When I got out of the Marine Corps, I was in pretty good shape. So, I signed up to play with a competitive traveling flag football grown-up league. I used to travel all through the state of Texas and other states to play competitive flag football for lots of money.

That was a big thing that helped me because I was trying to figure out who I was again and making more friends because most of my military friends live other places. So, transitioning into becoming comfortable back in my own environment, getting out and hanging out with people, and learning how everything is done again was a big role. Football helped me get rid of the daily stress of thinking about Man, I don't have the job I want yet or things of that nature. Football definitely played a huge part in my transition from the military.

Ron was enrolled at a large, public, state university when his cousin suggested they join the Marine Corps. Impressed by the Marine Corps uniform, he left college, went to Camp Pendleton, and entered a unit that included only seven African American males. “There wasn't a lot of brothers in the Marine Corps. Whenever you are able to link up with a Master Sergeant or an E8/E9 that has been there and done it, that was helpful. Those guys would hang out with the younger African Americans and share their wisdom on how to best take advantage of the military to make sure that we’re successful.” As a branch manager, he thrives in a work environment that allows him to utilize the leadership skills and training he obtained in the military. Furthermore, Ron’s work schedule allows him to spend more time with his wife, participate in his children’s extracurricular activities, and offer advice and words of encouragement to military service members and veterans.

Shazza



Figure 13. Oh, The Places You’ll Go!

When I enlisted into the Air Force. I was a lost, bright-eyed, bushy tail, 21-year-old. I literally just turned 21 and I was just trying to find my place in the world.

I'm dealing with a breakup and I had recently just come out to my mother and to my siblings. My mom was dealing with her youngest son being gay and everything. Joining the military was really unpacking what this was and needing to go off to find something else. I have a smile on my face, but I don't think that smile was very genuine. But nonetheless, I'm excited to be starting a new journey.

Shazza has always wanted to carry on the family tradition of being a teacher.

Being in the military was the first time Shazza was away from home, which gave him the space he needed to think about life before embarking on his career. It was during basic military training, Shazza became concerned about his role as an African American male serving “in the White man's military.” With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the death of Michael Brown, and inspired by the teachings of Marcus Garvey, Huey P. Newton, and Malcolm X, Shazza loved and appreciated his term in the military, but knew it was not where he was supposed to be. Today, Shazza finds joy in being a “mentor and encourager” to his young students. They are often surprised when he shares on the first day of class that he is a veteran. “Coach Shazza, I thought you were gonna be strict and stuff like that. You were in the military? Yeah, I was, but I'm not now. I'm your coach.”

Walter



Figure 14. Press Towards the Mark

These happened when I started to think about what I wanted to do after my retirement. I took six months off from any physical training just to relax and recover. And I said, Well, I need to get back into the fight. I need something that keeps me going, keeps me pushing, and reminds me that I should never give up. I talked to my wife about this and we've been doing virtual runs and before COVID-19, we were doing some actual runs. This is some of the hardware that, collectively, me and my wife have so far. Between the both of us, we ran close to 750 miles.

We've served our time, but we want to give back. I talk to some of the high school kids about military life. I try to tell them, don't go in just because you want to get away from your surroundings. Go in and try to figure out who you are as a person and what you can do.

Walter's father, a former disabled Vietnam War veteran, once told him he would never make it if he joined the military. "I went to basic training as a 17-year-old scared out of my wits, first time away from home. And I was like, well, I know I need to go and I'm going to prove something." Despite the obstacles and fears, Walter is the participant who served the longest in the United States Armed Forces. Through Hire Our Heroes, Walter was able to prepare for his transition into the civilian workplace while he was still serving in the military. The internship gave him a glimpse into what civilian employers are looking for in their employees as well as how situations are managed outside of the military (i.e., conflict resolution, emergencies, etc.). Although Walter works directly with veterans and military connected family members, he had no interest in working on a military installation unit after he retired. His passion lied in running with his wife to reach their goal of 2200 miles by December 31, 2020, in honor of the 22 veterans who commit suicide each day.

This section of the chapter introduced the eight participants that graciously agreed to be a part of this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. The veterans represent three of the six major military branches in the United States Armed Forces, and, through the

interviews and artifacts, they described their feelings about their military to civilian transition. Of the eight participants, six of them are married with children. Collectively, they provided a glance into why they chose to join the military or their military experience. While some of the participants credited the military for the life skills training that helped them persevere in various situations, it was evident there were areas some were unprepared for as they tried to redefine themselves and adjust to a new way of living as civilians. Their reflections opened the door to learn about their dreams of becoming business owners, the crossroads of having a job versus a career, and feeling out of place in the civilian private sector.

Transitioning to Civilian Life and the Workplace

This section presents study findings related to the participants' level of preparedness transitioning from the military to civilian life and into the civilian private sector workplace. Table 4 illustrates the emergent theme, the frequency or number of times the theme was identified in the data, and a description of the theme.

Table 4

Preparing for the Transition

Emergent Theme	Frequency	Theme Description
Transition Assistance Programs	25	Pros and cons of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) program
Getting Ready for Work	17	Expectations about the civilian workplace prior to leaving the military
Financial Stability and Security	10	Feelings regarding how they would provide for their families and maintain life as civilians
Workplace Awareness	7	Differences and similarities working for the military and the private sector
Military Mentoring	7	Receiving and providing mentoring to do the transition

Each emergent theme is presented with supporting narratives from the study participants followed by a summary paragraph highlighting meaningful points made by them.

Transition Assistance Programs

This emergent theme was the most frequently noted as it relates to the participants' experiences with transition programs offered to them by the military prior to joining civilian life. Therefore, the veterans discussed the pros and cons of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) program. In 2013, TAP became *Transition GPS* to emphasize the *career readiness* component of the training. However, throughout the interviews, the study participants consistently used the term TAP. They spoke about what was beneficial and what they wanted to change about the program.

For example, Byron explains the importance of résumé preparation and the missed opportunities in the TAP curriculum.

TAP helped me with the résumé that I still use today. They gave us a gang of stuff, but the one thing that I still have is a little White, rinky-dinky booklet that talks about building your résumé - what it needs to look like, the verbiage that needs to be on there, etc. I do not recall TAP having a segment where they had a representative from a consulting firm discuss franchise opportunities - locally or even back home. It would have been pretty awesome to have someone speak to those of us dreamers that could afford or wanted to put some money away to start an ATM or McDonald's franchise. Maybe they thought it was a time waster. But for someone young and impressionable or older per se that wants to do more, as opposed to retiring or transitioning into a job, that would have been a phenomenal opportunity. It makes sense to me because of where I am projecting my family to be in the next five years. TAP focused on getting folks ready to go to work while teaching them about a suit and tie combo. (Byron)

During his military service, Byron received an annual Enlisted Performance Report (EPR); however, for the civilian workplace, having a résumé is essential when looking

for employment. Reflecting on TAP, he was concerned that there were no topics related to veterans becoming entrepreneurs. Byron aspires to create a business that can financially support his family and create generational wealth. Next, as a more seasoned veteran, Colonel Taylor, speaks to his experiences with TAP.

I can remember people talking about the veterans' benefits, disability, employment, and how to write a résumé and what should go into it. We were able to wear civilian clothes and then dress up to do a mock interview with the résumé. I think that helped out so we could see how we actually look in business attire with a suit and tie or business casual. This kinda gets the mind thinking... You know what, I need to probably go out and invest in something nice or nicer. For some members who served four to six years, leaving the military may not be a big deal. But for those members who have served over 20+, this is all you are familiar with. The TAP topics and speakers really helped. I think it also helped allowing active-duty members to wear civilian clothes to TAP. There were a variety of speakers that came in and I think what really helped was one or two previous members that transitioned. I think that really helps out to let you know it can be done. I would advocate having a member take the course maybe 9-18 months before they transition to give them enough time to think about the expectations so they can get their house in order.

I took TAP in early/mid 2014 when they were starting to manage Transition GPS. I don't think it was standardized. I worked on an Army base, but I took my TAP at an Air Force base because I knew the Air Force places an emphasis on certain things with the transition. The transition can be stressful. You go from living in this well-organized bubble where you are one of thousands, to now you're one of millions. You go from an Airman, Sergeant, or Officer to a civilian. It can be daunting without having the unit and department that you would normally go to daily. This can be scary for a lot of people. (Colonel Taylor)

Colonel Taylor believes the military to civilian transition is a drastic lifestyle and identity shift for those who have served a long time, 20+ years in his case. He advocates that military service members should begin planning for their transition earlier than suggested. Early planning and preparation may not lessen the service member's anxiety of leaving their military connections but can provide time for process and reflection.

Conversely, Ron described his experiences and made suggestions on how to make sure that TAP focuses on addressing the needs of different military service members.

We had a week to go to TAP classes. But in the Marine Corps, certain things come before others. When I was getting out, it was more like... go to this class, see what they tell you. If you didn't learn nothing, it's just whatever!

The class had around 50-60 Marines in attendance, and they discussed what we could expect when we get out. They told us to work on our résumé and, if needed, we could fall back on the Post 9/11 GI Bill if we wanted to go to school.

TAP should have been more Military Occupational Specialist (MOS) driven. For instance, if you're in infantry, there's not too many jobs that are transferable other than being a cop or basic stuff that you did while you were in service. They should have had people in your MOS come back and give their feedback based off the trials and tribulations they experienced.

Before leaving the military, I wish there was a better way of figuring out what options are really out there. This would definitely help a lot of people, so they don't spend all their years either going to school or graduating and still not knowing what they want to do. It's just a long journey for some of us. I still know guys that after six or seven years, they are still trying to figure out their niche.

When you are transitioning from the military to a civilian, you don't know how your job and certifications are really going to translate and what companies are looking for veterans. The military gives you all the big names, but some of them are already crowded with ex-military. There is sometime a five- or six-year waiting list to get with a veteran-friendly company. (Ron)

Ron strongly believes the transition program should be tailored by the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and that resources should be accessible to service members that are unsure of their future career path. Furthermore, TAP should be a place for service members to have open and transparent conversations about the difficulties of obtaining civilian employment, especially within veteran-friendly companies and organizations.

Similarly, Mr. Gaines participated in TAP while focusing on his military workplace demands and trying to plan for his retirement. His story highlighted the struggles service members encounter as they prepare for their civilian transition.

The military needs every asset they can have. When they find out that you're retiring, they're like, "What?" Then they'll say, "Okay, we want to support you.

Go to the Transition Assistance Program.” You go, but you're one foot in, one foot out. You're not really fully in it because you're still constantly in your job. And so, for me, I felt like the military really didn't help. They allowed me to go to TAP, but they really didn't. When I talked to my other peers who really got to immerse themselves and prepare for transitioning, I felt that I was lacking.

When you have military members in Europe, stateside really needs to prepare them. You need to have a qualified instructor that can ensure the information you're giving out is valid. If it's not valid, it is not beneficial to us. TAP exposes you to what's out there. You're then on your own to validate that information, and to use it to the best of your interest. (Mr. Gaines)

Mr. Gaines is the only study participant that completed TAP overseas and vividly shared the downside of this occurrence. Because of his attention to detail, he caught numerous mistakes in the TAP course material. With the instructor's approval, this eventually led Mr. Gaines to update the curriculum to ensure current and future military service members would have access to accurate resource information.

Similarly, Dwayne suggested that TAP develop a curriculum specifically tailored to senior level service members. With the new program, he hopes that those who held senior level positions could learn more about entrepreneurship.

I felt like I was not prepared to transition from the military to the civilian sector. The TAP program in my opinion wasn't fully designed to help career military personnel to enter the civilian sector. Back then, the focus was only on writing résumés and how to conduct interviews. They never gave information on entrepreneurship. It's almost like they were just going through the checks instead of actually helping you figure things out. There was very little information about the transition as an individual. You're so structured in your military career and that structure will go away once you are in the civilian sector. They should have a senior level TAP, and then regular TAP. Meaning, if you were a person who is getting out after four years, your experience is totally different. Coming out of the Army after 24 years, I expected to start at a certain level. You learn the hard way.

They gave me two slices of bread and a cup of water, but knew I was going to live in the wilderness for 30 days. I don't want to get deep, but after 24 years, they left it up to me to figure out how to get the nutrients to survive. (Dwayne)

For Dwayne, being an entrepreneur can benefit veterans who want to have flexible work schedules or no longer want to be responsible for leading or supervising a team. He completed his TAP in a state in the south of the United States where the primary focus was on résumé development. Once he moved to an area that catered to veterans, he was able to see the difference in benefits and resources not often discussed and shared at other military installations. Dorian reflected on how the TAP instructors should have been allotted more time to present the course content. “It was a lot of information. They probably should have extended the length of the classes because I don't think they give them much time to teach every day. It was a lot of information packed into a week. The instructors complained that it wasn't really enough time for them and for us to absorb all the information that they're giving us.” With TAP being a mandatory requirement prior to a retirement or separation, Dorian acknowledged challenges can arise when there is so much to comprehend on the military to civilian transition.

Lastly, Walter, and Shazza’s narratives illustrated that each veteran enters their TAP with specific needs and concerns depending on a planned or unexpected military retirement or separation.

TAP has improved leaps and bounds over the years. I've heard horror stories and I've lived through some them. From its first inception, it was terrible. Now it's a lot easier with a lot more opportunities. If you haven't found a job after 180 days, you can come back for assistance. The best thing TAP taught us is to tailor the résumé to the job you are applying for. If you need to put in more things about yourself to qualify for the job, then that's what you do. (Walter)

I already had a plan, but TAP reinforced everything. I didn't feel like it made a distinction between those who had served their full six years, served a full 20 years, or someone like me who didn't get to fulfill their contract. I feel if I didn't have a plan, it could have ended up worse for me. I was getting out with people who didn't fulfill their contract and they were very down and depressed because the military was their life. This is what they wanted. This is what they perceived for themselves. This was their career. (Shazza)

Bryon and Dwayne discussed the importance of becoming business owners. They could not understand why this topic was not included in TAP. It was also evident that the study participants' experience with TAP varied based on their military branch and location.

Getting Ready for Work

The second emergent theme addressed the steps taken by the participants as they prepared for the civilian private sector workplace. With an emphasis on *career readiness*, the TAP program introduced the veterans to the personal and professional demands that often awaits upon leaving the military. Based on the interviews, the participants' initial workplace expectations were shaped by military officials, veteran service contractors, and professional development opportunities while in service. Such professional development was shared in Walter's conversation on the Hire Our Heroes initiative.

Fortunately, I was able to find something that I could fit into before I retired. I found the Hire Our Heroes internship program through one of the job fairs. Through the internship, I spent 11 weeks as a member of their summer IT team. I really impressed them, and they hired me after the internship!

I had to give a presentation at the end of the internship. I said, I'm not like any college intern. I'm different. I'm a veteran. I come with a different skill set than they will have. I have more experience doing this job, working with different networks, and working with people who speak a different language. I won't be just another wheel in your company, I'll be an asset that can help you reach different goals because I'm not gonna sit there and just settle for just coming to work, doing my job, and leaving. What can I do better? What can the company do better? Veterans can enhance what you can do in the workforce. (Walter)

Walter's reflection highlighted the benefits of service members participating in an internship prior to leaving the military. By doing so, it provides a space for veterans to showcase their talents and skills to civilian employers.

Next, as an Air Force chaplain assistant, Byron discussed how his military training and skills have been applicable in developing his family business.

As a Black man, my ability to protect and provide for my family is based on the resources that I had and what I could do with them as I was getting out of the military. I still want to do my heart's passion which is what my wife and I do outside of our 9-5. Our aspiration is for our business to supplement our collective income at 100%.

My dad had me cutting grass at 11,12-years old, probably younger than what I should have been operating a lawn mower. My father was a part of a social organization that had tons of fundraising, tons of block parties, tons of networking and I got to see him firsthand. One of the things that he did is cut the grass and take care of the lawn at the club house they had. He had me out there with him and at least a third of an acre of the land property they had was the cut grass.

Dave Ramsey's got his Financial Peace that my wife and I did before and after we got married. Just like everyone else, you have ups and downs, and those ups and downs are predominantly with resources. I saw a Dave Ramsey meme four or five years ago about making your side hustle, your main hustle. So, I was thinking, you know, I can get back into cutting grass. I can save up, get some good equipment, and help people not have to be out in the Texas heat cutting the grass because I know how to cut grass.

As a chaplain's assistant, you learn pluralism, multiple religions. You learn not to take from what you believe in, but how to relate to other religions that are recognized inside and outside of the military.

The military showed me how to run a business - the ins and outs of the logistics of maintaining a religious facility, a church. Literally the day-to-day operations of running a business, but under the microscope of a church. A lot of folks don't really put two and two together. The average person would say, "Sunday morning, I'll go to church, I'll do my hour and a half or whatnot, I'll leave, and I may go back on Thursday for bible study or Saturday for choir". As a chaplain's assistant, it's literally a 9-5 day to day in a chapel. It's the operations of paying the bills for the facility, buying enough chips, Cheez-It crackers, and fruit punch for vacation bible school. Those things that I didn't realize prepared me for the world that I'm in now.

I'm confident and convicted that if I would have stayed and did my 20 years in the Air Force, I would still be at a point where I need to do more. I got all this energy to do more, to be more, to give more. I am content with the decision to step away from the military. (Byron)

Byron's desire to become a full-time business owner shines a light on the veterans who have been able to see a connection between their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and civilian workplace positions.

While beginning a new position requires onboarding and training, Colonel Taylor brought his military medical background into the private sector, showcasing the transferrable skills that are desirable to civilian employers.

