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Transition Barriers of U.S. Military Veterans With Combat Occupations

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Carole A. Thomas

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my fellow veterans and service members. I dedicate this

dissertation to my family, my ancestors, and those who follow. We are more than ourselves.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the faculty at Abilene Christian University for seeing the potential in me and pushing me to see it as well. I would like to acknowledge my original chair, Dr. Jesse Richter, for guiding me and giving me wake-up calls when I needed them. I pray that all is well with you. I want to acknowledge Dr. Wade Fish for stepping up when Dr. Richter was unable to continue. I appreciate the constructive feedback, and I thank you sincerely. I also want to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Williams and Dr. Lumpe. I truly appreciate you.

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I want to acknowledge my participants for being willing to tell their stories. I appreciate your honesty and your truths. I acknowledge all service members and veterans. I am your veteran sister.

I acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Abstract

Many combat-occupation veterans experience difficulty translating their military occupation to a civilian occupation after they leave the military. Veterans may struggle with military culture, self-leadership, health concerns, stereotypes, and employment barriers such as disability and underemployment. In this qualitative descriptive research study, the researcher analyzed the transition barriers U.S. combat-occupation veterans experienced when entering the civilian sector and workforce. The researcher interviewed six participants via Zoom using semistructured interview questions. All participants met the criteria of being 18–29 years old, being a veteran with a combat occupation, and having a willingness to tell their transition experiences. Five of the six participants knew they were leaving the military in advance, but none felt they were prepared for their transition. Participants felt they were still transitioning, though some had been out of the military for several years. Findings showed that veterans are often underprepared for transition, transition is difficult, leaders must allow service members to prepare for transition, a support system is key, and self-leadership is a catalyst for successful transition. Government agencies that work with and for the U.S. military can create specific programs and practices for transitioning service members with combat occupations to create a successful transition into the civilian workforce.

Keywords: qualitative descriptive, combat-occupation veteran, transition, self-leadership

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many U.S. military veterans are leaving the military due to retirement, medical disability, inability to reenlist, or completed enlistment obligation (Guina, 2018; Pinter, 2015). Regardless of the reasons, this transition can be challenging as reintegrating into the civilian sector is vastly different from serving in the military. Schlossberg (2011) described transition as "events or nonevents, anticipated or unanticipated," that "alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159), such that these changes happen simultaneously. The transition for veterans can encompass personal, social, familial, financial, and administrative levels (Grimell, 2017). In addition, "transitions can impact lives in two quite different ways: They can change the way that people live, or they can change how people feel or what they believe" (Svob et al., 2014, p. 449). Added to this, transitioning veterans are required to create a new identity outside of the military (Grimell, 2017).

Studies show that most soldiers serving in combat occupations have little or no formal education beyond high school (Bullock et al., 2009; Miles, 2014; Pease et al., 2015). This lack of formal education or occupational training limits veterans' ability to find employment with equivalent military pay and benefits. Along with limited job opportunities, this may hinder veterans entering the civilian workforce. In this study, I examined the transition readiness and barriers of U.S. military veterans entering the civilian workforce. I used the self-leadership attributes of behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought strategies (Manz, 2015; Mendoza, 2017) as guidelines to determine level of transition readiness. Veterans are exposed to self-leadership attributes throughout their military career: "The United States Military has used self-leadership strategies to build soldiers' directedness and self-discipline" (Neck & Manz, 1999, as cited in Bailey et al., 2018, p. 149).

In addition, this study focused on U.S. military veterans who had previously served in combat occupations. Emphasis was placed on military veterans aged 18–29, as records indicate this population experiences higher unemployment rates than veterans aged 25–64 (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2018a). Bartholomew et al. (2017) emphasized how some military veterans experience ongoing traumatization, and the unique nature of these experiences warrants individualized attention. Some have responded emotionally when their valued identities (soldier, sailor, airman, marine, coastie) or central group memberships are lost and are an integral part of the self (Jetten et al., 2014). Van Doeselaar et al. (2018) considered young adulthood to be ages 18–24, a period when "the formation of a stable identity, consisting of a strong set of commitments, is a key developmental task" (p. 950). This self-identity is associated with positive well-being (van Doeselaar et al., 2018). Therefore, the loss of identity during this time can positively or negatively affect the population of combat-occupation veterans aged 18–29.

Often, veterans transition to civilian occupations similar to the military occupations they held while serving in the military. However, there is limited need for combat-occupation veterans in the civilian sector unless employers require specific skills possessed by this group. A combat-occupation veteran is one who engages the enemy directly during military conflict (BLS, 2015). These veterans have served in specialties such as air defense artillery, armor, combat engineering, field artillery, or infantry (USMilitary.com, n.d.). Skills required to serve in this role include ground combat, air assault, weaponry, and ability to engage the enemy with or without weaponry (USMilitary.com, n.d.). Because of challenges with obtaining employment, veterans of combat occupations often believe they do not possess the necessary skills to provide for themselves and their families in the civilian workforce (McAllister et al., 2015).

Researchers such as Holmström (2013), Sayer et al. (2014), and Schreger and Kimble (2017), have examined combat veteran transitions into the civilian sector. For this study, I conducted several EBSCO searches using the keywords *veteran transition*, *combat-occupation veterans*, *combat-occupation veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce*, and *jobs for combat-occupation veterans*, which garnered 583 articles. By narrowing the search to academic scholarly journals and veterans and by selecting the time frame 2014–2019, I reduced the number of articles returned to 36. No research specifically addressed combat arms veterans' transition. The gap in literature regarding combat-occupation military veterans and their transition into the civilian workforce is distinct because researchers combine combat-occupation veterans with other combat veterans when conducting research (Bullock et al., 2009; Holmström, 2013; MacLean, 2017; McAllister et al., 2015; Miles, 2014; Sayer et al., 2014). A combat veteran refers to any veteran who has served "in a military designated dangerous region" (Jinkerson & Battles, 2019, p. 34). Thus, literature addressing combat-occupation veterans' transition is unavailable.

Background

The following sections discuss aspects of the military environment that factor into potential transition barriers for U.S. military combat-occupation veterans. Benefits of the military are discussed first to ensure understanding of the transition obstacles faced once combat-occupation veterans are no longer soldiers. Military punitive measures are discussed to explain how discipline is ingrained in military culture. Next, military culture is compared and contrasted with other cultures. Financial stability is addressed to explore key points in the military that are not present in the civilian workforce. Finally, education is addressed as a possible obstacle to transition to the civilian workforce.

Military Benefits

The benefits afforded to active-duty military members are numerous. The U.S. military provides soldiers with basic pay upon reporting for duty. Soldiers with families are granted additional funds, such as the Basic Allowance for Housing (FederalPay.org, 2018), to provide for dependents. In addition, upon assignment to permanent-duty stations, soldiers receive appropriate housing to accommodate their growing family (FederalPay.org, 2018; U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), while single soldiers are housed in barracks (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Soldiers living in barracks, installation housing, or dwellings not on the installation, receive meals, uniforms, legal assistance, and health benefits as part of their contract of enlistment or commission. Hill (2015) posited, "Militaries are societies unto themselves, with their own sociology, history, values and beliefs" (p. 86). These societies apply to all aspects of life, be it legal help, substance or alcohol use, mental health, or childcare. All these services are provided as part of the soldier's enlistment (Snowden et al., 2017), so the loss of these benefits may contribute to the challenges transitioning soldiers and veterans experience.