In the military, I occasionally worked part time over something we called moonlighting. That really helped me out compared to some of my other contemporaries, who probably didn't have the skill set that I have practicing family medicine, urgent care, and flight medicine. I've always had a part time job that lends itself to continuous networking. I always had my finger on the pulse of what opportunities that may lay ahead. Overall, I think I was a little bit more prepared for the transition. I went from an Airman basic, which is an E1, the lowest enlisted rank there is, to a Lieutenant Colonel O5. I was tracking to go to Colonel because I could have stayed 40 years. When going from enlisted to an officer, you can stay for an extended period of time. I just came to an epiphany that I wanted to ensure my girls, who were in high school at that time, would graduate and continue to develop friendships and give them a stable home. So, we decided to stay here in Texas. Staying in, I would have progressed in my medical career. Getting out, gave me the opportunity to really see there's a bigger world out here. (Colonel Taylor)

Colonel Taylor's story shows the positive impacts of military training, networking, education, and awareness. For veterans who are unaware of the expectations (spoken and unspoken) in the civilian private sector, it can be overwhelming when they do not understand what is needed to be successful and to maintain employment in the various career fields.

This way of thinking lends itself to Ron's recognition of the perceptions and realities he carried as a Marine eager to embark on a new career path.

I thought I was very prepared, but it was just excitement. You get caught up in going back to what you thought you knew, to where you don't listen or pay attention to what is really going on in your transition. You miss a lot because you're just counting down the days and the hours to be like, I'm out of here!

Before you know it, you're back home wondering... did they do this? Was I offered this? Was this put on the table for me?

You think you already have it all figured out because you previously lived a civilian life. But after four to eight years, a lot changes based on what you experienced versus what you're going back to. So...was I ready? I thought I was. But when I got out, Oh, hell no, I wasn't.

I decided to try the "it's not what you know, it's who you know" philosophy. I knew a few guys that I met throughout my time in the military that said they would hook me up. That didn't work well. I was in a rush to get out because I thought I had stuff lined up based off conversations I had with people. (Ron)

Ron acknowledged there are a plethora of things going through the minds of military service members as they are preparing to return to civilian life. Despite receiving information and resources through TAP, reality does not settle in until after the military retirement or separation.

Lastly, Mr. Gaines and Dwayne shared how they reached out to other veterans for guidance and support to prepare for the military to civilian workplace transition. In addition to the key takeaways from TAP, they wanted a first-hand account from those who had tackled all that they were anticipating.

I felt I was prepared because when I retired, I interviewed a bunch of my friends and I asked them what they were doing and how was the transition for them. Did they keep the jargon we normally use? I did all the research, but when I got in there, the challenge was that I heavily relied on the military jargon. I also wasn't prepared for an environment that had a different structure. (Mr. Gaines)

How did I prepare myself for retirement? I talked to other veterans. What should I expect? How did you get on? How did you do this? TAP didn't focus on the psychology part of transitioning from military to civilian. They showed me how to write my résumé and how convert military language into civilian language. So you, the person in HR who's reviewing my résumé, could understand what in the ham sandwich I'm talking about. But what about the mentality part?

For some of us that lived, breathed, and love being a soldier every day... Birthdays, holidays, and everything I missed were for a good cause. After 24 years, how do I turn that off? How do I stop being who I am now that my environment changed? TAP needs to focus on the psychology part. I reached out

to other veterans. However, they could only tell me their truth based on their experience. (Dwayne)

Preparing to enter the civilian private sector workplace was met with mixed emotions for some of the participants. The anticipation of leaving the military was often overshadowed with the overwhelming concern of finding employment and understanding how to be successful as a civilian employee. For those who were pleased with their military to civilian transition, it was concluded that reliable networking and the opportunity to gain experience in the private sector prior to leaving the military was crucial in helping them get ready for work.

Financial Stability and Security

The third emergent theme focused on the significance of having a financial plan prior to a military separation or retirement. Service members and veterans are accustomed to getting paid specific days of the month and are familiar with the salary scales and pay grades associated with military positions and ranks. Therefore, being able to financially take care of themselves was a top priority, especially for participants who wanted to return to school before seeking a private sector position. After his contract with the Marine Corps ended, Dorian was excited to learn he was eligible for financial support while completing his undergraduate degree: “During TAP, I remember a guy sharing I could get a work study job and receive military benefits while I was in school... I believe that furthering my education would open the door to more career opportunities in the civilian workforce. I’m studying political science and I’m taking some criminal justice classes right now. I might go to grad school and try to do policymaking to get rid of the bad laws. Or I’ll try to go into forensic psychology and hopefully get into that field.”

Similarly, Byron explored the idea of returning to school with the anticipation of entering a career field that differed from his Military Occupational Specialty (MOS).

As a male, a primitive goal for me is to protect and provide. As a male in the workforce, what I do and how I do it determines how I can take care of my family. I can't protect and provide when I don't have a job. I've walked out of a place and had to give up my badge. It's probably the scariest thing. If you fundamentally want to break a male, take away their ability to protect and provide. When I got out of the military, I considered money as a priority which is why I wanted to pursue a PhD at Capella University. I wanted to build or teach courses on the side or full-time...Many folks asked me why I got out of the military after 10 years. I could have done another 10 years, but it was in my best interest to use the benefits, use the experience that I had, and just try to see something else.
(Byron)

However, Byron did not enroll in the doctoral program: "I could still go back if I wanted to. It's the time. I would have to have amass resources. The family would need to be straight for me to be able to really give the type of time that I see my wife, who is a doctoral student, give on top of everything else she's got going on." The participants who retired or separated from the military with family obligations unanimously stated their spouses, children, and/or family members were in the forefront of their financial decisions.

Ron shared how this forefront way of thinking is a natural, never-ending mindset engrained in those who serve their country.

Being in the Marine Corps, you put your happiness second, and everything else first. I wasn't worried about job satisfaction. I was just trying to find a job that could make as much money as possible to provide for my family.

Coming back to reality - the bills and things are way different on the civilian side because once again you don't have that steady paycheck rolling in like when you're in the service. (Ron)

Ron's statement reflects how *duty before self* is a mantra that also reflects the responsibility that is placed on a veteran as he continues to care for his family outside of

the confines of the military. He further noted that an adjustment period occurs when veterans are no longer eligible for such benefits as the military's Basic Allowance Housing (BAH) to help mitigate expenses. "When you're in the military they make you feel like you can accomplish anything. That is just the way they push you, especially in the Marine Corps. You are an unstoppable force that can achieve whatever. You take that same mentality to say, when I get out, it is going to be this easy for me to find a job making X amount of dollars because you get used to BAH, bonuses, and other benefits that come with being in the military. When I was stationed in California, you get paid an extra \$2700 a month on top of your regular. If you find a cheap area to live in as a little E2, E3, you are living the dream! When I was getting California BAH, I got used to a certain income." Additional stressors can evolve when the veteran discovers they can potentially earn less money as a civilian employee.

Dwayne explains how this was an area of concern as he was leaving the military and balancing two households without having a civilian job. Dwayne's wife, who also served in the Army, was stationed in a different state with their daughter throughout their terms of service.

As service members are retiring, two things definitely play a factor. One, location. If they live in a military-friendly area, they already have connections. On Friday, they will step out of uniform and Monday come back to the same job in civilian clothes because of the location, people, and connections. I didn't have that connection because I retired from one installation and retired into a new area I've never lived in.

Two, making sure the finances were straight was important. I didn't know if I was going to get another job right away. I didn't know how and when my VA disability was going to kick in and what percent I was going to start off with. We all hear horror stories from those who retired on how the VA drags their feet.

My full-time pay was cut by $\frac{3}{4}$ of what I was used to. Once you leave the military, all the extra benefits disappear. (Dwayne)

Like Ron, Dwayne was faced with immediate real-life decisions that would tremendously impact his family. “I talk to other retirees and a lot of other veterans have what we call the *fear of the unknown*. The majority of my life was in the military. I joined the Army at 18 and retired at 42. The Army is all I know. What in the world does the civilian sector have waiting for me? I don't know. How hard is it gonna be for me to get employment? I simply don't know.”

As his retirement date drew near, Colonel Taylor reflected on how *Faith, Family, and Finances* played an integral role in his financial decision-making process.

Preparation was always the key, especially being the primary breadwinner for the family I feel unique and blessed because I practice medicine. I am always a strategic thinker, the military prepared me for that.

Veterans certainly lead the way; they have a lot to offer. Because we work in a very diverse, military culture with people from all backgrounds, that made the transition easier because you have a breadth and depth of building relationships. I think it has equipped me as a leader to contribute to society. (Colonel Taylor)

Early on, Colonel Taylor understood the benefits of having a military career field in high demand and often sought after in the civilian workforce.

Walter mirrored similar sentiments as he discussed his ability to expand on his MOS skills and training in the civilian private sector.

In the military, I started working in communications with telephone lines. They train you to do the job, but rarely do you get a chance to do it. Today, while I'm touching the network, I'm making a difference on imaging computers, providing a service, and solving problems. In the military, I would never do any of that. I could not troubleshoot the network because I had to wait for a Warrant Officer, the subject matter expert, to come in and do his own magic to the network.

As I prepared for retirement, I considered the location of the job and where I would be happy. The money aspect was not what drew me. Is there opportunity? Is there growth with a company I'm trying to work with? (Walter)

The ability to take care of themselves and others was reflected as a common theme in the participants' views and perceptions of maintaining financial stability and security. As pay cuts, demotions, returning to school as an adult learner, and entering new career fields awaited them on the civilian side, the participants carried no regrets about their military retirement or separation. Failure was not an option and their ability to support their families remained a priority.

Workplace Awareness

The fourth emergent theme described the participants' views on the workplace dynamics that vary and exist within the military and civilian private sector. For some of the participants, entering the private sector workplace was a culture shock. Others welcomed the opportunity to be in a work setting that promoted growth and development as they tried to reestablish themselves personally and professionally as civilians. In the early stages of their new career field, a couple of the participants noted an awareness of employee terminations.

Byron associated working in the private sector with seriousness, pressure, and limited possibilities for employee errors.

I was prepared enough to jump in with an understanding this is serious like basic military training. But I was not prepared for the realism of you can be fired. In the military, if you get in trouble you receive coaching and a letter of counsel. Depending on the severity, they may take some pay. When you work at an at-will state. I know I could wake up, walk into the office, and they could say, "We had a conversation this morning and you're out of here. It's time for you to pack your stuff and get out." That's how real it is.

When I left the military, I was a part of a pilot program for new veteran employees who recently retired or separated. There was a dozen of us when we started. Two quit and one person did not pass the test to continue in the program.

My stint in the military won't allow me to do anything other than operate as if I've still got a uniform on. Even to the way that I wear my hair. I can count the

number of times I wanted to grow my hair out so I could have an afro, twists, corn rolls, or tied up dreads. I've always wanted to do it, but I can't. The transition from the military to civilian has helped me keep myself right. (Byron)

Byron's feelings emulate the two-fold concerns veterans can have on how making mistakes or not meeting specific expectations in the private sector could result in them being fired.

Dwayne expands on Byron's statement as he reflected on how being fired is not an area of concern for many who serve in the United States Armed Forces.

If you're in the military and you are an E3 or E4, you can't get fired because you're not in charge of anything. The only people who can get fired are those who are in leadership positions (E5 and above).

As an E3 or E4, I was just a regular mechanic. If I go out there and did something wrong and damaged the equipment, they're not gonna fire me from being a mechanic. The worst thing they can do is take money out of my check. But guess what's gonna happen tomorrow? I'm going right back to work. I'm gonna put on my coveralls, open up my toolbox, and start fixing vehicles.

Let's say it's a 23-year-old in the civilian sector. If you take your vehicle to the dealership, and that 23-year-old does something to damage your vehicle, what are the chances of that 23-year-old coming back to work tomorrow? Slim to none because he cost that dealership money. They got to fix your vehicle and that's money. They're more than likely gonna have to give you a loaner. Because that the 23-year-old in the civilian sector cost that dealership money, they might be like, you know what? You're not gonna cut it. We didn't have to worry about job security in the military.

When you leave your duty station and you go to your next, depending on your rank, you're going to land in another leadership position. I got fired over here and when I get to my next duty station, that information will probably follow me. But when I get there, it is under the assumption, I am still coming to take charge of something.

If you are a horrible, incompetent leader, you can be fired. But, guess what's going to happen on the 1st and 15th of each month? You are still going to get paid and keep your benefits. When they fire you from your position, they just find something else for you to do. Military personnel, regardless of the branch, don't worry about job security like civilians do. After six months on a civilian job, I ended up getting terminated. I didn't fully transition from military to civilian. I wasn't militant. I was too military for where I worked. (Dwayne)

Dwayne is cognizant that for those who did not hold a senior military leadership position like himself, the private sector truly becomes *A Different World*. As veterans and military service members learn about civilian workplace practices, there is a possibility some may begin to question if they are ready for life outside of the uniform.

After serving under the leadership of six United States presidents and successfully completing the Hire Our Heroes internship, Walter welcomed the opportunity to embark on his role as a full-time civilian private sector employee.

I was pretty much tired of the military and needed a break. I needed to get into the private sector and get away from any type of federal government agency dealing with soldiers and the military. I wanted to deal with just regular people who were putting out a decent product.

I found that most people that work on or around post, never really retire. They may have taken off the uniform and dress in civilian clothes, but they still think they're wearing rank. They never fully understand they're no longer Sergeant, Sergeant First Class, or Sergeant Major. They're actually Mr., Mrs., or people will call them by their first name. I decided if I was going to retire, I might as well start fresh and somewhere away from the military posts. (Walter)

Walter had a glimpse of the interworking that occurs in the civilian private sector while still fulfilling his military obligations. The overarching theme from the participants was that the eagerness to become civilian employees can be diminished when they feel the odds are stacked against them prior to their arrival.

Military Mentoring

In the fifth and final emergent theme, the participants described the individuals who took the time to help them prepare for the Boots2Suits transition. The mentoring connection ranged from open, transparent conversations about what employers are looking for in today's job market to employment opportunity referrals. Furthermore, this

section addresses the hardships of not having a mentor in the workplace, specifically with someone military connected.

While serving in the military, Ron was honored by the mentoring he received from his commanding officer during and prior to him leaving the Marine Corps.

The unit I was with was ran by a 28-year, Black male Master Sergeant. He was pro Black beyond belief. He would put all eight Black Marines in his office and have conversations with us just to ensure that we understood how important it was for us to outshine everybody else, especially being that we were in an all-White branch. He would specifically say, "I love everybody, but you guys have to understand that I love you more." That was probably the thing that motivated me to become more of a leader.

When he retired, he returned to the base to hang out with us. He would tell us, "These are my secrets, use them. Use everything I've learned in my 28 years of service because no one ever told me any of this." I still take it to heart to this day.

Today, anytime I go somewhere and there are African American males, I pull them aside, and let them know I'm not racist nor judgmental. I'm going tell them rules of engagement. It's the only way to make it in this life sometimes. (Ron)

Ron's mentor did not want him to ignore there were certain expectations and hardships that would be placed upon as an African American male, inside and outside of the uniform.

Byron's mentor, a Caucasian male name Sean, was credited for being a support system throughout their time in the military and as he needed help finding a job after his military separation.

Sean is a 5R chaplain's assistant that knew the importance of networking, That's probably one of the reasons why he was kinda a big brother to me at that time. He knew the value of just transcending yourself, just knowing more than yourself. After being at my first job after a year and a half until I was like, I need something else because this is only going to take me so far. I joined an Appraiser Manager Pilot Program...another one of these pilot programs when they were bringing in vets who were "eligible" to get on and become managers of a team. It fell through. It was one of those situations where, Look, pay attention and listen. This is the bell curve and this is where you are at. This next test, we need you to get more than an 86. If you don't get more than 86, we're gonna put you on a

plane and send you back home. And that is what happened. At the airport, I hit Sean up because he was my bestie at the time. You are not gonna believe what happened. I remember him saying, "Look, call me when you get home."

Got home from Dallas, called the next day to check in with him. He was like "Would you get on selling cars temporarily? You have car salesmen that, if they're successful, they bring in five to sometimes seven grand a month and of course, you've got to build that book of business." I'll take whatever I can get man. If you can put me a seat at a table with somebody you know, put me on.

Sean introduced me to the training folks for one of the dealerships, a couple of phone calls were made, and Sean and I were doing lunch at Olive Garden with the hiring manager and training manager. The four of us were there doing lunch and it was one of those like...you seem well rounded, you're gonna do good here as long as you don't mess up. You're personable, you're relatable, you look trustworthy. So, these people that walk into the dealership, they're gonna flock to you.

Sean was happy to help me get a spot at the table. We're still like brothers and he was extremely supportive. I can count on one hand the folks that helped, and with Sean, it was unlimited support the moment I got out of the military. (Byron)

Fortunately, Byron and Ron were able to successfully develop mentoring relationships that left a lasting impression on their lives.

However, for Mr. Gaines, he discussed the disconnect and disappointment of not having a mentor in the private sector for guidance and support.

If I had to do it all over again, I should have followed what I did when I was in the military. If you don't know the environment, you seek out a mentor so they can help you. I didn't do that in my civilian job... In the military, we're so used to structure, and then when someone takes it away, that's a transition in itself. Many civilians don't know the jargon, the talk, the struggle. You want to go to someone for mentorship, but you don't know if they'll understand what you're going through. A lot of times, we're quiet and float through it, which is not beneficial because you don't know how to be an asset to the organization. As veterans, we want to be an asset. We want to be able to do the things that we were doing for our country. I needed a mentor that could have helped me translate and evolve as I was trying to learn my position. (Mr. Gaines)

Because the military is built upon brotherhood and camaraderie, Mr. Gaines' reflection acknowledges how mentoring can provide a support system to veterans who enter

unfamiliar territories. For the participants, this emergent theme illustrates a safe space for veterans to speak freely without judgement and the impact of being surrounded by those who uphold the military's mantra of "Got Your Six" (at all times, a fellow service member has your back).

Chapter Discussion

The research question guiding the chapter was: How (un)prepared are African American males transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace? Thus, this chapter presented five themes that emerged from analysis of the data collected for the study: Transition assistance programs, Getting ready for work, Financial stability and security, Workplace awareness, and Military mentoring.