Military Punitive Measures

Another aspect of military life includes punitive actions taken against soldiers. For example, soldiers who do not consistently report for duty at assigned times will be counseled initially. If supervisors believe further action is warranted based on continued absenteeism or tardiness, soldiers will be penalized by receiving a reduction in pay or rank. Another example involves exhibiting conduct unbecoming of a soldier. USlegal.com (n.d.) defined conduct unbecoming as "conduct on the part of a . . . professional that is contrary to public interests, or which harms his/her standing of the profession in the eyes of the public" (para. 1). This type of behavior can include becoming involved with law enforcement by committing the following

violations: (a) drunk and disorderly conduct, (b) theft, or (c) domestic violence. This behavior could result in a loss of rank, which means demotion to a subordinate or equal position to people the soldier may have previously supervised. Veterans who are released from the military as a punitive measure may not be entitled to veteran benefits (Snowden et al., 2017). Therefore, they may have more difficulty transitioning than veterans who transition traditionally (Barr et al., 2018).

Military Culture

According to military culture, everyone serving commits to the mission regardless of their intrapersonal feelings (Cole, 2014). The mission can be as simple as cleaning equipment or as complex as preparing for deployment. Soldiers believe their fellow soldiers will support them and will be there for them (Rose et al., 2017). By contrast, individuals in the civilian workforce tend to be more self-serving (Hall & Yip, 2016). This adjustment may be difficult for veterans who are accustomed to military culture. Moreover, separation of work life and home life may hinder reintegration to civilian life because soldiers are accustomed to having leadership involved in all aspects of their lives. For instance, when soldiers are assigned duty stations, supervisors normally show them how the team operates. They also assist soldiers in other areas of professional and personal growth, barriers, and circumstances. Upon leaving the military, loss of accountability could be a barrier to transition (Snowden et al., 2017). Boafo-Arthur et al. (2017) stated, "We fail to thrive in environments that make us feel rejected and alone" (p. 1068). Thus, accountability and shared culture can assist with major life changes.

Military Leadership

Military leaders use various leadership styles including transformational, charismatic, pragmatic, individualized, and shared (Laurence, 2011). In addition, noncommissioned officers

(NCOs) ranked E4 or above receive extensive formal leadership training, while lower-ranked soldiers receive less. Noncommissioned officers in the U.S. Army are ranked E4 to E9 (Luther, 2018). Senior NCOs are ranked E7 to E9, with the Sergeant Major of the Army being ranked E9S (Luther, 2018). Understandably, military leadership is recognized as an example of successful leadership (Laurence, 2011). When soldiers are promoted to the rank of E5 in the U.S. military, they must demonstrate leadership qualities during their promotion board. Some qualities (e.g., competence, self-confidence, motivation, and accountability) associated with self-leadership are included in the questioning of promotion candidates (Roberts, 2018). These leaders demonstrate leadership qualities to soldiers. The demonstration of these qualities to enlisted soldiers may assist in the development or improvement of self-leadership, which could be beneficial for military veterans who have previously served in combat occupations as they seek employment upon reentry into civilian life.

Georgianna (2007) explained self-leadership as "a process in which people direct and motivate themselves to behave and perform in a desired way" (p. 570). In addition, Markham and Markham (1995, as cited in Georgianna, 2007) described self-leadership as engagement with the how, what, and why of completing tasks. Self-leadership incorporates self-regulation, self-management (Teguh & Tentri, 2019), self-determination, and self-motivation. The components of self-leadership have been instrumental in strengthening performance at work, in clinical environments, in athletic abilities, and in learning (Manz, 2015; Williams, 1997; Zapalska et al., 2015). Self-leadership among military veterans is ideal for transition when understood and practiced in accordance with goals of integrating into the civilian workforce.

Financial Stability

Another area of concern for transitioning combat veterans is financial stability. Financially, transitioning veterans must pay for services the military previously provided. This includes housing, utilities, and food (Holmström, 2013). Veterans may have to pay taxes or incur expenses they did not have to pay as service members. As such, an ill-prepared veteran with significant financial expenses may suffer during transition. At the same time, approximately 11% of veterans find themselves homeless (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2017) estimated that 39,000 veterans are homeless. The causes of homelessness vary depending on the nature of discharge and medical conditions. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), lack of family support, and perceived lack of necessary skills are common factors contributing to veteran homelessness (Bullock et al., 2009). Other veterans may stay with family or friends (Ahern et al., 2015).

Education Among Soldiers and Veterans

Additional focused training is provided to enable soldiers to ceaselessly defend the United States. However, readiness activities, combat unit preparation for war (Dickstein, 2017), and lack of time or direction may contribute to soldiers not seeking formal education or training to prepare for their reentry to the civilian workforce (Bullock et al., 2009). Added to this, BLS (2018a) stated 6% of veterans between the ages of 18 and 54 are enrolled in school. Providing formal education and professional training for veterans of combat occupations may decrease unemployment numbers. Of the 26 combat occupations in the U.S. Army, 21 are available for enlisted personnel, one for reservist personnel, and the remaining four for officers. Other options for participants include obtaining technical training or schooling, often referred to as short-term

training or school (CareerOneStop, 2019). These options are usually completed within 2 years (CareerOneStop, 2019).

Social learning theory involves the interaction between the environment, personal factors, and individual behavior (Corey, 2013, as cited in Boafo-Arthur et al., 2017). This interaction is assimilated with the concept of self-leadership. Georgianna (2007) defined self-leadership as directing and motivating the self to act and behave in certain ways. Some attributes of self-leadership include "behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies" (Mendoza, 2017, p. 75). The recognition and use of these strategies may impact transition obstacles of combat-occupation veterans.

Statement of the Problem

BLS (2018a) reported the current unemployment rate for veterans leaving the military was 4%, and the unemployment rate for post–9/11 veterans was 5%. Veterans in the 18–24 age cohort (more than 11% of the overall group) had an unemployment rate of 10% (BLS, 2018a). The problem under investigation was transition readiness and barriers for this cohort because the transition time for these veterans may be longer than for other transitioning veterans. Combat-occupation veterans could account for much of the unemployed veteran population as well. Further, employers have mentioned veterans' inability to verbalize their skills and qualifications as barriers to employment (Redmond et al., 2015).

The disconnect associated with leaving the military could also impact integration into the civilian sector. Ahern et al. (2015) posited, "Service members experienced repeated disruption of connections with family members and friends" (p. 2). Ahern et al. also iterated the long-term impact of health problems is reason enough for assistance in transition to the civilian workforce, while Drebing et al. (2018) posited that many veterans are at a higher risk of reduced social

support due to medical and/or mental health problems. Praharso et al. (2017) found that "life transitions are linked to the development of psychological distress and clinically significant major depressive disorders" and that "life transitions strongly predict the onset of first and subsequent episodes of depression" (p. 265). Furthermore, Hanna et al. (2018) posited, "Transitions from one relatively stable state to another are proposed to be stressful, requiring adaptation, with the potential to impact health" (p. 203).

Many combat-occupation veterans experience difficulty translating their military occupation to a civilian occupation, as reflected in the double-digit unemployment rates for veterans between the ages of 18 and 24. Other barriers include stereotypes, employer perceptions, self-leadership attributes, and military culture. For example, Ahern et al. (2015) found that "differences between military and civilian culture have increased over the past century" (p. 9).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceived their transition readiness and barriers to entering the civilian workforce. For the purposes of this study, U.S. military combat-occupation veterans' level of transition readiness was measured according to how they used the self-leadership attributes of behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought strategies (Manz, 2015; Mendoza, 2017). This study focused on U.S. military veterans who had previously served in combat occupations. Emphasis was placed on military veterans aged 18–29, as records indicate this population experiences higher unemployment rates than veterans aged 25–64 (BLS, 2018a). This research provides a useful perspective to consider when revising transition processes for military personnel.

Participants were males between the ages of 18 and 29. This was a qualitative descriptive study with eight participants recruited from LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and snowball sampling venues. Social media groups that cater to combat-occupation veterans were used with institutional review board (IRB) and group administrator approvals. A qualitative study allowed for veterans' voices to be used and their points of view to be studied. I am a veteran, and this positionality allowed me to delve deeply into the phenomenon of the combat-occupation veteran's transition. It also connected me to the veterans and allowed for building quickly. I conducted screening questions using SurveyMonkey before selecting participants to eliminate any conflicts of interest. In order to reduce bias and keep participants' confidentiality, those who had participated in a Department of Labor employment workshop that I had facilitated were ineligible for participation. The representative participants were veterans occupying combat occupations who did not serve in law enforcement or security positions.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive their transition readiness levels when entering the civilian workforce?

RQ2: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive barriers that they encounter when entering the civilian workforce?

Definitions of Key Terms

Behavior-focused strategies. Behavior-focused strategies increase self-awareness for management of behaviors (Mendoza, 2017).

Combat-occupation veteran. A combat-occupation veteran is a veteran whose occupation was specifically to engage the enemy utilizing ground, air, or sea combat with or without weapons (USMilitary.com, n.d.).

Combat veteran. A combat veteran is a veteran who has served in any capacity during a conflict with the enemy (Charlie Company, 2013).

Constructive thought pattern strategies. Constructive thought pattern strategies involve the management of cognitive processes (Mendoza, 2017).

Enlisted soldier. An enlisted soldier is an individual who carries out orders and completes missions assigned by commissioned officers (U.S. Army, n.d.).

Installation. An installation is a base, camp, post, station, yard, center, or other military activity (Military Construction Codification Act of 1982, 10 U.S.C. § 2801, 2008).

Natural reward strategies. Under a natural reward strategy, a person is rewarded by working the task or activity (Mendoza, 2017).

Self-leadership. Through self-leadership, an individual self-directs and self-motivates to behave or act in a particular way (Mendoza, 2017).

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the research problem and described the issues related to military combat-occupation veterans' readiness and transition barriers upon reentry to the civilian workforce. In addition, I identified the purpose of the study, research problem, and research questions. This chapter included relevant terms that are used throughout the study. Information introducing the methodology was included as well. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth discussion of the literature regarding military combat-occupation veterans' transition into the civilian sector, military culture, health concerns, stereotypes, self-leadership, and occupational choices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review addressed the research on potential barriers that combat-occupation veterans encounter upon entering the civilian workforce, including military culture, health concerns, stereotypes, and occupational choices. Various U.S. military veterans leave the military as a result of retirement, medical disability, inability to reenlist, or completed enlistment obligation (Guina, 2018; Pinter, 2015). Often, transitioning into the civilian sector can be challenging as it is very different from life in the military. Combat occupations do not easily translate to the civilian sector unless veterans are entering law enforcement or security.

Search Procedures

While gathering articles for this literature review, I used the library at Abilene Christian University. Specifically, I accessed EBSCO, CINAHL Complete, Abilene Consortium Catalog, Academic Search Complete, MEDLINE, Military & Government Collection, ERIC, PsycArticles, and PsycInfo. Words I searched included *army veterans*, *combat arms veterans*, *military culture*, *health concerns*, *veteran transition*, *employment barriers*, and *stereotypes*. The relevant articles totaled 147, with many spanning more than one subject.

I identified the most-researched topics regarding barriers experienced while transitioning to the civilian sector from military life. The topics included military culture, self-leadership, health concerns, stereotypes, and employment barriers.

Military Culture

The U.S. armed forces include the army, navy, marines, air force, coast guard, reservists, and national guard. Hill (2015) declared, "Militaries are societies unto themselves, with their own sociology, history, values and beliefs. Military culture is built on these principles of shared history and values" (p. 86). Military culture begins on the first day of military service and is

intertwined throughout all aspects of military life (Redmond et al., 2015). In addition, members of the military who choose to make the military a career experience its unique career culture. According to Hall and Yip (2016), "Career culture is a distinct aspect of a broader organizational culture that represents beliefs and practices that prescribe what is valued for career success in the organization" (p. 174). Similarly, Redmond et al. (2015) noted, "Career culture is a powerful source and transmitter of social information, shaping individual career motivations, decisions, and behaviors" (p. 14).

Military culture works this way as well. Members become aware of norms, beliefs, and assumptions by observing the pride taken in wearing the uniform and being promoted for adhering to these cultural aspects. Redmond et al. (2015) explained the assimilation culture that military cadets embrace at West Point and then implement as they lead military units. Entry into basic training involves assimilation practices such as the teaching of new norms. Therefore, expectations are understood, and the bonds between leaders (E5s and higher-ranked personnel and enlisted) are strengthened. The enlisted are praised for knowing and adhering to military culture, and they are corrected when their behavior is not acceptable by military standards (Redmond et al., 2015). Therefore, entering civilian culture can be difficult for veterans. Tran et al. (2016) stated, "Daily life in civilian culture can be experienced by some veterans as being filled with constant choices, uncertainties, and at times even chaos when compared with the military environment and structured routines" (p. 728). In other words, cultural differences can cause stress for a veteran entering the civilian workforce.

Schein (1996) defined culture as "a set of basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, to some degree, their overt behavior" (p. 11). Both enlisted and officer personnel

are trained to adhere to military standards upon entry into the military. At the same time, Cole (2014) and Redmond et al. (2015) described military culture as different from other professional or organizational cultures in that it extends to the personal lives of military personnel. Ahern et al. (2015) stated, "A substantial proportion of veterans experienced the military as a family that took care of them and provided structure" (p. 8). By contrast, the civilian sector encourages individuals to set up their own structures.

Military culture may impact veterans' decisions to seek help with health concerns (McDermott et al., 2017). Warrior ethos—"a mindset and group of values that all U.S. armed forces aim to instill in their members" (Redmond et al., 2015, p. 14)—hampers assistance seeking because of perceived weaknesses (Snowden et al., 2017). Abraham et al. (2017) found that the masculinity of military culture, along with the hegemonic masculinity of U.S. culture, impedes soldiers and veterans from seeking assistance for health concerns—specifically, mental health concerns (Fox et al., 2015; McDermott et al., 2017; Scheinfeld et al., 2017).

Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) stated, "The transition from civilian to military life requires rapid acclimatization to an institutionalized lifestyle in which individuals are obligated to submit to a cornucopia of novel situations" (p. 138). Transition from military to civilian life can be just as profound. The feeling of alienation when entering the civilian sector contributes to the challenge of reintegration (Ahern et al., 2015). Pease et al. (2015) suggested that cultural shock for veterans was like the shock experienced by immigrants upon entering the United States. Furthermore, Gaither (2014) asserted that transitioning service members must be ready to make serious changes by adapting to cultural shock and finding work. Ahern et al. (2015) posited that "lack of support from institutions generates and exacerbates alienation. Some veterans felt they could not connect with family, friends, and other civilians, and, to make matters worse,

institutions that should have provided support left them feeling mistreated and unappreciated" (p. 9). This alienation may contribute to an extended time of assimilation for combat-occupation veterans.

Thus, without support, that assimilation may take longer than anticipated (Gaither, 2014). Ahern et al. (2015) proposed that significant obstacles to transition included not being able to locate or access support due to disconnection and unsupportive institutions. Veterans encountering anger problems during transition found that lack of structure, moral injury, and PTSD contributed to anger escalation (Worthen & Ahern, 2014). Veterans engaging in combat may have more difficulty transitioning because of the void of belonging and meaning encountered upon leaving the military (Lusk et al., 2015). Receiving social support from close relationships "enables individuals to thrive during adversity and relative calm" (Jakubiak et al., 2019, p. 1). Those close relationships provide either a haven or a secure base depending on the situation (Jakubiak et al., 2019). Veterans have difficulty finding a sense of meaning without aid of the military structure and goals (Ahern et al., 2015). The cultural divide can cause unemployed veterans to experience significant stress, especially veterans with long, successful military careers (Tran et al., 2016).