Transition assistance programs, also known as Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) were designed to provide veterans with the resources, services, and essential tools needed for their next endeavor. "While offering transition assistance has been a long-standing practice of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard, the recent statutory changes mandated participation by all service members, with certain exemptions, and further prescribed content" (Cleymans & Colon, 2014, p. 154). An important finding from the study revealed all eight of the participants completed TAP prior to voluntarily leaving the military. In connection to military transition theory (Castro & Kintzle, 2016; Kintzle & Castro, 2018; Stern, 2017), the narratives provided by study participants speak to "service members who leave the military voluntarily will be more likely to have planned for their transition to civilian employment, allowing the opportunity for preparation" (Kintzle & Castro, 2018, p. 122). In this case, study participants collectively recalled TAP being advertised as an essential component of the

Boots2Suits transition and as an avenue to learn about résumé development. The findings revealed that TAP is an essential first step for service members to learn about the expectations of a civilian job search. In addition, three of the eight participants (Byron, Dwayne, and Ron) provided suggestions about the information that should have been included in the TAP curriculum.

Despite the résumé having a critical role in workplace attainment, Byron and Ron could not understand why entrepreneurship was not a TAP discussion topic. As a contention of concern, the Transition GPS curriculum specifies the entrepreneurship course, Boots 2 Business is an optional two-hour topic available to all military attendees. Cleymans and Colon (2014) explained that “Boots 2 Businesses exposes service members to the basics of conceiving, opening, and running a small business. After the two-day class, the Small Business Administration offers an eight-week distance learning course to help Service members more rigorously prepare for business ownership” (pp. 159-160). The dissertation findings revealed that Byron and Dwayne did not recall hearing or being encouraged to take advantage of the Boots 2 Business course while in service. In fact, Cumberland et al. (2020) asserted that “...veteran entrepreneurship has been declining over 20 years. Only 4.5% of exiting military personnel since the start of the twenty-first century have gone on to launch a company” (p. 125). The authors noted mentoring and lack of funding towards veteran entrepreneurship could have an impact on such a low percentage, yet there were no concrete data to support this claim. Further, they reported that it was difficult to retrieve attendance records and programs assessments based on the Boots 2 Business attendees. In the dissertation, the participants explained that the civilian workplace environment is introduced as the appropriate next step for all

military service members – encouraging them to leave one structured organization for another.

Ron was disturbed by the lack of discussion on civilian jobs that are comparable to the service members' Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), specifically among those in infantry. With an emphasis placed on the journey of the veteran infantrymen, Minnis (2020) highlighted “without a direct pathway to civilian employment based on their military work, they may be stymied in reconceptualizing how they fit in the civilian employment environment” (p. 13). In support of this position, Zogas (2017) stated “the military trains service members to do a specific job that in many cases arguably cannot be done, or its skills transferred, outside of the military” (p. 13). However, before leaving the military, veterans are required to take TAP classes and a module on Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Crosswalk as a mandatory two-hour career exploration module to identify connections between military and civilian workplace positions. The module includes occupational codes for “service members to learn the skills needed to analyze their military skills and experience, research civilian occupations, and translate what they have accomplished in civilian terminology (Cleymans & Conlon, 2014, p. 156). But Ron does not recall the MOS Crosswalk being discussed when he participated in TAP.

Byron, Dwayne, and Ron represent three military branches: Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps. Collectively, the findings revealed the disparities within the different branches as well as a disconnect between what is advertised and what is offered through TAP. In addition, not everyone had a chance to participate in the program as they were preparing to leave service. Thus, Mr. Gaines and Ron described how they could not fully

commit to the course when *duty before self* took priority and interrupted their participation in TAP. Similarly, Zogas (2017) credited the TAP disconnect to “veterans complete the training in the weeks before they are released from their military contracts: they are excited, distracted, and generally unconcerned with finding work immediately” (p. 5). As explained by the dissertation study participants, in TAP there is a lot of information given, information missing, and a lot for the service member to contemplate as they prepare to leave. Anderson and Goodman (2014) argued that service members are at a deficit as “...pre-separation counseling and transition services tend to be short-term interventions focused on initial job search activities” (p. 40). All dissertation participants agreed that TAP was not enough preparation for a successful transition to civilian life and the private workplace sector.

Another theme that emerged from dissertation findings relate to getting ready for work outside the military and the veteran’s expectations to work in the private sector. “Military transition entails moving from the military culture to the civilian culture, producing changes in the relationship, assumptions, work context, and personal and social identity” (Castro & Kintzle, 2014, p. 4). Some of the dissertation participants identified the skills they felt were needed to jumpstart their Boots2Suits transition, whereas others shared they did not fully understand what was needed to be successful in the civilian workplace. Davis and Minnis (2017) explained that “one of the significant challenges for military veterans is often the inability to translate their military skills to a civilian career following military service” (p. 7). Regarding dissertation findings, the two longest serving veterans, Walter and Colonel Taylor, credited their preparedness to enter the private sector to their participation in internships and work in the private sector while

still being in military service. Anderson and Goodman (2014) further stated “each veteran brings individual strengths and liabilities to the transition, and a continuous appraisal of the balance of these is also important” (p. 41). Through Walter’s participation in Hire Our Heroes, he was able to identify the skill set that could be a positive contribution, either individually or collectively in the information technology field. It is also important to note that the Hire Our Heroes 12-week internship has been praised for their... “on-the-job training, as well as valuable skills to transition into corporate culture” (Kitchen, 2017, para 11). Similarly, as a family physician, Colonel Taylor acknowledged the military and private sector environments may be different, but the welfare of the patients remains a priority in both settings. While onboarding and continuous professional development are essential components to the transition, Colonel Taylor’s military medical training and skills were transferable to working with physicians and patients in the civilian setting. Likewise, Byron’s foundation as a chaplain’s assistant has been the most valuable in teaching him the business acumen needed in his pursuit to become an entrepreneur.

On the other hand, Mr. Gaines and Dwayne shared uncertainties of civilian workplace expectations. As senior military personnel who supervised, instructed, and mentored individuals in their respective branches, they collectively did not understand how to shift from being a service member to becoming a civilian employee. As senior level service members, these two dissertation participants would have benefited from partaking in a different type of TAP since they were transitioning into a second career (Binieck & Berg, 2020; Vigoda-Gadot, et al., 2010). A designated senior level transition course (i.e., Executive Transition Assistance Program) would have been more appropriate to meet their specific needs and allow them to connect with service members with similar

backgrounds (Binieck & Berg, 2020; U.S. Army, 2019). Therefore, dissertation findings suggested going to work was an easier transition for those who had worked in the private sector prior to leaving the military. Those who engaged in these opportunities carried a higher level of confidence and awareness of workplace expectations and how to become engrained in the culture.

Financial stability and security is referenced as a critical piece in the military to civilian transition. According to Kintzle and Castro (2018) “the expectations of many separating service members are that they will earn more money as a civilian than as a service member; certainly, no separating service member expects to earn less once they leave the military” (p. 121). Finances can be an added stressor for service members who have responsibilities beyond themselves to consider. Even though financial planning is discussed in TAP, the dissertation findings indicated financial stability and security is a continual concern for the participants who have dependents.

Many of the dissertation participants concluded that as males, they have an ethical responsibility to be financial providers. However, the necessity for financial stability and security was reinforced as a primary concern for husbands and fathers (i.e., Byron, Colonel Taylor, Dwayne, Mr. Gaines, Ron, and Walter). In support of this position, they elaborated on the struggles associated with transitioning to civilian life and the civilian workplace. Dwayne referenced the *fear of the unknown* as a phase veterans are not always prepared for and one of the harsh realities of the Boots2Suits transition. He defined the *fear of the unknown* as service members leaving the military without a concrete understanding of the employment and financial opportunities that will await in the civilian world. As one who takes care of patients in the air and on the ground, Colonel

Taylor understood the power of his profession, where it would take him, and how it could financially sustain his family (with or without the military's financial assistance).

Contrary to Walter's position that job satisfaction and fit is more important than salary, Ron discussed how having a suitable salary to take care of his wife and children is a precedence. The research study also revealed Ron's desire to only focus on private sector employment opportunities that value family time and self-care, two things he stated veterans often sacrifice during their military service.

Even though the literature suggests that transitioning from the military to the civilian life can be a hardship on married service members, this was not the case for the dissertation participants. Morin (2011) stated that "post-9/11 veterans who were married while they were in the service had a more difficult time readjusting to life after the military. Overall, being married while serving, reduces the chances of an easy re-entry into civilian life" (p. 5). This statement did not reflect the experiences discussed during the research study. All participants praised their spouses and family members for their commitment, unreserved support, and sound advice as they prepared for the transition into civilian life.

Dorian and Shazza followed similar paths upon leaving the military. They both returned to their parents' homes and with access to military educational benefits, they enrolled in college to complete their undergraduate studies. Furthermore, the dissertation findings suggested the participants saw obtaining a college degree as way for them to become marketable in the private sector. As African American males, Dorian and Shazza noted they aspired to enter career fields where they could earn money while implementing positive transformation in their communities and beyond.

In connection to intersectionality theory (Collins & Blige, 2016), all dissertation participants spoke to the disparities that existed when their identities were composed of multiple aspects. According to Collins and Blige (2016), “Ordinary people can draw upon intersectionality as an analytical tool when they recognize that they need better frameworks to grapple with the complex discriminations that they face” (p. 3). The research study revealed how gender, race, education, and military service impacted the veterans’ viewpoints. As males, the eight participants saw strength and honor in being husbands, fathers, and providers. Nevertheless, they felt the internal and external pressures of ensuring they were successful in their personal and professional lives. As African Americans, collectively, they were able to rise to managerial, supervisory, or leadership positions as full or part-time employees in the private sector. Yet, they were often the only or one of the few African American males in such roles. Regarding education background, six of the eight participants completed college-level coursework while enlisted in the military. For those who were unable to find a career related to their MOS or did not meet the qualifications for private sector workplace positions, they enrolled in a college/university, licensure, or certification program.

After leaving the military service, Dwayne, Byron, and Ron reflected on how the accessibility to certain resources changes once a veteran enters civilian life. Dwayne and Byron described the realities of being fired, earning less money, or the inability to find a job as civilians. To minimize this worry, they decided to focus more on entrepreneurship and less on working in a traditional private sector setting to establish professional and financial freedom. The veterans were willing to make the necessary sacrifices as men to solidify financial stability and security.

Workplace awareness was another theme that emerged from the dissertation study. According to the veterans, the military and civilian workplaces were two different worlds. Byron and Dwayne were blindsided by the different policies, protocols, and procedures in the private sector. Because they did not have prior knowledge or experience in the civilian private sector workplace like Walter, they realized that a civilian workplace setting was not a good fit for them. Throughout their narratives, Byron and Dwayne discussed the private sector employee firing practices. Being employed in an at-will state offered an additional layer of apprehension in their Boots2Suits transition. They described how being fired is an uncommon practice in the military branches. The possibility of being fired in the private sector made them feel they were replaceable regardless of their military work history and educational background. As explained by McAllister et al. (2015), “because of the training they received while in the military, veterans tend to develop identities that may make them uncomfortable in the civilian work environment” (p. 94). This was the case for some of the dissertation study participants who were not successful at thriving in the civilian workplace environment. Consequently, the study findings suggested veterans who have first-hand experience in the private sector prior to leaving the military are less apprehensive about being fired because they have an awareness of the civilian workplace dynamics.

Military mentoring was the last emergent theme presented in the chapter in relation to the participants’ (un)preparedness for the Boots2Suits transition. Military transition theory discussed how service members seek trusted social support networks to help them adjust to civilian life. In support of this statement, Kirchner et al. (2020) stated “veteran affinity groups and mentoring programs provide opportunities for veterans to

engage as a unique population as they transition into the broader organizational and civilian culture” (p. 166). Ron, Byron, and Shazza reflected on the positive impacts of mentoring during and after military service.

As one of seven African American service members in his unit, Ron valued the opportunity to receive personal and professional guidance from his Marine Corps African American male leaders. With a limited number of African Americans in military leadership positions, Cooper (2020) indicated service members are unaware of where their potential could lead them due to a lack of mentorship and seeing others in high level positions that look to them. “Rising to the top of the military means enduring a four-decade career of often being the only minority service member in the room, platoon or meeting” (Cooper, 2000, para. 30). As African American males try to adjust to the private sector workplace, McAllister et al. (2015) recognized political skills as an area that can be developed through training and that can be improved through mentorship (p. 94).

In the dissertation, political skills translated into a discussion of workplace mentorship or lack thereof. For example, Mr. Gaines explained that mentorship in the workplace can make a difference in a veteran’s success and retention in the workplace. He further shared that once a veteran is aware of the *mission* and has access to the necessary tools and resources in the workplace, the sky is the limit. As explained by the dissertation participants, when veterans, especially those who held senior level positions feel lost and confused, it results in emotions of failure and defeat. When issues arose in the civilian workplace, Byron sought guidance from a long-standing military friend who referred him to employers and companies that had a genuine interest in working with veterans. For Shazza, his military mentoring came in the form of the family support. As a

case in point, McAllister et al. (2015) asserted “Research has found that for members of the military, family support can be a crucial factor in influencing a veteran’s effectiveness while transitioning to the civilian sector” (p. 104). Because of his family lineage in the educational field, Shazza received the assistance he needed to secure a job in the independent school district of his choice. Therefore, these findings reinforce the need for mentoring to be a continuous endeavor as service members are trying to find their way both personally and professionally in the civilian world.

Overall, the study findings presented in this chapter suggested that preparing for the military to civilian transition can be filled with different emotions as the veterans are coping with civilian life and civilian workplace obligations. The eight participants’ level of preparedness varied per person. Those who had prior work experience in the private sector were strong believers that veterans could benefit from internships or job shadowing before jumping into their first civilian position. Through their own lived experiences, some of the dissertation participants believed such an opportunity could have prevented them from either quitting or being fired from their job.

IV. FROM BOOTS2SUITS AND WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

The current chapter focuses on the study participants' journeys while transitioning from the military into the civilian private sector workplace. Therefore, the chapter addresses the following two research questions: What are the workplace experiences of African American male veterans adapting to the civilian private sector? What challenges do they face in their transition from Boots2Suits and how do they navigate these challenges?

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, to discuss their stories, the eight study participants were asked to select three artifacts that could help them describe their experiences transitioning from Boots2Suits. Thus, relevant artifacts are presented with the respective narratives.

Second, study findings related to the participants' workplace experiences in the civilian private sector include three emergent themes. These are: (1) Acclimatization process, (2) Learning and training needs, and (3) Disability realizations.

Third, the chapter illustrates the participants' challenges navigating the Boots2Suits transition. This section is presented through the following three emergent themes: (1) Does race matter? (2) I am more than a veteran, and (3) Old habits never die. Lastly, the chapter closes with a discussion section which serves to establish connections to the literature and to highlight the study findings.

Byron



Figure 15. Dream Big

This is an award that you receive as an insurance professional once you completed a slew of reading, coursework, and tests. It took me six to seven months to get done and I was operating on five hours of sleep per night.

My wife and I own a landscaping company! The yellow indicates the brightness in the awareness and the ability to operate earth moving machinery. The yellow one denotes what I'm doing right now as a lawn laborer and an earth mover. There's an orange one that I want. If you have an orange hardhat, it denotes that you've undergone the training, certification, and test to charge somebody hundreds of thousands of dollars. That is something that we do plan on investing in when the business is scaled up enough to do more than just lawn service and small landscaping.

Byron has committed countless hours towards maintaining his insurance licensures and certifications. He appreciates that the profession has allowed him to financially support his family through the years. As he prepared for his military to civilian transition, an emphasis was placed on him becoming a federal, contracted general schedule (GS) employee. “My first choice would have been a GS position because that is what the talk has been. If you’re going to get out, apply for that GS 3 or GS 4, do your probation and make it do what it do. That was always my aspiration.” Despite Byron not being able to gain a federal position, he focused on becoming a full-time entrepreneur within a field

that was introduced to him by his father and that he has grown to love. Byron continues to balance his private sector work obligations with his life-long passion.

Colonel Taylor



Figure 16. Against All Odds

As a medical professional, I get the privilege of practicing medicine and taking care of patients from cradle to grave in a hospital setting. Being able to have that in my hip pocket made the transition a whole lot easier compared to some folks who may not have a skill. Medicine is always needed, and I take pride when I wear this uniform, especially now with COVID-19 issues going on.

Having the PhD really opens doors on so many levels on the active duty and in the civilian sector. It helped with the transition. When they say PhD, Doctor, it's humbling. What this has taught me is that when you do all your research, you're going to be a subject matter expert, but you still don't know it all. There's still more to learn, there is still more to contribute to the literature. I take pride in this as I was able to help and mentor one of my other colleagues to achieve his PhD. It's always good to reach back and pull others up.

Colonel Taylor's passion for medicine and education has opened many doors for him.

Working with fellow veterans and within an organization that offers diversity and inclusion/ cultural awareness trainings was extremely valuable for him in the Boots2Suits transition. He further noted "I understand people and where they may be coming from - even if they are from a small town or metropolitan area. The military prepares you. Being

a leader, one of the things you have to do is know people.” As one of the few African American males in his profession, times have not always been easy for him. Colonel Taylor understands the importance of presence and representation, mentorship and support as the next generation of African American male veterans re-enter civilian life.

Dorian



Figure 17. Safe Travels

*I got this tattoo on Pacific Beach while I was in.
It means Safe Travels. I'm still here.*

Dorian's primary focus has been completing his undergraduate degree, so that he has the necessary qualifications to obtain full-time civilian employment. While serving in the military, he remembers numerous conversations centered around service members applying for GS positions. "It's really hard to get a government job. I don't know many people that have one and I think the competition is kind of fierce. I applied for internships and I've searched for jobs on USA Jobs. Although I am a veteran, a lot of the jobs I'm not qualified for because I don't meet me all the requirements. It seemed like they just wanted people with a higher ranking or had at least some type of higher-level education. That crosses a lot of enlisted people out of the picture." Dorian continues to attend school full-time and has a part-time job built on his military skills and training. He looks forward to entering the civilian workforce and understands veteran status may only take him so far.