According to Jakubiak et al. (2019), "Invisible support may be preferable to visible support because it allows a support-recipient to receive assistance without feeling incapable or indebted" (p. 2). Thompson et al. (2017) posited, "Self-regulatory efficacy . . . involves beliefs about controlling motivational aspect of the job search over time" (p. 46). Also, the "emotion regulation efficacy helps people manage the feelings experienced during the job search process, such as excitement during a negotiation, frustration during the application process, and disappointment following the receipt of a rejection" (Thompson et al., 2017, p. 46). Wang et al.

(2018) emphasized that one's efficacy and outcome expectations are susceptible to the influence of leaders through vicarious learning. The ability to recognize and use the framework will assist in the transition and job search.

Pease et al. (2015) indicated that reintegration includes finding purpose, developing interpersonal relationships, finding employment or entering school, and covering the basics of housing, health care, food, and other necessities. Health issues are a major concern. Medically discharged veterans are released from military contracts due to health issues that prevent them from appropriately performing their duties. These health issues may impact their perceptions of their ability to find employment in the civilian sector. The tenants of self-leadership may assist with this perceived barrier.

Self-Leadership

Research has shown a correlation between self-leadership and positive outcomes. One external benefit of self-leadership is its positive influence on others (Phillips et al., 2017). Self-leadership posits individuals can set challenging, achievable goals to motivate and increase individual performance (Sampl et al., 2017). It is a self-influencing process that reduces strain and improves cognitive and physical performance (Sampl et al., 2017). Singh et al. (2018) stated that self-leadership is a "self-influence strategy" that helps "to manage task performance and focus on the natural motivational value of the task/activity itself" (p. 354). According to Bendell et al. (2019), "Self-leadership specifies a collection of intraindividual strategies that provide explicit behavioral and cognitive prescriptions that can be used to achieve greater personal effectiveness" (p. 112). Megheirkouni (2018) stated that self-leadership is the process of individuals achieving the "self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform" (p. 393). Further, according to Marques (2017), "Self-regulation remains a logical and critical aspect

toward self-leadership, and just as with most things in life, improvement occurs through increased efforts. Through reflection, self-leaders can continuously learn from prior mistakes, and improve their self-regulatory skills" (p. 18).

Self-leadership has many facets, and authors have described different aspects. Marques (2017) stated, "Self-leadership entails our ability to improve our performance utilizing a management mode of self-regulation through self-guidance in reasoning, motivation, and behavior" (p. 18). Cunha et al. (2017) posited, "Self-leadership is a process that can be translated into the capability of handling and sustaining four dualities: challenge and routine; self and other; nonwork and work; mind and body" (p. 472). Marques (2017) emphasized that self-leadership does require frequent observation of behavior and reflection on self. Cunha et al. (2017) emphasized, "Leading oneself means keeping a capacity to handle and sustain complementary and potentially conflicting demands" (p. 484). Bendell et al. (2019) posited self-leadership could help individuals succeed in dynamic, uncertain, and stressful contexts.

Social learning theory is "a unified theoretical framework for analyzing human thought and behavior" (Bandura, 1977, p. vi) with the "aid of modeling behavior," self-regulatory capacities, and "the interplay of self-generated and external sources of influence" (Bandura, 1977, pp. 12–13). Social learning theory emphasizes how the self-leadership practices of self-regulation, self-management, self-determination, and self-motivation may assist with transitioning into an unfamiliar culture. According to Marques (2017), "The relationship between self-regulation, self-control, and self-management form a strong and solid foundation for self-leadership" (p. 20).

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is one of the cornerstones of self-leadership. Marques (2017) emphasized, "Self-regulation remains a logical and critical aspect toward self-leadership, and just as with most things in life, improvement occurs through increased efforts. Through reflection, self-leaders can continuously learn from prior mistakes, and improve their self-regulatory skills" (p. 18). Marques explained that the main goal of self-regulation is to adjust behavior to achieve goals by evaluating performance or beliefs and assumptions. Milyavskaya et al. (2015) stated, "Self-regulation often consists of balancing self-control efforts against the presence and strength of temptations and impulses that can distract or impede one's goal pursuits and must be effortfully overcome" (p. 677). Similarly, Burman et al. (2015) posited self-regulation involves learning, self-monitoring/self-management, self-determination, self-control, social behavior, and self-monitoring.

Self-regulation is instrumental in transitioning from military to civilian life. Struthers et al. (2000) stated, "A healthy self-regulative behavior is connected with better handling of pressure situations, stressful . . . events, and performance" (as cited in Sampl et al., 2017, p. 1394). Moreover, according to Bradley et al. (2017), "Self-regulation plays an important role in motivation; it requires that people plan, monitor, and modify their behaviors and cognitions in terms of personal goals" (p. 519). Self-regulation "is a more democratic self-congruent mode to carry out intentions and it is associated with invigoration and not with effortful enactment" (Kazén et al., 2015, p. 1064). Marques (2017) noted, "Self-regulation often serves to balance self-control efforts against the presence and strength of temptations and impulses that could distract or impede our goal pursuits" (p. 18). Burman et al. (2015) stated, "Self-regulation involves the monitoring and management of the self, by the self, so that behavior can be

appropriately controlled—especially in learning situations" (p. 1516). Marques (2017) posited

self-control and self-regulation can be interdependent and interrelated: Self-control allows one to

self-regulate by remembering why an action is being done, whereas self-regulation requires

control to do what needs to be done.

Self-Control

Self-leaders have an internal locus of control, known as self-control (Marques, 2017).

Ryon and Gleason (2018) stated, "Locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals

believe they can control events that affect them" (p. 1036). Manz (1986) posited that "self-

control is a process in which we set our own performance standards, engage in our own

evaluation process, decide our own rewards and punishments, and perform within the parameters

of our own values, beliefs, and vision" (as cited in Marques, 2017, p. 18). Similarly, Kazén et al.

(2015) found that

> Self-control is a dictatorial other-directed mode in which the person suppresses her/his
>
> own needs to reach an assigned goal and it is associated with effortful task enhancement
>
> because behavioral energy has to work against negative motivational incentives rather
>
> than being supported by positive incentives. (p. 1064)

Marques (2017) perhaps defined self-control most concisely as "the internal ability to

reduce or eliminate undesirable or unacceptable behavior" (p. 20).

Self-Management

Self-management refers to controlling one's goal accomplishments by using internal and

external measures for fulfilling those set goals. Marques (2017) stated that self-management is a

"self-influence process, consisting of a set of strategies that mainly address how we fulfill our

tasks in such a way that we effectively realize the standards that are usually set by others" (p.

19). Marques (2017) further explained that "self-management is the circumstantial adaptation that drives self-regulation and self-control: it entails the ability to distinguish between and select the proper internal and external prompts to internally apply self-regulation and maintain self-control" (p. 20).

Juwel and Ahsan (2019) described self-management as utilizing the internal locus of control, which is the ability to control individual behavior—a key component of social learning theory. Juwel and Ahsan defined social learning as "the process of social interaction between actors by which people learn behavior within a societal context" (p. 1). This definition aligns with Bandura's (1977) view that social learning "is a continuous reciprocal interaction of person and environment determinants" (pp. 11–12). Bandura (1977) stated, "Self-evaluative reactions figure prominently in social learning theory" (p. 139). Thus, social learning theory and self-leadership intersect on every level. Manz (1986) stated, "Self-management entails a broad range of . . . strategies: self-observation, personal goal-setting, outlining strategies, self-encouragement, self-punishment, and preparation" (as cited in Marques, 2017, p. 17). In other words, self-management is doing what is necessary to reach goals.

Self-Determination and Self-Motivation

As facets of self-leadership, self-determination and self-motivation are activated by the ability to make necessary changes in order to obtain desired goals. Látalová and Pilárik (2015) stated that self-determination "is conceptualized as a subjective belief that one initiates and regulates his/her behaviors, decisions and goals" (p. 95). Deci et al. (1989) stated, "Self-determination is defined as the degree a person has in choosing to initiate actions" (as cited by Solansky, 2015, p. 619). Solansky (2015) also stated, "Autonomy is a central premise of self-

determination" (p. 619), while Flannery (2017) posited that self-motivation "is essential in any aspect of behavioral change" (p. 155).

Self-Leadership Strategies

The three types of strategies that encompass self-leadership are behavior-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Bailey et al., 2018; Bendell et al., 2019; Burman et al., 2015; Cunha et al., 2017; Furtner et al., 2015, 2018; Manz et al., 2016; Marques, 2017; Milyavskaya et al., 2015; Nel & van Zyl, 2015; Unsworth & Mason, 2016). Manz et al. (2016) iterated that behavioral/action-focused strategies include actions or behaviors that result in favorable responses. Bailey et al. (2018) and Nel and van Zyl (2015) described behavioral-focused strategies as including self-observation, goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, and cues. Furtner et al. (2018) included the self-management traits of self-goal setting, self-observation, self-reward, self-punishment, and self-cueing as other behavior-focused strategies to evaluate and modify personal behaviors. Modifying or changing behaviors that hinder oneself is essential in order to achieve personal expectations.

Ay et al. (2015) found that behavior-focused strategies are "very effective to achieve individual excellence," whereas "failure causes undesired behavior" (p. 31). Bendell et al. (2019) clarified how "behavior-focused strategies help strengthen an individual's behavioral management through enhanced self-awareness" (p. 113), whereas monitoring self and recognizing behavior patterns can assist with development of self-leadership strategies and characteristics (Ay et al., 2015). Behavior-focused strategies can assist individuals in managing their behaviors through self-observation, incorporating self-rewards, and learning to self-cue (Cranmer et al., 2019). These strategies use a two-step process: The first step is self-evaluation to

determine if modifications are necessary, while the second step is setting goals to modify

undesirable behaviors (Furtner et al., 2015).

The second category of self-leadership strategies—natural reward strategies—uses

intrinsic motivation to find pleasant and rewarding aspects to task assignments (Bailey et al.,

2018), experiences (Marques, 2017), and performances (Nel & van Zyl, 2015). In other words,

by using natural reward strategies, individuals experience personal satisfaction in accomplishing

the goals they set. Bailey et al. (2018) stated that self-leadership uses intrinsic motivation to

identify goals, determine a strategy to use, and apply the strategy with related entities to

accomplish set goals. Thus, natural reward strategies involve fostering intrinsic motivation as the

joy or pleasure of doing something. Individuals garner satisfaction from the act and not from

external gains (Ay et al., 2015). Unsworth and Mason (2016) included among natural reward

strategies changing the environment to include enjoyable elements, keeping focus on pleasant

tasks, and not dwelling on the unpleasant aspects of necessary tasks.

Singh et al. (2018) described natural reward strategies as cognitive and directed toward

the self. In particular, Singh et al. identified natural reward strategies as including "authenticity,

responsibility, and increasing capacity for achieving increased personal effectiveness" (p. 354).

The ability to build pleasurable activities into assigned tasks or refocus away from the unpleasant

aspects of assigned tasks involves using natural reward strategies (Cranmer et al., 2019). Thus,

the use of these tactics may increase "feelings of competence, self-control, and a sense of

purpose" (Cranmer et al., 2019, p. 685).

The final category of self-leadership strategies—constructive thought strategies—

"involve[s] visualizing successful performance, engaging in positive self-talk and examining

individuals' beliefs and assumptions in order to align cognition with desired behaviour" (Nel &

van Zyl, 2015, p. 3). According to Bendell et al. (2019), self-talk or self-dialogue has the potential to enhance self-regulatory effectiveness. Bailey et al. (2018) also posited constructive thought patterns assist in rational thinking, transforming problems into challenges, and increasing motivation and self-efficacy.

Constructive thought pattern strategies can be used to evaluate current beliefs and assumptions and adjust accordingly (Cranmer et al., 2019; Lucke & Furtner, 2015). Visualizing success and positive self-talk are key components of constructive thought patterns (Ay et al., 2015; Furtner et al., 2018; Lucke & Furtner, 2015). These strategies determine if thoughts are healthy (Uzman & Maya, 2019) or need adjustment. The replacement of negative or unhealthy thoughts with positive, healthy thoughts is essential to constructive thought pattern strategies.

Lack of use of self-leadership strategies has been shown to lower coping capabilities and life satisfaction (Uzman & Maya, 2019). According to Wang (2016), use of self-leadership plays a key role in coping and wellness. Therefore, use, or lack thereof, self-leadership strategies have the potential to affect the transitional challenges of combat-occupation veterans entering the civilian workforce.

Health Concerns

Some veterans' military service ends because of mental and/or physical health concerns. Soldiers who retire due to medical issues leave the military with health conditions that prevent them from performing tasks appropriately. Kukla, Bonfils, et al. (2015) stated that "unemployed veterans were more likely to have depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD, schizophrenia, or substance use disorders" (p. 51). The loss of military culture may make transitioning more difficult for these veterans than for veterans choosing to leave the military voluntarily. Lack of monetary and civilian career preparedness may add stress that other transitioning veterans do not

encounter. Stroud et al. (2015) posited that young adults aged 18–26 are less healthy than adolescents and adults in their late 20s or 30s. Moreover, combat-occupation veterans have health concerns that other young adults often do not deal with, which increases the stressors for veterans.

There are physical, cognitive, and cultural limitations some veterans face from military service (Libin et al., 2017). For instance, veterans may feel they do not deserve care because they consider their injuries or illnesses to be less significant than others whose physical or mental limitations are more severe or visible (Fox et al., 2015). Military culture may impact veterans' decision to seek help. Although veterans are no longer in the military, the tenants of the culture influence decisions made long after leaving the military. The masculinity of military culture makes seeking help difficult for veterans. The weakness associated with asking for help may thwart the healing needed to integrate into civilian cultures. The tenet of self-determination may assist with overcoming the culture of not seeking assistance for medical purposes.

Coping with the loss of physical preparedness and the ability to endure harsh environments and combat enemies effectively may cause mental issues due to exposure to and embracing of the masculine and hegemonic culture described by Abraham et al. (2017). Physical ability is part of military training to prepare service members for possible engagement with opposing forces. The loss of physical ability can impact combat-occupation veterans in ways unknown, as their ability to perform their duties is a major part of their identity. The use of alcohol and drugs may be coping mechanisms for veterans dealing with emotional and physical hardships (Derefinko et al., 2018). Derefinko et al. (2018) posited there are significant increases in marijuana and hard drug use after transitioning out of the military. Veterans with PTSD, stress, and depression have more severe alcohol cravings than veterans who have alcohol use

disorder only (Herrold et al., 2017). Hanson et al. (2016) found that military personnel tend to engage in heavy or binge drinking. The military personnel who engage more than others in this behavior are aged 17–25, male, and White or Hispanic and have a high school diploma or less (Hanson et al., 2016). Military personnel with head trauma may also experience more alcohol dependency (Hanson et al., 2016). Furthermore, Jacobson et al. (2008) stated that military personnel exposed to combat have increased risk of alcohol misuse (as cited by Hanson et al., 2016).