Dwayne



Figure 18. Beginning and End

I have neckties with different colors because in the military, the only time I put on a necktie is when I put on my formal uniform, my Class A's. I very rarely wore a tie, even for social events. Coming into the civilian sector, wearing a tie every day was a part of my norm. I had to learn in my 40s how to tie a tie, because I wore clip ones in the military. There is an art to the tie and properly linking it to the shirt, suit, shoes, and belt. Also, what specific type of knot that tie will be in. The tie is part of my transition as I'm stepping out of everyday uniform, into a flexible, forever changing professional attire.

The cane...One of the hard lessons that I had and continue to learn is, it's my transition. But, in order for it to be a good transition, you will need a good support cast. Rather, it is your spouse, significant other, family members, and friends. Somehow, some way, you do not have to do it on your own and there will become a time where you're going to have weak moments in your transition. You need a few people on your side to provide that support in those weak moments when things just don't seem like they are working out for you.

The sneaker represents easy, relaxed, light days. There gonna be some days where you could just sit back and relax. You don't have to put on dress shoes or military boots. It just didn't make sense to me to do 24 years, retire, and continue to work as hard as I did the last 24 years. If I wanted to maintain that same pace that I did in the military, I would have stayed in.

The knife represents being sharp enough to slice through certain things that come my way. Some things are thick, some things are thin, but at the end of the day, I still need to be mentally sharp enough to slice through it.

Dwayne retired from the military with the anticipation of obtaining a GS position. “Like the old saying go... It’s all in who you know. I wanted to go straight from the military

into the federal service because that's where the benefits, money, and security are. Being in a federal system, they are equal to the military. All the holidays I had off while I was in the military, I'm going to have them off as a civilian federal employee. So here I am thinking...I got all this experience and education. I am a true leader, trainer, facilitator...I got all this, somebody's going to pick me up! I didn't know the right people.” Dwayne entered the civilian private sector with a willingness to apply his military leadership skills to his new workplace environment. Unfortunately, he discovered some employers do not have a clear understanding nor are they open to learning from seasoned military veterans.

Mr. Gaines



Figure 19. Connecting the Dots

In the military, you want to feel part of something. For my transition, I wanted to make sure that I felt a part of the organization I was in. I'm an Air Force retiree, so I love blue. That shirt was blue and that really made me feel a part of a family at that job.

Mr. Gaines never could imagine the difficulties and challenges involved in his military to civilian transition. Although his private sector position was closely aligned with his Air Force career, his lack of understanding and connection made it difficult for him to adjust in his new environment. With a military career built on teaching others how to assimilate

so they can do and become better, the participant believes failure is inevitable when veterans are unable to find their purpose in the workplace. Furthermore, for veterans like himself who use military jargon, he believes there is a heightened level of confusion when they do not know the appropriate terminology or understand the organizational policies and hierarchies in the workplace. “I told my wife that if I had to do it all over again, I would go into being a GS civilian. The reason is because I would be compensated for the skills that I have, and I know how the Department of Defense works. We have federal laws and guidelines that we go by and I’m a rule follower. When I went to the civilian sector, you can do whatever you wanted to do. I am accustomed to the military having that structure. You give me a federal law, I read it, and then I function within those guidelines.” A teachable moment and a lesson learned that Mr. Gaines has now carried in his volunteer work with military service members and veterans in transition.

Ron



Figure 20. Quality Time

This plays a major part in my transition from the military. I didn't spend much time with my kids when I was in service. When I got out, I dedicated a lot of time to my oldest son as far as coaching or being an assistant coach on all his teams to re-establish that relationship. It helped me with my whole transition and to get rid of that daily stress from work and the grind. When you spend time on activities with your children, it just does something different for you. It takes your mind off all the stuff you would normally be thinking about in the whole transition phase of

like, I'm not where I want to be yet. My transition from the military was basically reestablishing the bond with my wife and kids. I spent all my time with them and activities that they enjoyed. It helped me transition through all the stuff I was going through at the time.

Ron attributes his private sector success to workplace fit. As a veteran, he has been fortunate to find a position that values and welcomes different ideas and perspectives. Furthermore, he is encouraged by his supervisor to utilize his talents and strengths on projects ranging from local to corporate level. “If I think something is going to work, as long as I’m not doing anything wrong, my boss encourages me to try and see what happens. Sometimes as veterans, that’s what we need. The opportunity to showcase our abilities without someone either thinking bad about us, trying to persuade us, making us do things that aren’t right, or trying to steal our ideas and play both sides.” After years spent in service, Ron prioritizes his in his new normal, especially his children. They have supported him throughout the adjustment period and all that it entails, one day at a time.

Shazza



Figure 21. The Next Generation

I ran track my final year of college. I was a student athlete and the school I attended showed warmth to student veterans. Graduating from college and knowing everything that I had been through... I completed the family legacy. My siblings and I are college graduates and educators, and this made my mom really proud.

These are the shoes that I wore in my very first track meet with my athletes. Ever since then, when we have a major track meet, I wear those shoes.

Shazza's time in the Air Force never deterred him from returning to follow his true passion: becoming a teacher. As he works on his master's degree, he realizes more than ever the importance of having African American male representation in education as teachers and administrators. His passion for track and field has provided an avenue for him to coach students from all walks of life, allowing them to see where the sport could possibly take them. Shazza has been able to adjust well to civilian life and he recognizes how lessons learned in the military have translated into his work in the private sector. "I don't really wear veteran on my back or my shoulder like a lot of people do. I think being in the military made me a lot more serious about things in life. The military made me that way because everything has to be done with a sense of urgency. That's our life. Therefore, as an educator, I don't take that lightly. I don't play with my students."

Walter



Figure 22. Strength Beyond Measure

I'm real big into comics and superheroes. I've got Groot and Professor Hulk. Groot is in the flowerpot that represents him starting to regrow after he sacrificed himself to save his whole team. Now, he's brought back!

Hulk was always an unevolved savage and he could not communicate without being in total rage. Professor Hulk is when he begins his major transition of uniting Hulk and Bruce Banner's personalities. They both have evolved. This represents me evolving throughout military to now civilian life.

Walter's use of Groot and Professor Hulk are symbolic of the transformation many veterans endure as they go through an identity shift, especially in the civilian private sector. With over 30 years of workplace experience in the military, he discovered the civilian private sector can be challenging when everyone does not share the same goal and staff members lack adequate training. Granted he is no longer wearing a uniform or stationed on an installation unit, the participant explains the performance expectations he has towards himself and those he works alongside. "The one thing I have to keep reminding myself is they don't have my work ethic. I may know some that are similar but nobody's going to work as hard as me or how I think that they are supposed to be working. I had to understand everybody has their own self-speed." Walter describes an offering of grace that must be given towards veterans and those who share time and space with them. Despite the undeniable benefits of the Hire Our Heroes, Walter's transition from intern to full-time employee exposed him to the internal struggles and personnel work ethics which can exist in the civilian private sector.

This section of the chapter described the participants' experiences in the civilian private sector workplace. Using artifacts, they each were able to reflect on what led them into their current position and what has sustained or motivated them throughout this process.

Collectively, the participants left the military with the anticipation that their background and experience would be an asset and not a threat in the private sector. Interestingly, three out of the eight participants wanted to pursue employment

opportunities as federal contracted general schedule (GS) employees but realized the process to get into the system was extremely difficult. In addition, after reflecting on his tenure in the private sector, another participant shared he should have avoided the private sector and focused his attention on being hired as a GS employee. Based on the participants' responses, it was evident they entered the civilian private sector workplace for various reasons. Yet, their eagerness and desire to be great contributors and team members within their respective fields never wavered.

Workplace Experiences in the Civilian Private Sector

This section presents study findings related to the participants' workplace experiences adapting to the civilian private sector. Table 5 illustrates the emergent themes, the frequency or number of times the theme was identified in the data, and a description of the theme. Each emergent theme is presented with supporting narratives from the study participants followed by a summary paragraph highlighting meaningful points made by them.

Table 5

Workplace Experiences

Emergent Theme	Frequency	Theme Description
Acclimatization Process	45	Process of adaptation into the civilian private sector workplace
Learning and Training Needs	10	Understanding what is needed to be successful in the private sector
Disability Realizations	7	Awareness of (in)visible disabilities and the impact on the workplace

Acclimatization Process

After an analysis of the interviews, it became evident that the study participants went through an adaptation process into the civilian workplace. Some were more

successful than others in navigating this stage of their professional lives. The first emergent theme focused on the expectations the veterans had upon entering the private sector. Byron reflected on importance of being acclimated into his company's organizational culture, especially as an African American male.

I've always been somewhat of a square, somewhat of a bookworm. I am the slacks and button downs in a crowd of jeans and tennis shoes. I've always been that type because that's how my folks raised us to be. The military helped refine me to become a little more personable and relatable.

The workplace got me around a lot of different folks from all walks of life that don't necessarily think, feel, or associate with some of the things that I wholeheartedly believe in. When you're working somewhere new, you've got to assimilate. You can't have the good without knowing the struggle, or the pleasant without having to assimilate and become indoctrinated by virtue of going through the probation process. You've got to adapt and try not to get fired.

The manager I have wants me to succeed. It's not from a place of, I got something on you. But from.... You're a brother. We need you. We need you to hold it down. We need you to be successful because you can do so much more. This is the first employer/manager I got that vibe from. My supervisor is of mixed race. (Byron)

The private sector introduced Byron to a diverse range of opinions and ideas that are openly discussed in the workplace, a huge shift from what he was accustomed to in the military. Byron stated some veterans may be reluctant to share their personal views due to the fear of losing their job or being ostracized in the workplace.

Next, Dorian described how the lack of structure and following protocol is a concern for veterans entering the private sector.

On the civilian side, people will run their mouth at you. They don't care who you are. There are some veterans who are institutionalized by the system. They get used to the day-to-day pattern and when that pattern breaks, they're not able to cope as well as others. It's like somebody who goes to prison, and they don't know what to do when they come out because they are so used to this rigid schedule. The military is a lot more rigid. If there is any sign of disrespect, you could be punished. (Dorian)

Dorian's statement illuminated how a veteran's regimented way of living plays a vital role in their civilian workplace transition. Coming from an organization that is constructed on chain of commands and being told *what to think* as opposed to *how to think*, Dorian acknowledged the freedom to openly share personal views is a foreign concept for some veterans in the private sector.

Colonel Taylor acknowledged how working with veterans and/or those with military culture awareness has positively impacted his experience working in the private sector.

The majority of my team is military. My boss is a retired O6, another guy was in the Coast Guard, and I work with a chief that I recommended they hire. The other guy on the team was not in the military, but always wanted to be. Four out of five of us have prior service so that really helps and we understand each other. We can talk the same jargon and lingo and we can do things without really communicating. We do what it takes to get the job done.

If you're not well prepared, haven't network or coached or sponsored to some degree, this journey can be daunting and outright fearful. It can create a lot of anxiety.

I think for some employers who may not have the veteran experience, they may not understand compared to an employer or manager who does. Those with veteran experience will have some situation awareness and are probably a little bit more empathetic to the plight of why veterans think the way they do. (Colonel Taylor)

Colonel Taylor highlighted how the private sector can provide a sense of comfort for veterans who are surrounded by those with similar interests and backgrounds, specifically those sectors which are deemed "veteran friendly." The work ethic and ability to collaborate with other veterans provides an avenue for them to establish a sense of community as they try to make a name for themselves within the company or organization.

Next, Walter acknowledged that some former service members may have difficulties with the Boots2Suits transition when they are unable to step away from the military mindset.

We have four of us (three enlisted and one military dependent) on our team and we all have the same mindset. Give us a good description of what you need and we're going to try to do what you want. We will try to make it work and we are not going to stop until we get it exactly the way you wanted. We had an officer that didn't make it.

He was a project manager that just couldn't understand the whole rhetoric that he's not in that position anymore. They expected more of him, but he's like, "Well, I've done this before. They should be happy with what I produce." No, you got to do it the way they want it. You got to be sure that you're pleasing them because you're producing a product for them, not for yourself."

I think for those who serve on the enlisted side understand it. We're used to executing and carrying out orders. While officers are used to giving orders and expound upon the finished product. (Walter)

Walter believed a military mindset shaped by years of service and rank could be the unfortunate downfall for veterans entering the private sector. For veterans who are accustomed to *giving* versus *taking* orders, Walter explained how this hinders them from meeting the needs of civilian employers who have the final say on what is right and wrong.

While some veterans feel compelled to adjust, Ron discussed how his military background was embraced as a positive attribute to his company - one that prides itself in having strong, self-sufficient leaders.

At my job, we don't want to come in and teach somebody or make someone do something a specific way. We want to have people that are innovative. We want them to come in with their own strategies and plans of doing things as long as it is within the company policy. Just make things happen. Most companies don't let you do that. You always have a boss that wants to put their foot on what you're doing because they want a little power.

When you're in the military, you're taught to think outside the box, to problem solve, and think critically. The one thing the military pushes onto us is to not be dependent. We need to be able to step up and take charge in case the next soldier falls. Your job is to step up and make sure that ball keeps rolling. That's one thing a lot of civilians don't have the mindset of. Something happens and they all freak out. But a lot of us veterans are like, you know what? That happens. He fell down. Who's next? It was hard in the civilian world because you butt heads with people that don't believe in this process.

If there was a problem, I would always revert back to the military trainings where the mission is essential. I thought about what the issue is, how we're going to fix it, and let's face it. Later on, we'll get together and talk about what the issue was and how to rectify or prevent it from happening again.

When I'm with my bosses or big people in the company, I'm one of those guys that you can give it to me, and I'll fix it. That personality helped me climb the ladder. I have level initiative to where people don't have to come to me and ask, "can you do this?" I always took that extra step to make sure things were being taken care of. The military gave me the leadership skills on how to lead at all times and problem solve without freaking out.

You have people that would rather spend hours complaining or whining about things. When I got out, the hardest thing was finding a workplace where people would try to help me with my Marine Corps thought process, or just allow me to be who I was to a certain degree. (Ron)

Ron identified how the support (or lack thereof) of a supervisor can impact how a veteran formalizes their civilian workplace identity, where an emphasis is placed more so on strengths as opposed to weaknesses. Additionally, he reinforced how a veteran's view of workplace success is heavily carried with a mission essential focus.

While varying opinions may open the door for civilians to assess or rethink their current practices, Dwayne shared how his experience has been that the acceptance of veteran employees and their ideas are a failed practice in the private sector.

What I've seen in the civilian sector is job security. I'm only going to do enough to stay out of trouble and to make it seem like I am important. I've never heard anyone say, "Hey, let's accomplish this task today. Let's get this done."

The service member is the one who is returning to the civilian sector and has to make the biggest adjustment, not the employer. They should take the time to get to

know and understand where we come from. The companies and corporations need to really try to understand the veterans they are receiving. When companies hire successful veterans, who have spent half of their career in leadership positions, they don't realize what they are getting. We are coming in already set in our ways on how we're going to work and how we're going to do things. When we question the status quo, we are seen as a threat.

My supervisor never considered my military background, and we were never ever able to get along. We were cordial and that was it. Why? I did not respect her as a supervisor. I'm totally different than she is. I served in the military, she didn't. She never stopped and said, "You know what? You're doing an excellent job, but I don't like why or how you do this or that." Am I breaking any rules? Is this against what the job is about?

When companies say, "we love the veterans", that is so cliché. I will admit, I was one of them that fell for it. I thought ya'll really did love us. What you love is not my skillset I bring to the table... How do you love that? You don't even know me yet. But what you do love is that credit that's about to roll in because you hired this veteran or disabled veteran. For every veteran that companies hire, they get like a \$7,500 credit. When we apply for a job, on the intake documents they ask, Are you a veteran? Some may go further to ask, Are you a disabled veteran? As they process and put us in a system, they are going to let the federal government know we just hired yet another veteran. They get credit for that, but don't take it beyond that.

It's important to figure out the veteran's skill set and look past what you can't control. All you need to do is give the veteran a task and the tools. You don't have to supervise him. You could turn your head, go on vacation, and it's all good. The veteran may do things even better than you expected. That's what they can do. Get to know the veteran that you hired. Then learn how you can best use that veteran for the good. I promise you...it'll be all good.

I'm a problem solver who knows how to listen, observe, process, research, and then come up with the answer. If I see an issue, I work towards a solution. Being a veteran, you learn how to juggle multiple tasks at the same time. (Dwayne)

Dwayne described the struggle that can exist when veterans feel they are used for public recognition and financial gain. As a seasoned veteran, he also discussed being undervalued in the private sector. To expand on this point, Walter shared how he is skeptical of "veteran friendly" companies and organizations who have an expressed interest in recruiting veterans. "I went to one job fair that lasted three days. I got the

feeling that companies were just sending representatives so they could say ‘we support our veterans!’ No, you don't. I don't remember too many people getting hired out of those jobs.”

Similarly, Mr. Gaines reflected on the hardships of not understanding the spoken and unspoken messaging from his supervisor and colleagues.

Part of my challenge is when I retired, I was older. I came from being in a senior management position in the Air Force to a lower-level position in the civilian sector. I felt like a new airman in the Air Force. They don't get the voice to speak. They are the young bucks that have a lot of learning to do.

I have a strong personality and I learned that can I come off wrong to some people. Some people thought I was trying to be disrespectful, but I was trying to clearly understand what they needed me to do. They thought I understood what they were talking about, but I didn't. That was a huge transition from the military to the civilian sector.

How are you going to put me on a pedestal as a veteran when I don't even understand the culture yet? You all say I'm a part of it, but I know I'm not. I'm not dumb. I attended several meetings where my head was spinning. What are they talking about? What is going on? I didn't understand the mission. Some of the meetings I was part of, I didn't understand why we were doing what we were doing. While feeling lost, they would say, “Oh man, you're a retired veteran! Oh, wow.” Some people looked at me and said, “You look too young to be a retired Air Force veteran. I thought maybe you served a couple of years or whatnot.” I would tell them I did 23 years and they just go “Wow”. That would offend me.