Many veterans who use alcohol to cope with stressors are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed in terms of mental illness, making them part of an at-risk population (Martens et al., 2015). Kukla, McGuire, et al. (2015) found that "veterans with mental illness tend to have poor employment outcomes, which are known to pose a substantial threat to well-being and financial stability over time" (p. 412). Guina et al. (2016) noted the PTSD criteria have the potential to affect the careers of soldiers, as well as benefits for veterans. Stressors incurred once back home further increase the risk of PTSD (Interian et al., 2014).

PTSD and TBI

PTSD and TBI have received significant exposure due to media coverage and support group efforts. PTSD has several criteria but essentially "is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 274). PTSD symptoms include exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence; the presence of intrusive symptoms associated with traumatic events; persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic events; negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic events; marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic events; duration for more than 1 month; the

disturbance causing clinically significant distress or impairment; and the disturbance not being attributable to the physiological effects of a substance or another medical condition (APA, 2013). According to the APA (2013), "Rates of PTSD are higher among veterans" (p. 276), and peritraumatic environmental factors for military personnel include "being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy" (p. 278).

Matarazzo et al. (2016) posited deployment veterans with a history of TBI have at least three related symptoms, such as headaches, irritability, and issues with balance or sleep. Swanson et al. (2017) defined TBI as "a traumatically induced structural injury of the brain or physiologic disruption of normal brain function resulting from an external force" (p. 251). Its characteristics include at least one of the following: "loss of consciousness, posttraumatic amnesia, disorientation and confusion, or, in more severe cases, neurological signs" (APA, 2013, p. 625). TBIs account for 82% of military-related brain injuries (Mosti et al., 2019). Further, "some symptoms associated with TBI may overlap with symptoms found in cases of PTSD, and the two disorders may co-occur, especially in military populations" (APA, 2013, p. 627). TBI may be caused by "blast exposure, motor vehicle crashes, falls, or other head trauma and frequently co-occur[s] with mental health diagnoses" (Wyse et al., 2020, p. 65). Veterans diagnosed with TBI have a greater probability of having PTSD and depressive symptoms (Kanefsky et al., 2019). Pogoda et al. (2016) stated, "Veterans with a positive TBI screen . . . found an unemployment rate of 33%" (as cited in Wyse et al., 2020, p. 66).

PTSD tends to manifest several months after returning from combat environments (Sayer et al., 2014). Veterans who have been deployed are trained to drive aggressively during deployments for safety reasons, but aggressive driving has caused an increase in motor vehicle accidents for the veterans after deployments (Van Voorhees et al., 2018). TBIs usually occur due

to contact with or proximity to simple or complex bomb attacks (Bullock et al., 2009). Swanson et al. (2017) emphasized, "TBI is difficult to diagnose because it requires careful assessment of patients not only at the time of their injury but also during the acute period after the injury" (p. 252). APA (2013) stated, "Among U.S. military personnel and combat veterans who have been deployed to recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, co-occurrence of PTSD and mild TBI is 48%" (p. 280). Kulas and Rosenheck (2018) stated PTSD is diagnosed more commonly than TBI, especially in recent conflicts.

However, Blais et al. (2014) stated, "Many veterans with PTSD do not receive the recommended course of therapy" (p. 171). Fox et al. (2015) posited that veterans with suspected TBI or PTSD do not seek treatment for these illnesses. Blais et al. (2014) and Fox et al. (2015) indicated that Caucasians and women tended to seek help more than other demographic groups. Thus, Waszak and Holmes (2017) posited, "Veterans with PTSD may be at increased risk for other conditions or problems" (p. 434). Depression symptoms are one likely consequence of PTSD, according to McKinney et al. (2017), with symptoms including thoughts of suicide, feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, low mood, and changes in physical activity. Libin et al. (2017) indicated veterans with TBI must deal with complications such as memory loss, trouble with goal setting, pain, sleep disturbance, and PTSD while transitioning into the civilian sector.

McKinney et al. (2017) noted that frustration and anger are commonly associated with PTSD and depression. Anderson and Rees (2015) noted that soldiers are especially prone to violent behavior as a result of having been exposed to intense combat. Continual occurrences of frustration and anger may trigger suicidal thoughts and symptoms. The loss of control that transition may precipitate could trigger PTSD symptoms including frustration, anger, and

depression. Veterans with depression are at elevated risk for suicide (York et al., 2013). PTSD co-occurring with depression is considered a high-risk factor for suicidal ideation (Bryan et al., 2015). Waszak and Holmes (2017) stated, "All post-9/11 veterans should be assessed for suicide, not just upon their return from service but continuously" (p. 436). Thus, the loss of military culture and the support system veterans have known may well have adverse effects including depression and exacerbation of PTSD symptoms. This could, in turn, adversely affect transition efforts and integration into civilian culture.

Suicide Risk

Bullman et al. (2018) posited that suicide risk is greatest the first year after leaving the military and decreases once that crucial year is complete. The authors also posited that "active duty veterans had a 56% increased risk of suicide when compared to the U.S. general population" (Bullman et al., 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, Kang and Bullman (2008) stated, "Research has revealed that suicide risk is increased by 33% for former active duty U.S. military veterans and 77% for veterans diagnosed with a mental disorder compared with the general U.S. population" (as cited in Dittrich et al., 2015, p. 428). Mohamed (2013) found that "mental illness and addiction have been implicated as potential causal agents in veteran suicide, with particular elevated risk among veterans with a dual diagnosis" (as cited in Crane et al., 2015, p. 7).

Comorbidity, or dual diagnoses, is the rule rather than the exception when it comes to mental illnesses (Crane et al., 2015). Crane et al. (2015) asserted comorbidity usually involves mental illness and substance use disorder for the general population. The risk factors for substance use for veterans include "being male, involved in longer deployments or more hazardous combat arenas, younger than 25, and never married or divorced" (Crane et al., 2015, p. 5). These factors can impact transition and employability for combat-occupation veterans.

Suicide and Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal ideation is defined as "thought about self-harm, with deliberate consideration or planning of possible techniques of causing one's own death" (APA, 2013, p. 830). Suicide attempt is defined as "an attempt to end one's own life, which may lead to one's death" (APA, 2013, p. 830). Gradus et al. (2015) posited postdeployment suicidal ideation was associated with male Veteran Health Administration (VHA) and non-VHA veterans diagnosed with deployment-related TBI and TBI in general. Wisco et al. (2014) posited specific TBI characteristics increase suicidal ideation. These characteristics include loss of consciousness and receipt of multiple injuries. APA (2013) asserted, "PTSD is associated with suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and presence of the disorder may indicate which individuals with ideation eventually make a suicide plan or actually attempt suicide" (p. 278). APA (2013) also stated that in "veteran samples, PTSD is associated with poor social and family relationships, absenteeism from work, lower income, and lower educational and occupational success" (p. 279). Readjustment difficulties are often associated with PTSD (Marquardt et al., 2018).

A major health concern among veterans is suicide and suicide attempt. O'Connor et al. (2017) stated veterans deaths account for "approximately 20% of annual suicides in the United States" (p. 1360). This figure averages 22 veterans a day. These risk factors would be easy for combat-occupation veterans to ignore for the sake of service and would be considered an integral part of military culture. Ursano et al. (2017) stated the odds of attempting suicide were higher with combat arms and lower when actively deployed. The U.S. Army suicide rate tripled in 2012 compared to 2004 (Lusk et al., 2015). Lusk et al. (2015) also stated most suicides were soldiers who received demotions, had deployments, and were aged 18–24. Other authors (Kirsch, 2014; York et al., 2013) also stated this age group was most at risk for suicide, suicide attempt, and

suicidal ideation. The soldiers considered themselves a burden, and the suicide attempt usually occurred within 24 hours of an event or argument, criticism, or isolation. Ursano et al. (2018) posited the odds of suicide attempts during or after second deployments occurred within the first 12 months of service and those with a dwell time of 6 months or less. Some aspects of military culture may impact the soldiers' decision-making process concerning suicide. The masculine military culture considers seeking help a weakness, and the soldiers or veterans would not want to be considered weak. King et al. (2014) posited social isolation and low social interaction are risk factors associated with suicide.

Other indicators of suicide risk include high stress exposure with relationship problems, exposure to traumatic events, availability of weapons, mood and substance abuse disorders linked with skill using firearms, and untreated PTSD and depression for veterans residing in rural areas (York et al., 2013). Stress is defined as "the pattern of specific and nonspecific responses a person makes to stimulus events that disturb his or her equilibrium and tax or exceed his or her ability to cope" (APA, 2013, p. 829). A stressor is defined as "any emotional, physical, social, economic, or other factor that disrupts the normal physiological, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral balance of an individual" (APA, 2013, p. 829).

Rural veterans may not have access to services afforded veterans in urban areas. Wisco et al. (2014) iterated, "Depression, lifetime PTSD, high levels of alcohol problems, and low levels of social support were associated with current suicidal ideation" (p. 247). Self-regulation and self-motivation along with social interaction may assist combat-occupation veterans with dealing with health concerns.

Stereotypes

The barriers that combat-occupation veterans encounter may include subconscious stereotyping by hiring managers (Stone et al., 2018). Keeling et al. (2018) iterated, "Veterans experienced barriers to employment perceived to be specific to the military organization, their service experiences, and society's perceptions of veterans" (p. 65). Lee (2005) iterated that "stereotypes cause discrimination by influencing how individuals process and recall information about other people" (p. 483). Individual differences can influence individuals positively or negatively depending on the situation and context. Jones et al. (1984) posited that stereotypes develop from overgeneralization of a group based on inaccurate information (as cited in Stone et al., 2018). Stereotypes typically impact the individual or group negatively. Perceived employer stigma and discrimination are common themes that veterans encounter (Keeling et al., 2018). Veterans portraying a happy, relaxed demeanor during interviews may be considered exceptions to the rule.

Civilians, including employers, may hold negative stereotypes concerning veterans because of the disapproval rate of combat efforts during recent conflicts with Afghanistan and Iraq (Schreger & Kimble, 2017) and media portrayal of veterans (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). The perception that most veterans have PTSD or TBI (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Schreger & Kimble, 2017) reinforces the negative stereotype that hinders veteran reintegration into the civilian sector and workplace. Self-motivation, a characteristic of self-leadership and a component of social learning theory, can help combat-occupation veterans recognize the value they bring to the civilian workforce.

Employment Barriers

Disability

Combat-occupation veterans may be considered disabled and unable to showcase capabilities due to use of military terminology and acronyms as opposed to the civilian terminology employers understand. Longer integration periods of more than a year may hinder employment opportunities for veterans due to gaps in work history on the resume. Wilmoth et al. (2015) posited, "Households that include a disabled veteran are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of economic well-being relative to non-disabled veteran and non-veteran households" (p. 389). Kukla, Bonfils, et al. (2015) stated, "Among the serious consequences of vocational dysfunction in veterans, the risk of worsening mental health is prominent" (p. 52).

Underemployment

Veterans with combat occupations may not realize the skills, knowledge, and abilities they possess that make them assets to employers. Schulker (2017) affirmed that veterans are overrepresented in protective services, public administration, and production employment: They are three times as likely as their nonveteran counterparts to work in protective services or public administration. Veterans lacking education or training beyond high school may think their occupation choices are limited upon entering the civilian workforce. Monfort et al. (2015) posited, "Underemployed workers are those who work fewer hours, use fewer skills, or receive less pay than they would if they were working at full capacity" (p. 50). Underemployment may impact self-leadership in combat-occupation veterans if they do not use their skills to potential.

Combat-occupation veterans may need to start underemployed during their transition to civilian culture. Underemployment may cause veterans who have had greater responsibility to feel more stress than veterans able to secure employment that uses skills derived from experience

(Monfort et al., 2015). Combat-occupation veterans may think they are qualified to work only certain jobs in the civilian workforce. Schulker (2017) posited veterans work in civilian fields that align with technical military functions. McAllister et al. (2015) discovered through research that veterans with combat occupations believed they would not be able to provide for their families. Researchers, including Bullock et al. (2009), Miles (2014), and Pease et al. (2015), stated that most veterans with combat occupations have very little formal education, affirming their belief in their inability to find livable work.

Thus, combat-occupation veterans may deal with job insecurity when navigating the civilian workforce. Job insecurity "is considered to be a demanding aspect of the work situation that depletes employees' energy and decreases their mental and physical health in the long run" (Vander Elst et al., 2017, p. 1197). Veterans with occupations prior to military service may have a difficult time finding a new career once they complete their military service if they have PTSD, TBI, depression, other health issues, or a combination of these (Wyse et al., 2020). Sleep disturbances are common in veterans with health issues such as PTSD and TBI (Martindale et al., 2017). Cognitive functioning can be impaired by sleep disturbances, which only exacerbates symptoms associated with PTSD and TBI (Martindale et al., 2017). Education and knowledge about self-leadership may demonstrate the values these veterans bring to the civilian workforce.

Adaptability

Career adaptability provides combat-occupation veterans with the ability to cope with work-related stressors (Duffy et al., 2017). The skills veterans bring to the civilian workforce include leadership, teamwork, stress management (Ford, 2017), conflict resolution, and dependability (Stone et al., 2018). Military culture is learned upon entering the military (Redmond et al., 2015). This includes the language military personnel use. The language may

differ depending on which branch service members enter; however, what is consistent is that learning begins on day one of enlistment and continues until the service member exits the military. Completion of one tour of service impacts veterans' outlook (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018) and speech. Veterans must learn the civilian terminology for work responsibilities and communicate to potential employers effectively. Veterans who recognize the importance of effective communication outside of the military may encounter fewer transition barriers than those clinging to military language.

Anderson and Goodman (2014) iterated that veteran transition involves the changing of structures, culture, and life roles. Schlossberg (1981) stated, "It is not the transition itself that is of primary importance, but the rather how that transition fits with an individual's stage, situation, and style at the time of the transition" (p. 5). Veterans must cope with creating a new identity, learning a different culture, connecting with family and friends, and integrating themselves into a different work environment. Family members must also transition in a similar way. Military culture is family-oriented, so family members also must learn or relearn a culture they have not been subjected to for years.

Unemployment Factors

Individuals are considered unemployed if they are not employed during a specific time frame when they were available for work and made at least one specific, active effort to find a job, or if they are temporarily laid-off with an expected recall date (BLS, 2018b). Groves (2016) iterated that "low-skilled male(s) . . . have struggled to find stable employment with wages comparable to those earned by working-class males during the post-World War II manufacturing boom in the United States" (p. 394). He further stated that incentives given for low-skilled single mothers inadvertently created a 2.8% decline in labor force participation for men while causing a

10% increase in labor force participation for single mothers (Groves, 2016). As of January 10,

2020, the unemployment rate for men aged 18–19 was 12% and for men aged 20–24 was 7%

(BLS, 2020). Individuals "who are unemployed or unable to work were more likely to report

frequent mental distress" (Charara et al., 2016, p. 298), loss of identity, depression, or substance

use disorders (Davenport et al., 2017).