The problem that I was having as a staff member is I wanted to feel a part of this. People look at you and go, “Oh, you're an Air Force veteran. Wow! Thank you for your service!” I'm going, Okay. Thank you but forget that. I'm trying to be like you all right now. I'm not here because I'm a veteran. I'm here to make a change in the position. I'm here because I was hired for this work. It's hard for me to shed that veteran's skin.

In the military, I knew the playing field and the structure. Everything is laid out for you. I just didn't understand the civilian structure. It is a whole entire experience. Because you're coming into a different environment trying to learn how to act properly. If I was passionate about something in that environment, they felt I was being disrespectful. I'm like, I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I just love what I do. It was a challenge for me!

I understood we needed to be at work at eight. However, I was there at 7:30 because I didn't want to be late. I wanted to be prepared and ready to go. People would roll in and ask, "Why are you here? What's going on?" I'm like, I don't want to be late. I want to be on top of things. When I started getting those looks, I began second guessing if I should be there. With the military background, I tried to blend in. I stuck out like a sore thumb.

As I was pursuing a job, you would have that box on the application - Are you a retired veteran? Once you check that box off, they would go... "Oh, so you have retirement too, right?" They're not supposed to ask that question. That has nothing to do with it. I am qualified to do this position and I'm here just for this.

At times, comments were made at work about me receiving my military retirement payment. I would say, "my military retirement has nothing to do with this position." I know for a fact there are laws that forbid these comments. It made me feel as if they were saying, you ought to be grateful you got this job. I felt very uncomfortable because on one hand, I was put on a pedestal. On the other hand, I was being attacked or looked down upon. I wanted to leave my military career behind and be all in with the new position.

The Department of Defense has protocols in place to address issues and concerns. It may not have been perfect, but there was a place you could go to. You felt something was being done. Whereas in this new environment I don't know where to go; it is intimidating. (Mr. Gaines)

Mr. Gaines' story addressed the struggles veterans encounter when they feel civilians are unable to see them beyond their military affiliation. This is illustrated in the discomfort when veterans are asked personal questions that they deem inappropriate in the work setting. Additionally, he recognized the conflicts that can emerge when dedication is mistaken with defiance when trying to become engrained into the civilian culture.

Next, Walter expanded on how the Boots2Suits transition can be affirmed when veterans are provided avenues to thrive in settings where their military background is seen as an asset.

I work at an African American owned company. It felt comfortable and natural when I walked in. Their senior and executive leadership are made up mostly of minorities. I was at the leadership conference going, Wow! There are a lot of minorities here and with a wealth of experience!

There's a lot of us veterans out here. The right veteran can enhance your workforce by providing that spark that may inspire others. If a veteran is not complaining or stressing, why should someone be stressing?

Veterans can share their experiences of how they worked in the military. I look at it like this way... at least I'm not getting shot at. At least it's not 145 or 148 degrees and I am not wearing full body armor, a helmet, and carrying a weapon. The situation could be a whole lot worse. I'm thankful for what I have and I'm happy that I am doing my part to make it better. That attitude can rub off on workers that haven't known somebody to do that.

The majority of people come in saying, "Oh, I'm just here to do my job and then I'm gonna go home." For me, I'm gonna do my job to the best of my ability and maybe make a difference. It only takes one person to want to make a difference and it can spread to other people. It's just like dominoes falling.

I've used my leadership skills from the military to manage people and come up with workable solutions to problems. My skills also helped manage workplace stress and provide conflict resolution training. (Walter)

Walter described the mentality that drives the workplace expectations that veterans place on themselves and others. The private sector is seen as a safe, welcoming environment compared to the condition's veterans are subjected to in combat. By providing civilians a glimpse into the life of a service member, he strongly believes veterans can have a positive impact on others in the private sector.

Lastly, for Shazza, finding his place in the workplace was guided by his long-term passion for educating and mentoring young people. Even though he does not often reference or discuss his time of service, Shazza has found his military skills and training to be appropriate for his job in the private sector.

Because I had a family in the district, I was able to be selective about my job. I don't even think I put military service on my résumé to be a teacher. It's just relaxing to be with my students, relate and just hang out with them. They keep me young. Granted, I'm not that old. I'm 27, but they keep me young and fresh. Even when they have their little attitudes, I still wouldn't want to be anywhere else. They give me complete life.

Based upon basic training, pre-deployment training, and deployment, it taught me a lot about defense and how to be alert at all times. I think that has definitely helped me being in the school district where I am in because I'm able to spot out danger immediately when something's wrong. Even something as simple as breaking up fights. The military taught me how to properly do it so you can prevent injury and cover your own butt.

If you work for a company where there's a lot of veterans, you must have the mindset and understanding that your employees are coming from a completely different world. I don't think this is anything you have to be cognizant about in the educational field. To be honest, I often forget that I was in the military because my life is just so far removed.

I've only been on base one time to work out with a friend. Although, I have no desire to ever work for the military again, it brought a lot of order and discipline to my life. I wake up at five o'clock every morning. I was always a prompt person before the military but I'm even more a stickler for making it to places on time now. I hate being late anywhere, especially to work. (Shazza)

In this emergent theme, each of the eight participants had a unique perspective on the acclimation process as they entered the civilian private sector. The study participants' (in)ability to utilize military leadership skills and training in the private sector and understanding civilian workplace culture and expectations were reported with mixed feelings. While some of them felt they were contributing to the overall mission of their workplaces, others believed they were being judged simply because they were a veteran. There were high levels of satisfaction from those who worked with former service members, military connected individuals, and in areas with established personal connections. Unfortunately, hardships awaited those who lacked mentorship, constructive feedback, and understanding workplace expectations from their employer and colleagues.

Learning and Training Needs

The second emergent theme addressed the trainings and workplace learning the participants encountered in the civilian private sector. Based on the interviews, the participants held positions as blue- and white-collar supervisors, managers, and hourly

employees where they either found joy engaging in their career calling or contentment in having a job that allowed them to take care of themselves and families. After they stepped away from the structure and set regiment of the armed forces, the veterans began to learn about the skill set and core competencies essential in the civilian private sector positions they held.

As Byron entered a civilian job separate from his Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), he committed additional time outside of his normal workday to maintain his employment.

As an insurance professional, I completed a slew of coursework. The first was in insurance liability. The second was the law of claims fraud investigation and defense; this is where I really took off in my insurance career! The third was the law of automobile claims and coverage, and the last one was the legal principle. It took me six to seven months to get done. The best practices they share with me in insurance are passion, compliance, and the things you must do to be successful on the job. We have a script that I have to follow. I highlighted everything because If I don't do what I am supposed to, I could get marked down.

For our lawn service, I took a seven-section course. I didn't pass it the first time because I didn't finish all of the exam questions. It's 200 questions that you had to answer in 90 minutes. I paid for the second test and we passed! We ended up getting our certification and assigned a professional number! (Byron)

In balancing his job and his passion, Bryon acknowledged the hard work and sacrifice that is needed to reach his personal and professional goals. He also recognized the different types of learning he has embarked on while balancing his current job and being a full-time business owner.

Next, after over 20 years, Colonel Taylor transitioned from a novice to an expert in the medical profession. During the time of the interview, he discussed how technology plays an integral role specifically, during the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. “Going from military to civilian, there are some things that translate very easily, and some things

that do not. My job offers onboarding and constant training of available resources, especially on the iPad because we do a lot of telecommuting. I have had to stay up to date on different software, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel. I really appreciate that from a company and peer standpoint.” Colonel Taylor explained there are common themes and practices found in treating patients inside and outside of the military. Yet, he embraces learning as a lifelong process, and he looks to his employer to ensure he is adequately equipped to do his best work.

With professional development readily available and constructive feedback often given, Ron shared how his employer places a lot of emphasis on how his military background could benefit him in the private sector.

I haven't received too much training from my current employer. Based on my previous experience, this position was actually a step down. My boss is one of those guys that believes in you. Because I was in a previous position higher than this one, my boss said “This is going to be a breeze for you. I'm not going to shadow you.” Some people fail because they get too shadowed or micromanaged. My boss is definitely a blessing. He's one of those guys that if there's an issue, he'll tell you. But he doesn't want to tell you how to do your job. Everybody leads differently and has different thought processes. I believe this allows you to be more efficient because you're not always trying to follow the footsteps of somebody else. You also don't feel like you're failing because you're not able to live up to what they have put in front of you.

When I first got hired, I went through a year of training. With this position, we also have a regional trainer that comes to our store every 45 days. She spends four or five days going through all our paperwork and admin stuff. The trainer follows you around to see how you operate day to day to correct bad habits, make sure that you understand the importance of your work, and how to do certain things that you normally wouldn't know how to do. She will sit down with you and grade you on your daily operations. Are you operational already? Is your paperwork up to par? She will check everything that you should be doing and then if you're not hitting those levels, she will pull you to the side and show you how to reach out to the correct departments to make sure you're getting the support you need to be a better branch manager.

There's a lot of documentation that goes into my business. You got to have everything documented depending on the stuff you sell, the type of chemicals we

have, and the amount of money that's coming in and out of those places. You don't want to get fined. There are all these other hazmat and chemical companies that come around looking for money. (Ron)

Ron's professional development on the corporate and local level is combined with various modes of delivery. While the corporate branch is responsible for ensuring he is aware of the company's policies and best practices, his supervisor provides a space for Ron to use his military skillset to bolster the business. Consequently, Ron's reality was not aligned with the experiences of the other participants.

Dorian commented on the training he received as a former shift manager and currently in his security personnel work.

There has barely been any professional development. After leaving the military, I had two jobs, one for two years and I've been in my current job for one year. It wasn't like when you started, they sat you down. It's like an apprenticeship where you walk with someone and you're learning, and they're showing you how to do things. Most of it was on the job training and, maybe a few meetings.

At my first job, we were just doing readings on the founders of the corporation. The first time around, you cover most of your basis and then slowly, you add more onto that over time. At the job I have now, there is professional development on the operations and protocols that were already set in place. You walk through those things and that's pretty much it. I could always go to someone if there were questions, or in case an emergency happened. It's just me and a co-worker pretty much working together. I work on the weekends, so usually the building's empty. It's really easy. I feel like most of the professional development came from my Marine Corps training because it covers everything.

It's fine now because I usually work on the weekends. At my first job, I was working every day from 3:00-11:00am. I would go to class and then I went to sleep. But now, it's about the same pay right now and I have a lot more time to study. (Dorian)

Dorian makes sure that having a job does not interfere with his academic obligations. In his work as a part-time employee, his professional development and training are minimal compared to the training he received as a former full-time shift manager.

With a continued focus on workplace adaptation, Walter acknowledged the hardships he encountered transitioning from an intern to a full-time employee at his Hire Our Heroes site.

I received no training, and I don't think they have professional development courses for any of their workers. I have seen a lot of bad leadership from management. They need employee relations, conflict management, and conflict resolution decision making training. They don't know how to manage things. They've been working for the system for so long and they get promoted or apply for other jobs they just think they know. They go by what they learned from their predecessor. This is what he did, so I'm going to do this. There's really no job professional development whatsoever and that's sad. My job is primarily on the job training. If we have problems and nobody knows how to fix it, we just research it and it's there. (Walter)

Walter's statement spoke to how companies and organizations associate success by the ability to continue workplace cultures and traditions. However, because of his extensive military background, he taught himself certain things based on the trial and error associated with on-the-job-training (OJT). The participant would use his newfound knowledge to advise others in the department in an effort to increase productivity and limit mistakes.

Dwayne credited OJT in playing a critical role in his prior and current private sector positions.

At my previous job, professional training required local and federal certifications. Overall, it was mainly OJT, On the Job Training. I shadowed a couple of my co-workers to figure out the process they were using when they met with clients and certain information that was critical to share. After shadowing them for about a month, I broke out on my own and learned as I went. Some of the additional training I received was online. We also got credit when we went to a week-long fall or spring conference. You would pick the informational type courses you would attend. Once you attended those courses, you would sign in and sign out to get credit.

In real estate, professional development is an ongoing process. There are continuous education (CE) courses that we have to constantly take. The organization that governs realtors in the state of Texas are constantly pushing out

updated legal information (i.e., how to conduct business during the COVID-19 situation). You should be able to learn something new or different from every single deal that you do. Being a young realtor, I might be able to share and educate a realtor who's been in the game 20 years, based off my one experience with this particular deal. Every deal is different. (Dwayne)

For Dwayne, his discussion of OJT showed how it can be utilized when you are one of many within a large corporation to one person with a self-initiated entrepreneurial spirit. Because the participant is entering a new, second career path, he is receptive to learning being a shared effort between himself, mentors, and colleagues.

Mr. Gaines believed his employer failed to provide him with the necessary tools and training to be successful in the private sector. He discussed how his military background could only take him so far as he tried to build relationships, complete projects, and implement change in the workplace.

I struggled with this because I was relying on my professional development prior to coming into the civilian sector. I thought I understood, but I didn't. I remember I kept reminding my supervisor of their position of power. My supervisor could accomplish things based solely on position. However, for me, I was on the lower totem pole. When I tried to carry out what needed to get done, I got resistance. Therefore, I needed to know how the organization worked.

When I was in the military, when people would tell me they couldn't get something done, I would go, "Oh...we can't?" Because I knew the organizational structure, I would meet with the people who could help me get things accomplished. It took a lot of legwork that I also tried to do in the civilian sector.

After the first two weeks, I knew I was going to quit, or I was going to be fired. I was trying to do what they brought me in to do, but I could not carry out the responsibility. Transitioning from the military to civilian sector was challenging because in the military sector, I knew the movers and shakers. I knew how to make things happen. In the civilian sector, I didn't know them. I didn't feel comfortable sharing I had an issue, or that I needed their help. (Mr. Gaines)

Coming from a military branch where he felt nurtured and supported, Mr. Gaines described how feelings of inadequacy and lack of reassurance can make the transition from the military into the private sector extremely difficult for veterans. His story brings

attention to the stressors civilian employers can place on veterans without an awareness of how they are dealing with the adjustment into the private sector workplace. Moreover, the anguish of them doing so in silence.

This emergent theme offers a detailed description of the joys and pains associated with veterans trying to learn what it takes to be successful in the private sector. The participants reflected on the professional development and training (or lack thereof) in the form of job shadowing, on-the-job-training (OJT), online learning, etc. Based on the participants' statements, success was defined as the ability to understand the workplace mission, organizational structure, and the chain of command that must be followed to complete certain tasks.

Disability Realizations

In the third emergent theme, the participants described how their military injuries impacted their acclimatization into the civilian work environment. The study also revealed the resources the participants utilized to help them cope in difficult times. Each of the participants were adamant their disabilities should not be perceived as excuses, but as (a) explanations into areas veterans must consider when selecting a civilian position and (b) what employers should be mindful of when working with veterans.

Colonel Taylor described how employers should focus their attention on a veteran's strengths versus shortcomings.

There is a "go-go-go mentality" in the military - mission and people first, and you worry about yourself second. Because of a mindset of sacrifice and my ability to assimilate over the last two or three decades, it has allowed me not to use the veteran status or disability as a crutch in the civilian sector. I see it as an opportunity to show and demonstrate that... Yeah, I may have some disabilities, but I can still function intellectually. Physically, there may be some limitations because I'm not 18-25 anymore. But I still have a mind and I still bring value to the workplace.

I would say one thing that has impacted working in the civilian sector is being a man of faith and walking out my Christian lifestyle. I don't have to carry around the cross or talk about the Bible. I just have to be the Bible. Meaning my lifestyle speaks volumes. I can have a conversation and encourage anybody because there's so much negativity. Being able to bring some positivity to the table is tremendous for me. I try to share something positive with my patients, even though they come beat up, suicidal, depressed or whatever the case may be. I always try to pick out something positive to let them know that there is hope for them. (Colonel Taylor)

Colonel Taylor conveyed how the will and commitment of a veteran never truly leaves him. Regardless of disability, Colonel Taylor believed veterans have something to offer.

With a continued focus on military service-related injuries, Ron reflected on how post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and physical ailments impacted his prior and current private sector positions.

The biggest disability I had when I got out was my PTSD. It impacted my first job because there were days when we did computer work all day. I'm good at admin but I don't like it because I get very antsy and anxious sitting. I made good money, but the job wasn't allowing me to adjust back to family life because it was one of those where you're on call 24/7, you're always at work - like being in the military, on the go, 24/7, 365. I also get a little chippy because I have to move around a lot. During this time, coaching my kids was an outlet.

Coaching was my separation from the issues I was dealing with because it allowed me to hone-in on something that engaged me. I was developing young men like I did in the Marine Corps. That was one of the best things I was able to do to help me get over my PTSD.

As it relates to my current job, I have real bad shoulders. For the first few years out of service, I could not lift anything over 10 pounds because I tore all my shoulders up. This hindered me in a lot of jobs I was applying for when I got out of service. (Ron)

In an effort to adjust to civilian life, Ron knew he did not want a private sector position that closely aligned with the demands of the Marine Corps. Additionally, he acknowledged how money could never outweigh his desire to stay healthy and focus on

self-care. Ron credited his children for providing balance and allowing him to put his leadership skills and training to good use.

In further support of self-care, after leaving a hostile work environment, Mr. Gaines' took the necessary measures to seek counseling services through the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA).

I know that PTSD affected me, however I didn't know that at the time. Looking back, if I didn't understand the mission or what we were trying to do in the workplace, that gave me a lot of anxiety. I also bumped heads with my supervisor from that anxiety. I should have gone and used the appropriate resources that were there. But again, I didn't understand those resources.

I know some of the anxiety was due to PTSD. I didn't think the deaths and trauma that occurred while I was on active duty would have affected me. It didn't hit me until I woke up in the middle of the night with sweats. Through seeking help through the VA, I started understanding that was my anxiety. (Mr. Gaines)

Mr. Gaines found that the stress of the private sector was too much to bear. This experience was the catalyst for him to step away from a traditional professional setting and offer support to veterans who were preparing or who are currently in the workforce.

As a veteran who utilized services through the VA, Dwayne discussed how he felt ridiculed by his employer for attending his doctor appointments.

In the Army, it's an unwritten rule about senior personnel going to the doctor. It was frowned upon by a lot of higher ups if I, as the First Sergeant, had a major injury or I got a bad cold. I had to figure out how to deal with it on my own. Why? Because I need to be available for my soldiers. If I go to the doctor, what we call "sick call" and medication is prescribed, will it make me sleepy? Will it prevent me from doing my work? Or, if they put me on quarters, tell me to stay home for a couple of days because I have walking pneumonia, I'm not out there. We did not take care of ourselves the way that we should have as senior leaders.

When you transition to the civilian sector, that's all we want to do. I got the sniffles... I'm going to the VA. But while you are at work, they don't understand why you are going to the doctor so much. Or, when go to your VA appointment, why your appointment takes two or three hours. In the military, we didn't take care of ourselves the way we were supposed to. Now that we are in the workforce, especially if you are the only veteran, they don't understand dealing with the VA,

how it is a pain in the butt to wait a month or more for a particular appointment. Because if you don't jump on that time, you may have to wait another three weeks for a new appointment. It's almost like while you were in the military, nobody on a senior level cared about your health and neither did you. Now you care about your health, but others don't. For example, I had to go all the way to the VA hospital, and I tried to schedule my appointments early in the morning, or in the middle of the day. If I left work at noon but didn't come back until three, there was an issue. I tried to cut down the issues of hearing people complain and talk. I tried to schedule my VA appointments during lunchtime. I had to take a half an hour to an hour of sick leave. (Dwayne)

The veterans addressed the (in)visible disabilities (diagnosed and undiagnosed), which civilian employers may or may not be aware of. As they try to adjust to their military to civilian transition, Colonel Taylor, Ron, Mr. Gaines, and Dwayne emphasized they do not want special treatment or to receive special accommodations in the workplace. Yet, there is an anticipation that employers will understand veterans have appointments that are scheduled beyond their control. Although veterans are no longer in uniform, there are still certain directives they must follow. As individuals once responsible for leading and supervising service members, the participants found value in being acknowledged for what they can bring to the private sector. Unfortunately, for some, the ridicule and judgment they encountered resulted in them leaving the private sector with dreams of never working for someone else. They have not looked back since.

Navigating the Boots2Suits Transition Challenges

This section presents study findings related to the challenges the participants' faced in their transition into the private sector and how they were able to navigate through these situations. Table 6 illustrates the emergent theme, the frequency or number of times the theme was identified in the data, and a description of the theme. Each emergent theme is presented with supporting narratives from the study participants followed by a summary paragraph highlighting meaningful points made by them.

Table 6

Navigating Boots2Suits Challenges

Emergent Theme	Frequency	Theme Description
Does Race Matter?	11	The level of influence race carries into the new workplace
I Am More Than a Veteran	9	To be seen and accepted beyond the military identity
Old Habits Never Die	8	Military traits and skills veterans carry into the private sector

Does Race Matter?

The first emergent theme focused on the level of influence that race carries into the new workplace. Six of the eight participants (Byron, Dwayne, Colonel Taylor, Mr. Gaines, Ron, and Shazza) acknowledged in many instances they were either one of the few or the only African Americans in the workplace. This fact was met with different reactions from each of the participants. Byron discussed the standards he feels African Americans must uphold to maintain employment and be taken seriously.

I can't quit. I can't give up. I don't have the safety net and cushion that others may have. By virtue of being an African American male, I have to put my best foot forward, especially being in an at will state. I'm not devaluing anything, but I know systemically things are designed for me to not do anything more than what I've been doing. I have to present myself in a certain way. I'll wear Black or blue slacks, Black shoes, a buttoned-down shirt, and maybe a coat. My counterparts don't have to do that. They wear hoodies and shirts and rock shorts. I'm not judging or devaluing anyone. But if I had attempted to do that it would be a different story.... I've got co-workers classified as White who have their hair long and tied up in a ponytail and I'm not just talking about women. In fact, one of the managers had a rat tail... like a straight up George Washington. I don't think I can come to work with cornrows, twist, and an afro and not get the look. (Byron)

Byron's statement supports his belief that African Americans must be cognizant of how they are perceived in the workplace. Although he notices his staff members wearing casual attire, he feels there are some lines he is unable to cross to maintain his

professionalism in the private sector. Throughout the research study, Byron was adamant he did not want to give his employer a reason to fire him or think he was incapable of fulfilling his job responsibilities.

Similarly, Mr. Gaines described how he prepared himself and other African American colleagues to enter workspaces.

As a Black male, it was just challenging. I would tell my colleagues, when we go into these spaces, we have to be ready. I would make sure I was dressed properly, and I didn't do anything that was threatening per se. If I did say something, I had to choose my words appropriately, because it could be taken in a negative manner or I could offend someone. I don't feel comfortable hugging because I'm a Black male. There's not a lot of people that look like me and I don't want anything to be misinterpreted.

I walked into an office and I didn't see people that look like me. They were looking at me like, "Who is this?" I would have to disarm them by saying, Oh, I'm a retired Air Force veteran. As soon as they heard that, "Oh, thank you for service." Then they wanted to listen. If I wouldn't have been an Air Force vet, do you mean to tell me I couldn't come to the table?

I'm aware that I'm a Black male. When I come into a space, I don't own it. I'm just trying to be a part of the space. I thought I could assimilate to it. After being a minority and being discriminated against in the workplace, I decided I don't want to do that again. I don't want to be in an environment where I feel judged as an African American male. (Mr. Gaines)

Mr. Gaines never discussed with his employer the burdens and fears associated with being an African American male in the private sector. Despite his desire to step away from his military affiliation, it served as the only way he could build connections with his colleagues and outside constituents.

Next, Colonel Taylor shared his experiences navigating racism and discrimination in the medical field.

Being a male, you are outnumbered in certain environments. However, the number dwindles when you are an African American and it gets even smaller as a veteran. But I take it in stride and use it as a steppingstone. As an African American male, I'm always trying to be aware of who I am, the environment I'm

in, and I try to treat everybody with the dignity and respect I hope to get back. Even though sometimes I don't.

Given the current political and social events, with social unrest and racism coming to the table, people are dialoguing about it. There was some instances where I had to rise to the top and not go below the belt. It's so easy to do that. Some of my colleagues in the workplace have no experience with racism and it wasn't until I was able to highlight these stories that they were able to show some empathy. It's moments like this when I can help someone else have an "aha" moment to make the world a better place. Making the work environment a better place to work in, so we can accomplish our goals.

When I think about Boots2Suits, I think about the bridge and I want to fill that gap for others, but more specifically for the men of color. Especially now because we sometimes have an identity crisis. When I think about being a male, I'm not talking about being bravado. I'm talking about being smart, being responsible, being a man. I'm talking about being a father, being a husband. I'm talking about the whole package. When I think about a Black male figure in Boots2Suits, I think about a comprehensive man being that bridge. (Colonel Taylor)

Colonel Taylor stated that professional development and honest conversations are a necessity in dissecting the discomfort African Americans experience when they feel unwelcomed or unaccepted. For Dorian, such feelings were evident as he applied for numerous civilian positions: "It's hard for me to get interviews, but I don't know why. Sometimes I think it's because of my African American name."

In contrast, Ron believed his first name was instrumental throughout his job search.

My name is Ronald, so, everybody tends to think I am a White guy. Through my transition, I've dealt with companies and people that I've talked to on the phone. When I meet them in person, you can see their eyes widen as they begin to think, "Oh man, we thought you were a White guy."

Transitioning out and being a Black man hasn't really affected me too much (or at least I don't pay attention to it) because I live in a diverse, military city which is a good thing. I really just don't pay attention to the negative aspects of people. If someone says, "No", I just keep moving. I try not to mentally dig into it or try to figure out if it's because I'm Black. So far, I've had a pretty good transition as far as being an African American male coming out of the military. (Ron)

Ron understood that the adversities of racism still exist and are prevalent towards African American males. Although his first name may have opened doors for him, Ron believes that living and working in an area that has a robust population of military connected individuals allows for employers to focus more on his skills and training and less on his race.

Furthermore, Dwayne reflected on how workplace decisions and experiences surrounding race are not always clearly identified.

I have only had two jobs since I retired from the military and they weren't gender specific. The first job I had I was terminated after six months. I can't prove that being an African American was part of the reason. But I will say this...for the reason I was terminated, others kept their job until I filed a complaint, and an investigation was done. After they did a 30-day investigation, they called me back and said, "Hey, we were able to substantiate everything you claimed." I provided proof of everything— dates and times. Because they didn't want "equal opportunity" lawsuits, they offered me my job back at a different location, which is one mile from the previous location. And they told me, "Oh, by the way, that general manager who fired you, we terminated him." However, I turned them down because of the negative environment. I explained to him, the individual that you terminated, was just a scapegoat. He's not the root of the problem. You are. The company. It's the environment that ya'll create for the company as a whole.

You heard the term that the most dangerous man on the planet is an educated Black man? I never tell anybody that, but I damn sho' show it. (Dwayne)

As the only African American assistant manager in a region that covered three states, Dwayne's workplace concerns extended from the local to corporate level. While he did not identify race as the sole reason for his termination, he described how being educated and understanding his rights was the catalyst for him to voice his concerns.

With a vested interest in working with youth, Shazza reflected on what motivated him as an African American male educator.

I'm actually really glad that my contract with the military ended when it did. Because if I had done a full six years, I wouldn't be a teacher to this day. I wouldn't be feeling as fulfilled as I do to this day. Ain't no telling where in the

United States I would be. God really set that up and worked it out the way it was supposed to.

I can relate to the kids I teach at my school because I was raised in the same neighborhood where they live. I feel like I'm doing a lot more than teaching. I mentor and I'm being an encourager. I'm a motivational speaker. I'm helping kids go to college on my track team. I challenge kids and I make sure they see a different perspective. I know my presence as an African American male inspires my students. A lot of my kids don't come from two parent homes and don't have that strong Black male figure in their life. I think my presence lets them know that there is a man out there who cares for their well-being 100%. (Shazza)

To summarize, the theme “Does race matter?” illustrated the impact that race has in the workplace when African American male veterans are the minority. They are mindful of how they carry themselves, what they say, and how their presence can set the stage for those who will come behind them.

I Am More Than a Veteran

The second emergent theme centered on how the participants strived to be seen beyond their military affiliation. Although they take pride in being veterans, Bryon, Dorian, Mr. Gaines, Ron, and Shazza wanted to ensure they were able to eliminate the negative opinions civilians associated with veterans, especially towards those who may have been deployed or were in combat. Although his military skills and training were an asset in his two private sector positions, Dorian believes civilians carry a certain level of judgment towards veterans. “They might think I'm dumb, but they know I work hard. I have to prove that I don't fit into their veteran stereotype.”

Shazza commented that the Boots2Suits transition is often life changing for veterans who aspire to have a brand-new start after their military retirement or separation.

I think we have a tendency to write people's stories before they even tell us, and I think people have this perceived notion of what they think a veteran is going to be. For me to tell my story and at times I forget that I am a veteran, I think it's important to hear people's stories. I think it's also important to not define people

off their military service because that can be dangerous. I have so many colleagues, so many friends that I served with, and they don't know what to do because they've always thought of themselves as this Airman, this Sailor, this Soldier, this Marine. (Shazza)

For Shazza, the military experience could be perceived as bittersweet for veterans who are trying to reestablish their identities as civilians while others are interested in revisiting their past.

With an additional perspective, Mr. Gaines shared his frustration as he tried to clearly understand what was needed while struggling with limited access and direction in the workplace.

Boots2Suits is an understanding that you are coming from the military background and transitioning to the suit of corporate America. After experiencing the transition, there is a difference and we do need to be educated. I have my degree and I felt like I was qualified. But man... there's some barriers that's in between that I think this Boots2Suits captures. Boots2Suits is trying to be that middle part of understanding two worlds. You have two worlds – a boot and a suit and you're going from your transition from one to the other. When you go from being a civilian to the boot, it's a wake-up call. And you got to learn how to transition into that.

I felt like some people put me on a pedestal that I do not need to be on. I felt intimidated. They knew how to present in a manner to affect their audience and I was trying to learn that. I knew my way of doing it, but I was trying to learn their way. At times, I may have failed. However, I wasn't naive to say, I know what I'm doing. Forget that, I don't need to change. I was trying to adapt, but it was challenging for me. (Mr. Gaines)

For more than 20 years, Mr. Gaines was consumed with the culture, language, and practices of his military branch. As a new civilian employee, he was not oblivious that the private sector would be *A Different World*. Yet, he was hoping his employer would have made an intentional effort to help him along the way.

As Ron embarked on his new career path, he realized his employment opportunities were geared more towards his gender as opposed to his veteran status.

I haven't had any vet privilege as one would say. All the jobs I have gotten is because I was able to get in front of the individual and just show them who I was. For some people, it's about getting out of the military and figuring out the kind of person you are as a civilian man going towards the suit in the civilian sector.

I think being a male definitely helps because you can be a little more forceful. It is not looked at with a frown as when a woman is being more forceful towards a man or other people. Being a male definitely played a huge part in all my jobs. As a male, I am able to assert myself in a respectful way and just have manly conversation. You can shoot the breeze with a man. It's just a bond that has definitely helped out a lot. (Ron)

Based on Ron's statement, his success in the private sector was based on his ability to bond and connect with other males in the workplace. For Bryon, he realized his landscaping work has made a positive impression on young African American males.

My clients have sons, little boys and toddlers that see me pull up with all of the equipment. It's like I'm the lawn mower machine.

I got a property that I just procured, and I went to school with the young lady who took us on as a client. I've known her for 20 some odd years and both of her sons are the same ages as my daughters, 13 and 2. When I'm there, the boys always either come to the door or go to the back. The last two times that I've been there, they wave and I'm like, Hey, what's up! If they're curious and interested in learning, the goal is to get them to replace what I'm doing so that they can take care of their own and then do more. They know someone that has and can and that transcends just sending the tip and calling it a day.

As an entrepreneur, I feel like I'm able to protect and provide and fulfill that masculine energy, that male goal. I would devalue everything else I'm doing if I say, Hey, that it's enough. It's not. (Byron)

Byron believed that as a male, it is rewarding when you can simultaneously support your family financially and inspire African American males who may one day become minority business owners.

The overarching themes from the participants was their realization they cannot change what civilian employers and colleagues may or may not think of them as veterans. Nevertheless, they want to be offered the same fairness and professional development as

any new employee within the company or organization. Their statements also revealed how being a male served as the catalyst for the participants to begin establishing new relationships and finding a new sense of purpose as civilians.

Old Habits Never Die

In the third and final emergent theme, the participants discovered there are some old habits that are difficult to break. As they entered the private sector, they soon became mindful of the actions and routines which were once socially acceptable and a part of their daily norm in the military. Ron noted his tone and delivery was misinterpreted by those who may not be familiar with how individuals converse in the military. “My very first job after the military was for a big IT company. Coming out of the Marine Corps, you're very direct because that's one thing the Marine Corps is, a very direct organization. Let's get to the point and not beat around the bush. Mission accomplishment first and then everything comes after that. I was very direct, but I was professional.”

As he navigated through this Boots2Suits transition, Mr. Gaines described how he continued to adhere to the mandatory Air Force workplace attire requirements in the private sector.

It was crazy. I made sure my belt was down on the right Gig line and that my shirt was starched and collared up. These were all the things that I was taught in the military. In the civilian sector, everybody would go, “You need to relax.” I took the boots off, but I have not been able to unlace them. This even translates with my socks. Although I took off my military socks and put on new ones in the civilian sector, I went back to my military socks in my civilian job because I knew they could handle the warm and cold. Psychologically, my socks protected me and made me feel more comfortable in the environment. (Mr. Gaines)

Mr. Gaines acknowledged there were moments when he needed to revisit his past to give him the confidence and reassurance to make it through another day in the civilian world.

Byron discussed how for some veterans it may take some time for them to step out of their comfort zone to build connections within the private sector.

The interactions that we had with non-veterans was when we were on the floor with our teams or we had lunch with them in the cafeteria. We had to be bold enough to just make friends which was a different experience. It was a slow trickle transition to see that we're not just going be around veterans all day. I've heard from veterans that they didn't even want their employer to know that they were a veteran because they didn't want certain stereotypes connected to that. Sometimes I feel like I'm just doing a huge probationary time where I'm still learning, and I will arrive eventually. Boots2Suits is cathartic because it's not done. I'm nowhere near close to being done. (Byron)

Byron noted the culture shock of being in a new environment can be overwhelming for veterans who are hesitant to disclose they served in the military. Furthermore, because veterans are accustomed to being in a military environment, the private sector requires them to contemplate how to they should initiate conversations and build rapport with their civilian colleagues.

In providing a different perspective, Walter reinforced how military service is something veterans should be proud of as they try to solidify their career goals and aspirations.

I think being a veteran transitioning into the private sector workplace has given me an advantage over somebody just barely coming out of college getting a job. I have more experience, I know what I'm worth, and I'm not afraid to ask for it. But I'm also not afraid to say, Okay, if you can't meet my price, I am willing to work with you to find something we both feel comfortable with. At the end of the day, my veteran status has helped me transition to the civilian sector because I know what I'm worth, what I bring to the table, and what I can bring to an organization.

I noticed in myself that I have a three-year cycle. Every three years, I need to be in a different position in the company or promoted to a different level. I tend to work towards this goal within 18 months of being in my current role. The problem is that if I feel like there is no growth or become stagnant, I voice my concerns. If no movement or opportunities open up, I find myself looking for my next opportunity outside the company. Most veterans are not accustomed to slow

career growth companies and seek the next big challenge that can push them further. It is not always the money we chase, but the challenge it brings. (Walter)

As the longest serving veteran in the research study, Walter strongly believed former service members have valuable skillsets that will never leave them and can be useful in the private sector. Because of this, he believes veterans should not be hesitant to ask for a specific salary.

Like Walter, Dwayne commented on the importance of veterans acknowledging what they have to offer in the private sector. However, he emphasized that this form of directness can be off putting if it is presented with arrogance or a level of entitlement.

As veterans, we know what we are worth, and this could be a good and bad thing. Based on my experience and education, I was expecting to earn the same salary in the civilian sector that I had before retiring from the military. I did not expect to come into any organization on the ground level, but at minimum mid-management because that's what I feel I'm worth.

I feel like I am worth more than a job that pays a \$30,000 salary because I'll bring more to the table based on education and experience. Knowing what your worth, will make some veterans turn down \$75,000 because they feel they are worth \$95,000. The employers may say, "Okay sir, don't worry about it. We'll call you. Matter of fact, as you leave, take your whole file out the door with you." On a personal side, I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit in me. After 24 years, I don't want to work for nobody. (Dwayne)

Dwayne described how the civilian private sector pay scales can be a startling reality for former service members who were accustomed to earning higher wages while serving in the military. His story identifies the financial sacrifices veterans must embrace to gain employment in the private sector. Furthermore, how such financial realities led him to consider the benefits of becoming a business owner.

This emergent theme is a true testament to the military backpack that is continuously worn by veterans who enter the private sector (see Figure 1). Although the DD214 gave each of them permission to move forward into the future, some things are

difficult to let go of in the private sector. Although the load might be lessened, the weight is continuously present.

Chapter Discussion

This chapter described the workplace experiences of the study participants adapting to the civilian private sector, the challenges they faced in their transition from Boots2Suits as well as how they navigated these challenges. With the *acclimatization process* being a major concern for veterans, the participants described what they encountered in the civilian workplace. “Although the American workforce has become more diverse, there continues to be a lack of understanding and misperception about veterans’ skillsets and military experiences which inhibit successful employment after military service” (Davis & Minnis, 2017, p. 6). In this study, the participants reflected on the differences in lingo and freedom of speech from both contexts, the military and the civilian workplace. Open dialogue about sensitive topics such as race, religion, and politics is not allowed in the armed forces. Although their opinions may have been welcomed and encouraged, the veterans prior military service reminded them of the importance of following protocols and chain of commands and how one could be reprimanded for speaking out of turn.

Furthermore, the veterans noted there were benefits and challenges to working alongside other military connected individuals. While some of the participants enjoyed working with individuals who shared common experiences, others found it difficult to interact with veterans who were unable to adhere to directives in the private sector. The findings suggested it can be difficult for veterans to overcome workplace challenges if they are hesitant to abolish a military mindset to embrace a new one.

In the dissertation, *learning and training needs* focused on what the veterans believed they needed to know to be successful new employees. Hammer et al. (2019) explained “A lack of supervisor support may be related to negative outcomes specifically for post deployed veterans in the workplace” (p. 53). Mr. Gaines, Walter, Dorian, and Dwayne attributed their heightened level of workplace frustration to their employers’ failure to provide clear instructions and take their military experience for granted. This frustration was also discovered in their statements of how they believed civilian employers are infatuated with hiring veterans yet are unwilling to invest the necessary time towards helping them understand their positions. Intersectionality theory offered a perspective on the disconnect which can exist between veterans and their employer. Through this theory, it “shows how different people can be in the same general social context yet hold different interpretations of it” (Collins & Blige, 2016, p. 28). Based on the responses shared by four of the study participants, the private sector viewed veterans as employees who required minimal to no guidance or supervision solely because of their military background. These assumptions resulted in the veterans often working and researching independently how to do their job because their employers assumed they knew more than they did. However, it is important to note, Colonel Taylor and Ron praised their employers for their openness to their leadership style and diverse ideas to fulfill the company’s goals and objectives. Both participants also shared how professional development was readily available, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seven of the eight veterans were able to gain training and professional development in the private sector through on-the-job training (OJT). Matsuo (2014) stated “...most OJT has been relatively unstructured or unplanned...structured OJT has

largely focused on technical training, rather than managerial training that provides individuals the ability to plan, organize, schedule, and facilitate how work gets done” (p. 227). The research indicated all the participants had a successful workplace experience when they understood what was required and could utilize their military leadership, skills, and training. Additionally, the study findings determined OJT was a common practice in many of their professions and there are immense values when it is a shared experience between the veteran, supervisor, and colleagues.

As the veterans tried to find their way in the private sector, *disability realizations* spoke vividly to how while working, they were balancing visible and invisible military service-related injuries. Although the participants did not want to be treated differently in the civilian private sector, Dwayne, Mr. Gaines, Ron, and Colonel Taylor tried to identify ways to complete their job responsibilities without compromising their self-care.

According to Sayer et al. (2010), “determining the type of environment a Veteran is comfortable in may help identify jobs that are a better match potentially making long-term employment more feasible” (p. 264). Throughout the study, the participants described how the workplace environment can play a major role in triggering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Whether it is sitting in one spot for long periods of time or dealing with the stressors of not feeling a part of the workplace culture, the findings identified this is as a hardship that cannot be ignored. Therefore, the four participants who shared their stories were able to work through these challenges with the support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), family, and time.

Another valuable study finding was the judgement and lack of understanding from employers when veterans attend their VA appointments. Dwayne and Mr. Gaines

were strong advocates for utilizing their military retirement benefits. By doing so, this provided them with the services they needed to adjust to civilian life and overcome the challenges that occurred after their military retirement. Their backing of VA services contests Hoehn's (2018) stigma that African American male veterans are hesitant or resistant to seek medical attention from the VA. The participants' stories are a testament to the benefits of having private sector supervisors and employers who are knowledgeable of military cultural competency and veterans in transition. Because not all veterans disclose their military service injuries or disabilities to their employers, former service members should be aware of workplace support and advocacy resources and not be ridiculed for using VA related services.

“In the context of the workplace, this means that Black men do not enjoy male privilege in the same way or to the same extent as White males. Instead, Black males' male privilege is altered, modified, and minimized as a result of incipient racism” (Guy, 2014, p. 21). *Does race matter?* focused on the impact of the study participants being African American in the civilian private sector workplace. Based on their responses, it was discovered that both race and gender were a constant factor in their workplace challenges. For example: Byron, Colonel Taylor, and Mr. Gaines reflected on how African American males do not have the same privileges as their White counterparts, specifically as it pertains to workplace attire and appearance. The participants noted the responsibility they have to educate others about the hardships they encountered inside and outside of the workplace simply because they are African American males.

Moreover, in the research findings, Dorian and Ron described the impact names have had in them seeking employment opportunities in the private sector. Despite them

both having honorable military discharges, one believed employers have not contacted him because of his first name, while the other described how his application and telephone conversations made it difficult for employers to identify his race. In addition to names, Ward (2020) addressed a discrepancy that cannot be ignored. “African American military veterans tend to experience racial discrimination and bias that are primarily experienced by civilian African Americans. As a result, African Americans are not always are not always offered equal employment opportunities as their White counterparts” (Ward, 2020, p. 69). In connection with intersectionality theory, Collins and Blige (2016), stated “The focus of relationality shifts analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examining their interconnections” (p. 27). Four of the veterans highlighted the interconnectedness of being both African American and males in the workplace. The participants were adamant these two identities cannot be separated because it is part of their life’s story. Education and military service had a significant level of importance to them as they tried to ensure they had the marketable skills required in the private sector, despite the stereotypes employers and society may have towards African American males.

Overall, challenges existed for African American male veterans who were new to their career field or held a leadership role in the private sector workplace. Navigating this path involved the perseverance and reminder that race does matters. As African American males, they carried the responsibility of having so much to prove while allowing their actions and performances to set the standards for others.

For the participants, to be acknowledged *as more than just veterans* was a critical component to how they were able to navigate challenges in the private sector. Based on

Collins and Blige (2016), "...people's lives and identities are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. Moreover, race, class, gender...among others, constitute interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power" (pp. 26-27). In the dissertation, being an African American, college educated, male veteran carried a competing level of honor and stress that was revealed in the study. Some of the participants discussed how employers are unaware of the internal struggle veterans encounter as they try to become engrained in the workplace environment.

In association with veteran identity strain, McAllister et al. (2015) stated "Identity strain likely affects not only the employability of veterans, but also their workplace outcomes, such as their abilities to devote energy to assigned tasks at work" (p. 93). The study findings revealed this strain can be found in veterans who have PTSD and where the word "veteran" often sparked negative assumptions on how one's military background could impact their performance in the workplace. In the dissertation, the participants referenced how veterans typically gravitate to each other in the workplace and how some are hesitant to disclose they served in the armed forces. Based on Castro et al. (2014) "Over one-third of pre- and post-9/11 veterans reported that employers think veterans are dangerous (33.4% and 35.1%, respectively). Over 40% of post-9/11 veterans reported that employers think veterans are physically broken (44.7%) ..." (p. 27). Because of this, the study findings uncovered some veterans are concerned with discussing their military service in the workplace due to the fear of being stereotyped. Nonetheless, feeling comfortable in the workplace was possible when veterans established camaraderie alongside other men to complete a "mission" or when they stepped away from the traditional work environment to embark in entrepreneurship.

Old habits never die was the last emergent theme presented in the chapter; the participants described the misunderstandings that arise when civilians are unable to understand their conversational tone, directness, and military skills. As veterans who held leadership positions, these gentlemen have a trained mindset to get to the point - provide clear instructions so there is no room for misinterpretations. However, this way of thinking was not often well received in the private sector. Additionally, the research findings showed how the freedom to wear civilian attire is filled with mixed emotions. While some veterans were excited to no longer wear their uniform, others returned to their military clothing to give them the structure they lacked in the workplace. Such stories reaffirmed the significance of having a mandatory trainings and professional developments for companies and organizations that are working with veterans, especially those who coin themselves as “veteran friendly.” By understanding the mindset of a veteran, the study findings suggested that employers can gain more insight into how they can assist with both their adjustment and possible workplace challenges.

There was a consensus that the adaptation into the private sector was based heavily on the veterans’ ability to readjust their military mindset and ways of being to meet the expectations set by private sector employers. The study also indicated the transition into the private sector was not an easy process for the majority who were intentional about diminishing the historical and societal stereotypes associated with being an African American male (Bell, 2015; Guy, 2014; Mong & Rosigno, 2019, Moss & Till, 1996; Whitaker, 2019) and a veteran (Kintzle & Castro, 2018; Klemkamp, 2009; Nagomy & Pick, 2020). Five of the eight participants remained employed in the private sector. The remaining three realized that environment was not an appropriate fit and

explored other professional opportunities beyond a traditional work setting. Because adaptation in the workplace is a crucial time for veterans, it became evident that there is a need for appropriate trainings for civilian employers who wish to recruit and retain veterans.

V. CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the experiences of African American male veterans who entered the civilian private sector after 2013, and who had worked in the civilian private sector workplace for at least six months at the time when the data were collected. Their stories provided an awareness of the different job and career paths veterans enter upon their military retirement or separation. With the participation of eight African American male veterans, the dissertation findings revealed their level of preparedness transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace, the workplace experiences adapting to the civilian private sector, the challenges they faced in their transition from Boots2Suits, and how they navigated these challenges.

This research study could benefit current service members and veterans who are in the various phases of their military to civilian transition. This last chapter includes the following sections: (1) study highlights, (2) recommendations for practice, (3) tensions and challenges, (4) future research, and (5) final thoughts.

Study Highlights

Chapter III and Chapter IV provided a detailed insight into the level of preparedness of the dissertation participants transitioning from the military into the civilian workplace and their experiences adapting to the civilian private sector. This section of the chapter presents study highlights organized by research question.

Research Question #1

How (un)prepared are African American males transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace?

The veterans' level of preparedness to do the Boots2Suits transition varied by individual case. For some, workplace success was attributed to participating in internships, job shadowing, and networking with civilian employers prior to leaving the military. Those who lacked these experiences often sought-after former service members in the private sector for advice and support. All eight dissertation participants agreed that the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) could include more topics, relevant discussions, and resources to prepare them to enter the civilian private sector workplace. For example, TAP did not always provide information about entrepreneurship and Boots 2 Business was an optional course not everyone knew about. Furthermore, making sure that they would be able to provide for their families was part of being prepared to leave the military. Collectively, the veterans strived to find civilian private sector positions that were comparable to their military income. Financial stability was an overarching concern for the veterans who had dependents. As men, the participants felt that being a financial provider is something they could not waiver and there was no limit to the sacrifices they would make for their family.

Research Question #2 Highlights

What are the workplace experiences of African American male veterans adapting to the civilian private sector?

In their adaptation process, some of the participants spoke directly on veterans' invisible and visible disabilities affecting their performance and workplace retention. They do not want special treatment in the workplace and are trying to adjust to their military-service related injuries. However, they realized some employers lack familiarity with VA appointment scheduling and the difficulties of rescheduling an appointment.

Employers who recruit veterans but are not appreciative to the training and skills they bring to the workplace was a discovery made by some of the study participants. Being labeled as a veteran friendly organization/company did not necessarily meant they understood how to effectively support veterans in the workplace. The veterans believed their suggestions and leadership should be valued. They do not seem to welcome what they have to contribute to the company, but they recruit veterans to receive the tax credit.

Research Question #3 Highlights

What challenges do they face in their transition from Boots2Suits? How do they navigate these challenges?

Being one of the few or only African American males in the civilian workplace made them stand out and put extra pressure on their performance and the way they conducted themselves in the private sector. They were always mindful of what they said and their appearance when walking in the workspace. There was a sense of responsibility to make sure to represent themselves and their racial group well.

Their military identity was at times a burden when employers and co-workers were not able to see beyond their military background. The participants were concerned about the assumptions and stereotypes about veterans that created misunderstandings and mismatch in expectations about their skills and workplace knowledge. The veterans wanted to persevere and find possible outlets to either stay on the job or create opportunities for themselves becoming a business owner.

Summary of Findings

There is a gap in the literature regarding the specific workplace experiences of African American male veterans who entered the civilian private sector. At this present

time, most of the information focuses on veterans who obtained federal, contracted general scheduled (GS) positions upon their military retirement or separation. This research study told the story of eight participants that had varied experiences in the military and civilian private sector workplace. However, the one thing that binds all of them is their completion of Transition Goal Plan Success (GPS), a redeveloped version of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). While the curriculum was designed to focus on *career readiness*, the participants collectively agreed there was relevant information missing from the course. Furthermore, despite there being a standard TAP curriculum, it was evident that not all of the military branches administered the same information.

The participants statements closely aligned with the existing literature related to a veteran's transition from the military to the civilian workplace (Community Salute, 2017; Holland et al., 2014; Wewiorski, 2018). There is a level of significance found in the military backpack, which has been historically known for holding the essentials for safety, security, and survival during a service member's training and deployment. For the research participants, the items in the backpack defined who they are and made it difficult for them to live without it. The military backpack represents the veterans' past experiences and skills that they are bringing into the private sector. The research findings extend the backpack to also identify what the veterans wish they would have known or experienced prior to leaving the military and what they took away from their time in the private sector (see Figure 23). Depending on their years of service and leadership skills, some military backpacks may feel lighter or heavier than others. Hence, it is important to make sure all veterans have the necessary tools prior to entering the civilian private

sector. In light of military transition theory, the suggestions to improve TAP were based on recommendations from the research participants.

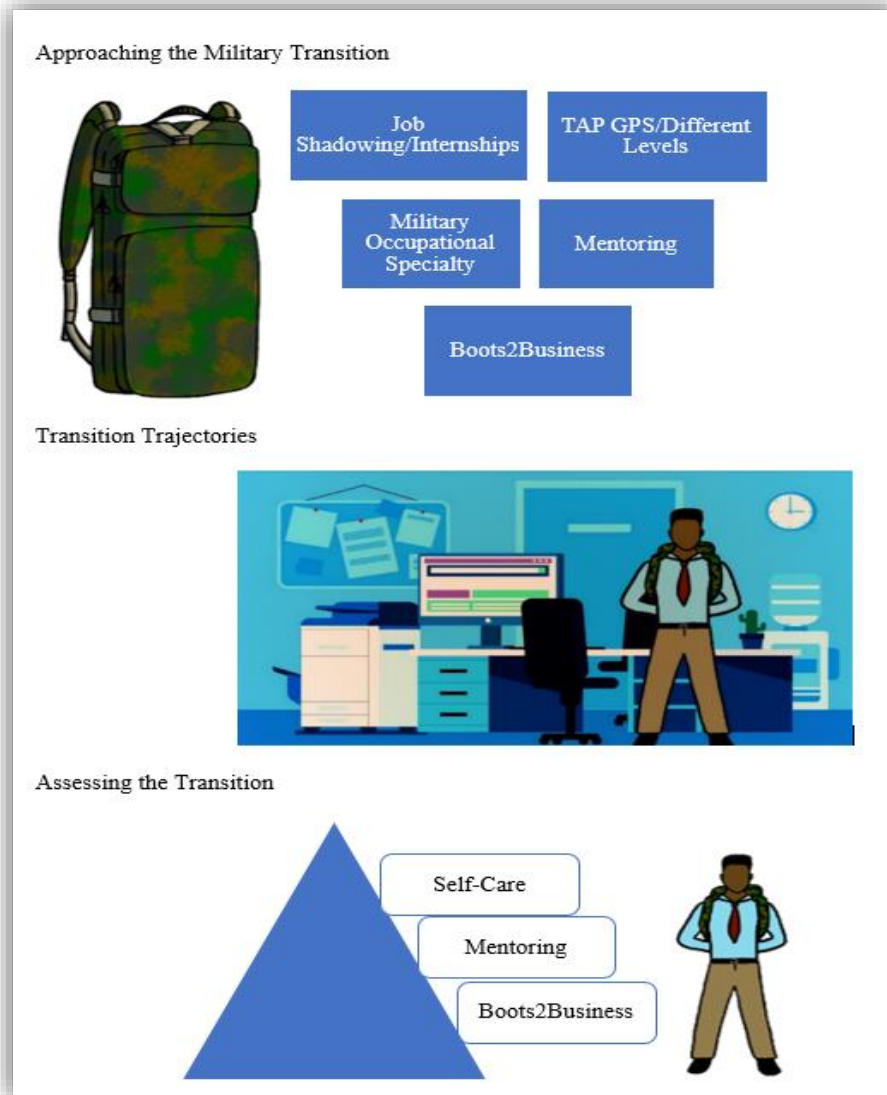


Figure 23. Segments Illustrating the Boots2Suits Transition

Image retrieved from <https://www.vecteezy.com/free-vector/office>

Military transition theory (Castro & Kintzle, 2016; Kintzle & Castro, 2018; Stern, 2017) identifies the three segments in a veteran's military to civilian transition: (1) approaching the military transition, (2) transition trajectory, and (3) assessing the transition. Intersectionality theory (Collins & Blige, 2016) acknowledges how race,

gender, education, and military service impact veterans' workplace performance in the private sector. For Figure 23, segment one, approaching the military transition, requires adding the following topics to the TAP curriculum: participating in private sector job shadowing and internship opportunities while in service, developing course tracks based on years of service and leadership skills, providing clarification on how a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) connects with private sector positions, inviting guest speakers willing to serve as mentors and teaching veterans how to request or find a mentor, and shifting the Boots 2 Business entrepreneurial course from optional to mandatory. By making these adjustments to the TAP curriculum, the stressors associated with being both an African American male and a veteran in the private sector could be lessened.

In segment two, transition trajectories, African American male veterans aim to enter the private sector with a clear understanding of workplace expectations and how they can be engrained in the culture. This is a common standard that occurs when veterans transition from unit to unit, base to base throughout their military career. An African American male veteran's workplace experiences can be broken or enriched by how he is welcomed and treated and how an employer utilizes the military skills and training he individually possesses. Based on the dissertation findings, the intersections of being an African American, educated, male veteran is not enough. The veterans believed that they are held to a higher standard and must work twice as hard to gain approval and avoid being fired in the private sector.

Segment three, assessing the transition, is based on the veterans' experience working in the private sector. Thus, selfcare, mentoring, and Boots 2 Business were

identified as the three most important aspects that the veterans needed to be mindful of. Their company or organization can shape their decision on whether they should remain in the private sector or pursue other opportunities, especially if the position negatively impacts their health. Based on this work, African American male veterans have a vested interest in their health and well-being. They are monitoring self-care by spending time with family and friends and accessing services through the VA. While working in the private sector, mentoring becomes an essential piece in helping African American male veterans establish their political skills and learn the *unspoken spoken* needed for workplace success. Mentoring also becomes a necessity for veterans who wish to give further attention to becoming entrepreneurs. With the support of mentors, veterans can learn not only how to run a business, but how to gather the financial assistance to support their dreams. The United States Armed Forces and private sector employers need to be abreast of what makes African American male veterans unique from others and what they often consider when walking into new work environments.

Recommendations for Practice

After presenting the study highlights, it is possible to identify some recommendations for practice that can be shared with military personnel and the civilian private sector employers. It is important for these stakeholders to be cognizant of what Boots2Suits looks like upon a military retirement or separation.

Military Personnel

- The TAP information should be accessible to veterans after their military retirement or separation. This will give former service members more time to engage with the course content, have access to resource materials, and seek

additional assistance in the job search process.

- Every military branch should have access to the same TAP curriculum and Boots 2 Business should become a mandatory topic.
- Veterans should have an opportunity to partner with former service members who are currently in their career field of interest.
- TAP curriculum should undergo a thorough review to assess its effectiveness. By doing so, the military can develop or remove topics that were introduced with the original curriculum.

Civilian Private Sector Employers

- Employers should participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion training that specifically addresses the needs of veterans who are transitioning into the civilian workplace.
- Because of the political climate surrounding the discrimination faced by African Americans, private sector employers should have a better understanding of how to offer support to their colleagues.
- Workplace environments should have counseling, mental health, self-care, and advocacy resources easily available for veterans to access online or in-person. For those veterans who are hesitant to ask for help, this can serve as a good faith effort to meet them where they are.
- Employers need to be clear about their purpose for wanting to hire veterans. Because each veteran's rank exposed them to specific trainings and skillsets, it is important they be treated and supported individually.

Tensions and Challenges

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participant recruitment had to be completed virtually through Facebook, LinkedIn, student veteran list serves, National Panhellenic Council alumni list serves (Alpha Phi Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Phi Beta Sigma), and referrals. With the original intent of being able to recruit African American male veterans at barbershops, graduate fraternity houses, churches, and Veterans of Foreign War posts, the pandemic made it impossible, and plans had to be reassessed. Because of the pandemic, I was unable to conduct the conversational interviews face-to-face. To ensure safety and follow the COVID-19 protocols outlined by the Texas State University IRB, all interviews were conducted via videoconference. As the participants were balancing family and work obligations, the online environment provided an opportunity for the interviews to take place during days and times that were conducive with their schedules.

Although social media has been viewed as a popular medium for connection and outreach, I strongly believe there are individuals who may not use it on a consistent base or at all. Therefore, if the COVID-19 pandemic did not exist, I would have envisioned recruiting a higher number of participants for this study. Likewise, face-to-face conversations with potential participants would have created more interest in taking part in the study.

I think it is also important to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in companies, businesses, and organizations transitioning their employees from an in-person to a virtual work environment. Because of this, I often wondered if potential participants were concerned about sharing their personal experiences while being in proximity with

their family members. Finally, I would be remiss if I were not cognizant of the virtual fatigue that exists when individuals are required to be online on a consistent basis. Because the study required two one-hour videoconference interviews, this may have been displeasing for the veterans who wanted to disconnect from the online environment.

Future Research

It is my hope that this research will evolve and take a closer look into the lived experiences of African American female veterans who transitioned into the civilian private sector workplace. Since the inception of this research study, I consistently received the question, “*What about the ladies?*” This one question leads me to believe African American female veterans want to ensure their voices are also being heard. The military to civilian transition can be a huge shift and each experience will vary per veteran.

According to Greer (2020), “In 2019, there were 18.8 million military veterans in the United States and about 10% of all veterans were women” (p. 153). The transition preparedness, workplace experiences, and transition challenges were the main areas that I studied for the dissertation, and I am now wondering about other topics that could arise from documenting the experience of African American female veterans, a minority group in the United States Armed Forces. Because there is limited literature related to this subject, this is a topic worth examining. Hirudayari and Clay (2019) set the stage as their work specifically focused on women veterans in the private sector. However, the reintegration of the African American female veteran into civilian life and the workplace also needs to be studied.

In addition, throughout the dissertation journey, it was surprising to see the multitude of research that places all veterans into one category as opposed to focusing on the individual circumstances that make them unique. Once they retire or separate from the military, it is time for the veterans to live their individual experiences.

Moving forward, developers of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum, military personnel, veteran-friendly employers, human resource directors, scholars, and researchers should make an intentional effort to assess the Boots2Suits similarities and differences which can exist between African American male and female veterans.

Another idea for future research would be to design a study focusing on employers who have African American male veterans in their companies/organizations. Such study will document their perspectives about hiring and retaining this population and what is being done to ensure their success in the civilian private sector workplace.

Final Thoughts

Throughout this research journey, I was able to answer the questions I was once hesitant to ask while also taking a glimpse into a world I often wanted to learn so much about. As an administrator and educator, I heard from African American male veterans that they were experiencing difficulties in the workplace, specifically in the private sector, and I needed to learn more.

Through this study, I realized that gaining a federal, contracted general schedule (GS) employee position is highly promoted and encouraged in military communities, yet it can be difficult to obtain. Therefore, military transition programs have to ensure veterans are prepared to work in a variety of blue- and white-collar private sector areas.

For many of these veterans, entering the private sector involves embarking on a second career with different languages, norms, and expectations. It is important for the United States Armed Forces to understand that veterans would value that same level commitment built into making them great service members is also placed into helping them become successful civilians. Similarly, if they have a vested interest in diversifying the workforce, it is important for employers to be aware that African American male veterans come with different and unique perspectives and skill sets.

After reviewing my research journal and listening to the participants discuss their workplace experiences, there were moments when I felt concerned, enlightened, surprised, and proud. The pride ranged from hearing how as African Americans, these men were able to turn difficult situations into teachable moments or how a complete separation from their military life is exactly what they needed to rediscover themselves outside of the uniform. I am hoping this dissertation will remind civilian employers that not all veterans are the same and depending on when they left the military, there is a variation in was included in their TAP curriculum.

I cannot thank the eight participants enough for allowing me to see the impact race, gender, education, and military service has had on how they walk into the private sector (despite historical and societal racism) and the legacy they wish to leave for those to follow. As the daughter of a veteran, I never had the opportunity to ask my father about what life was like upon his return from the Korean War. As the wife of a Marine Corps and Air Force veteran, I have heard and saw the first-hand joys and frustrations of my husband returning to college as an adult learner and embarking on a career in the private sector. All I can say is, *Good and faithful servant, job well done.*

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Active Duty

A commitment to full-time active duty and training duty in the United States military (DoD, 2019).

Andragogy

The art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1984, p. 6).

African American

“A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (Minority Veterans Report, 2017, p. 22) who resides in America. Born of black African descent, African Americans can be referred to as Afro American, African American, Black, or Black American. Furthermore, according to the US Census (2020), Black or African American is “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as ‘Haitian’ or ‘Negro’ can be used in addition to ‘Black’ or ‘African American.’”

Boots2Suits

A balance of two worlds; veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workplace.

Commissioned Officer

A service member who has earned a college degree and is awarded the authority to supervise officers and enlisted service members.

Enlisted Service Member

An individual who signs a contract to serve within the United States Armed Forces. Enlisted service members are required to complete Basic Combat Training (BCT) and attend Advanced Individual Training (ATI) to obtain the skills they need for their workplace positions within the military. Enlisted are ranked E1 to E9.

Intersectionality Theory

“...those employing intersectional analysis strives to distinguish how individuals engage in environments based on multiple identities” (Griffin & Reddick, 2011, p. 1034).

Involuntary Separation

A service member leaves the military due to “failure to achieve promotion, family or health issues, or for disciplinary reasons” (Guerra, 2019).

Males

Individuals who were assigned as “male” at birth.

Military Transition Theory

The multiple phases military service members go through as they prepare for their separation or retirement from the United States Armed Forces.

Race

The assumption “that individuals can be divided into groups based on phenotype or genotype and that those groups have meaningful differences” (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ry, Buckelew, & Hodge, 2010, p. 440).

Retired

Service members who served a minimum of 20 years in the United States Armed Forces.

Separated

Service members who voluntarily left the United States Armed Forces and has completed their Expiration of Term of Service (ETS). The service member has no additional obligation to their military unit or branch.

The United States Armed Forces

A term to describe the collective United States military forces - Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard (DoD, 2019).

Veteran

Based on 38 U.S. Code § 101, “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air force, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable” (Cornell Law School, 1992).

Voluntary Separation

A service member leaves their military branch if the employment contract ends, or there is no longer a high demand for the trained position (Guerra, 2019).

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Research Participation Invitation

Boots2Suits: African American Males Transitioning from the Military into the Civilian Private Sector Workplace



Purpose:

This research study aims to document the experiences of African American male veterans working in the civilian private sector. Therefore, you will be asked questions regarding your experiences transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace.

Participation:

Participation is voluntary. In order to participate, you must

- Complete a 40-minute online questionnaire. You will receive a link via email.
- Participate in two 60-minute interviews via Zoom.

Requirements:

- Be 25 or older
- Have served in one or more of the U.S. military branches
- Have completed the Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS/TAP) course after 2013
- Have worked in at least one civilian private sector workplace for at least six months after military discharge

Compensation:

A one-time \$20 (electronic) gift card at the completion of the second interview.

Contact Information:

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact Malikah Pitts Harvey at mvp30@txstate.edu.

This project 7249 was approved by the Texas State IRB on May 26, 2020. Pertinent questions concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351- dgobert@tlu.edu; or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 – meg201@txstate.edu.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Boots2Suits: African American Males Transitioning from the Military into the Civilian Private Sector Workplace

Principal Investigator: Malikah P. Harvey
Email: mvp30@txstate.edu

Faculty Advisor: Clarena Larrotta
Email: CL24@txstate.edu

This consent form will explain why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may experience while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to share your experiences of transitioning from the military into the civilian private-sector workplace. The information gathered will be used as research data in a doctoral dissertation. You are being asked to participate because you are an African American male veteran who has rich knowledge on the subject.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be expected to participate in the following activities:

- Complete a 40-minute online questionnaire. You will receive a link via email.
- Participate in two 60-minute interviews via Zoom. These interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes only. They will be conducted via Zoom to observe the social distancing measures in place due to COVID-19.
- Bring and discuss three artifacts to the second interview. Artifacts are objects such as photographs, clothing, awards, and memorabilia related to their military to civilian workplace transition.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There is minimal risk in participating in this study. All the questions and activities related to your experience transitioning into the civilian private sector workplace that you decide what to share. If any of the interview questions make you uncomfortable, you are always free to decline to answer the question, take a break, or stop your participation in the study at any time without consequences. Should you experience any emotional discomfort after participating, we advise you to contact the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital (7400 Merton Miner Street, San Antonio, TX. 78229) main switchboard number at 210-617-5300 to speak with a counselor.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES: Study findings will improve our understanding of how

(un)prepared African Americans males are when transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace, the workplace experiences of African American male veterans adapting to the civilian private sector, the challenges they face in their transition from Boots2Suits, and how they navigate these challenges.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

Participants will receive a \$20 (electronic) gift card at the end of the second interview. Participants must participate in all of the following activities to receive compensation:

- Complete a 40-minute online questionnaire.
- Participate in two 60-minute interviews via Zoom.
- Bring and discuss three artifacts to the second interview.

There is no prorated compensation if a participant withdraws early from the study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequences of any kind.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about your participation in this study, you may contact the principal investigator or faculty advisor shown at the beginning of this document.

This project 7249 was approved by the Texas State IRB on May 26, 2020. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and have decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out the Online Questionnaire for Study Participants.

If you consent to participate, please complete the Online Questionnaire for Study Participants.

APPENDIX D

QUALTRICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking a few moments to participate in this questionnaire concerning your experience transitioning from the military into the civilian private sector workplace.

This questionnaire will take approximately 40 minutes to complete. Please try to answer all of the questions; however, if there any items that make you feel uncomfortable or you prefer to skip, please leave the answer blank.

This project IRB#7249 was approved by the Texas State IRB on May 26, 2020. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research related-injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 (dgobert@tlu.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 (meg201@txstate.edu).

If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out the questionnaire.

If you consent to participate, please complete the questionnaire.

Please click here to indicate that you have read the statement above, understand it, and are ready to proceed with the questionnaire.

Please click here to decline to participate.

Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. Please check the options that apply to you:
 - a. Marine Corps
 - b. Army, Navy
 - c. Coast Guard
 - d. Air Force
 - e. Involuntarily Separated
 - f. Voluntarily Separated
 - g. Retired
 - h. Other:
2. When did you serve in the United States Armed Forces?
3. How old were you when you joined the military?

4. What type of support did you use to look for employment before retiring or separating from the military (e.g., search engines, referrals, job fairs, etc.)?
5. Before leaving the military, describe your experience attending the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS).
6. What did you find useful about the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS)?
7. What led you to work in the civilian private sector workplace?
8. Explain how a civilian private sector position differs from a military enlisted personnel position (e.g., structure, uniform, job expectations, location, etc.)
9. In your current job, what type of duties do you perform?
10. How different is your present job compared to what you did in your previous military personnel position?

APPENDIX E

SAMPLE CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview I: Questions for Study Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview! This interview focuses on your experiences of transitioning from the military into the civilian-private sector workplace.

This interview will be audio recorded. I will ask you a series of questions, please try to answer them to the best of your ability. However, if there any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or you prefer to skip, please let me know. I will ask you the following question instead.

Do you agree to participate in this audio recording?

Are you ready to start?

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your military background.
2. Looking back on the moments leading to your military separation or retirement, how un(prepared) did you feel you were for your military to civilian workplace transition?
3. What did you consider when making the transition from the military to the civilian workplace?
4. How did your military branch or unit assist you with your transition into the *civilian workplace*?
5. In what ways was the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) effective?
6. What should Transition Goals Plans Success (GPS) being doing different?
7. Please describe what led you to pursue employment opportunities within the civilian private workplace.
8. Some people would say that employers should be aware that the transition from the military into the civilian workplace is an entirely new experience for veterans. Share your thoughts on this statement.
9. In the online questionnaire, you mentioned X, can you please elaborate on that? (Note: This question will be formulated based on the participant's responses).

10. Is there a topic or experience related to your transition from the military into the civilian private sector workplace that you would like to share with me at this point and that I did not ask you about?

Thank you for your time. For the next interview, please bring three artifacts (objects such as photographs, clothing, awards, and memorabilia) related to your military to civilian workplace transition.

Interview II: Questions for Study Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview! This interview focuses on your experiences of transitioning from the military into the civilian private sector workplace.

This interview will be audio recorded. I will ask you a series of questions, please try to answer them to the best of your ability. However, if there are any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or you prefer to skip, please let me know. I will ask you the following question instead.

Do you agree to participate in this audio recording?

Are you ready to start?

1. Please tell me about the artifacts you selected for this second interview. How do they relate to your transition experience into the civilian workplace sector?
2. Identify the skills or training you obtained in the military that have made you successful in the private sector.
3. What type of professional development or training did you receive from your *employer*?
4. What type of professional development or training did you receive from your *colleagues or team members*?
5. Please share any experiences you consider appropriate from your military service that you believe have impacted your transition working in the civilian workplace sector.
6. Are you finding professional development as an on-going process or one-time initiative in your workplace?
7. How has being a *veteran* influenced your transition from the military into the civilian workplace?
8. How has being an *African American* influenced your transition from the military into the civilian workplace?

9. How has being a *male* influenced your transition from the military into the civilian workplace?
10. Before the interview ends, how would you define Boots2Suits?
11. Please share any information you consider relevant and that you believe have impacted your experiences working in the civilian private workplace sector.

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