Hom et al. (2012) advised that "job loss refers to any form of involuntary unemployment

which may involve being individually fired, laid off in the context of a mass reduction in force,

or pressured into involuntarily quitting" (as cited in Thompson et al., 2017, p. 40). In other

words, leaving a job for any reason other than personal or professional is considered involuntary

unemployment. Schaller and Stevens (2015) posited involuntary job loss negatively affects the

health of individuals almost immediately. The health concerns do not become serious unless the

job loss leads to long-term unemployment. The health concerns cover psychological and physical

well-being for individuals and affected families (Schaller & Stevens, 2015; Thompson et al.,

2017). Further adverse effects of job loss include isolation (Davenport et al., 2017; Tumin &

Qian, 2017) and possible marital strain for individuals who are married. Tumin and Qian (2017)

iterated that "job loss . . . may strain the marriage because it forces the couple to make do with

fewer resources, upsets the bargain over what each spouse contributes to the relationship, and

makes the unemployed spouse less attractive as a partner" (p. 1391).

Job Dissatisfaction

The main reason individuals voluntarily leave employment is job dissatisfaction (Cook &

Burke-Miller, 2015). Job loss can still have adverse effects whether it is voluntary or

involuntary. Studies by Classen and Dunn (2012), Paul and Moser (2009), and Thompson et al.

(2017), indicated men have higher distress following a job loss, with suicide rates higher than

those for women following a job loss. Furthermore, the United States has trailed 21 other highly developed countries in terms of men's life expectancy for three decades (Elder & Griffith, 2016). McGee and Thompson (2015) posited, "The high rate of unemployment among emerging adults (aged 18 to 25 years) is a public health concern. The risk of depression is higher among the unemployed than among the employed" (para. 24). Further, "the odds of depression were about 3 times higher for unemployed than employed emerging adults" (McGee & Thompson, 2015, para. 24). The longer an individual is unemployed, the less employable they become due to job skill loss. The associated financial losses affect living conditions and veterans' ability to provide for themselves or their family members (Rothstein, 2016).

Men with lower levels of education and lower cognitive test scores have higher odds of long-term unemployment (Rothstein, 2016). Many individuals must "retool their skill sets in order to pursue jobs that paid enough to support the lifestyle to which they'd become accustomed" (Kelly et al., 2017, p. 34). Without the ability or means to retool skill sets, individuals may experience psychological or physical ailments associated with short- or long-term unemployment. Venkataramani et al. (2016) posited, "The lack of economic opportunity could create a disincentive to engage in healthy behaviors since the future monetary and intrinsic benefits of doing so are less likely to materialize" (p. 478). Cylus et al. (2015) posited, "Ten percent of individuals who were gainfully employed in the previous year reported poor health, whereas 24.9% of individuals who experienced job loss in the previous year reported poor health" (p. 319).

Combat-occupation veterans are entering a civilian workforce that is difficult for young adult men to traverse. Gillums (2016) stated, "The question of why today's generation of highly trained veterans face higher average rates of unemployment than their civilian peers has

confounded researchers, employers, and veteran advocates over the last few years" (p. 4). The odds are stacked against them. Other areas that may affect obtaining gainful, rewarding employment include "mental wellness, physical health, financial security, awareness of resources, and the need for effective veteran-specific support networks" (Gillums, 2016, p. 4). Veterans who may be recovering from serious injuries may not focus on employment during recovery, instead focusing on federal benefits, quality health care, home health services, and mental wellness (Gillums, 2016). These issues, along with extended time out of the workforce, make gainful employment more difficult for veterans (Gillums, 2016).

Job Insecurity

Job insecurity is another aspect that affects health in American adults (Khubchandani & Price, 2017). Perceived job insecurity is also detrimental to health (Khubchandani & Price, 2017). Employers are encouraging or mandating employees to attend training or educational endeavors to maintain job security (Dill & Morgan, 2018). However, employees are not necessarily guaranteed a wage increase or promotion for attending or participating in professional development programs (Dill & Morgan, 2018). Dill and Morgan (2018) stated that low-level workers (i.e., those with no college degree who earn less than $40,000 annually) receive minimal financial rewards for participation, but lack of participation could cause job insecurity. Veterans with health concerns may experience more job insecurity than the general population due to the stigma attached to veterans. This perceived job insecurity may further exacerbate veterans' health conditions.

Disability and Employment

One in three employed veterans with a disability worked in the public sector in August 2018 (BLS, 2019). That same month the unemployment rate for veterans with disabilities was

5%, whereas the percentage of unemployed veterans aged 18–24 in the labor force was 10% (BLS, 2019). The percentage of unemployed male veterans aged 18–24 in the labor force was 11% (BLS, 2019). Livermore and Honeycutt (2015) posited that "people with disabilities are permanently exiting the workforce" particularly those in "blue-collar and goods-producing jobs" (p. 70). Cook (2006) iterated that "a high proportion of people with psychiatric disabilities quit due to job dissatisfaction, which is likely a reflection of their typical underemployment or employment in poor-quality jobs" (as cited in Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015, p. 379).

Lysaght et al. (2015) posited that employment is "an important element of social participation" (p. 112). Davenport et al. (2017) stated, "Employed individuals with chronic pain experience numerous limitations that interfere with their ability to carry out the essential functions of their jobs" (p. 249). Gatchel et al. (2017) posited that "chronic pain affects approximately 100 million adults in the United States, a prevalence that exceeds the total combined number of Americans living with diabetes, heart disease, and cancer" (as cited in Davenport et al., 2017, p. 249).

Cook and Burke (2002) iterated that "employment for people with psychiatric disabilities is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of factors, including labor market conditions, individual work environments, worker characteristics, and public disability policies" (as cited in Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015, p. 371). Donnelly (2017) posited that individuals with mental illness are greatly concerned about steady employment and are hesitant to disclose their condition to employers or potential employers due to possible repercussions, discrimination, and privacy concerns.

Individuals who desire to work but suffer from chronic pain and the stigma associated with it benefit physically and psychologically from working (Davenport et al., 2017). Individuals

with chronic pain experience numerous limitations that interfere with their ability to carry out the essential functions of their jobs, and their job functions may be hindered by fatigue, exhaustion, memory loss, and inability to concentrate (Davenport et al., 2017). Wells et al. (1989) found that "patients with a depression or depressive symptoms have worse physical, social, and role functioning, worse perceived current health, and greater bodily pain compared to people without chronic conditions" (as cited in Charara et al., 2016, p. 292).

Veterans are underrepresented in the civilian workforce (Tran et al., 2016), and there are stigmas and stereotypes associated with individuals with disabilities and mental health limitations. Furthermore, "negative mental health beliefs, employment, and social-leisure functioning all have a negative relationship with mental health care utilization for Veterans with PTSD and problem drinking" (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 1204). Afari et al. (2015) showed that "veterans who experienced combat had significantly increased mental health symptoms across a range of assessed domains including PTSD and depression symptoms, and verbal, object, and other aggressions" (p. 300). These symptoms may cause a strain on personal relationships (Vogt et al., 2017). Vogt et al. (2017) stated that "although many veterans successfully navigate the transition to civilian life, some veterans may find it difficult to secure financially rewarding and personally satisfying jobs" (p. 341). The unique risk factors that contribute to veterans' long-term unemployment may lead to lower productivity, which adds to their health concerns and reduced quality of life (Tran et al., 2016).

Veterans with additional health concerns have difficulty obtaining employment. As Routon (2014) mentioned,

Veteran status has been associated with both positive and negative outcomes in the civilian labor market with some employers reportedly reluctant to hire veterans due to the

perception that they can be costly to insure due to combat-related physical injuries and behavioral health conditions. (as cited in Tran et al., 2016, p. 721)

Veterans are also more likely to live in rural areas than their civilian counterparts (Kelley et al., 2019). Veterans without personal transportation may rely on public transportation. Most live in rural areas, where public transportation is scarce, if available at all. Tyndall (2017) iterated that lack of public transportation increases the likelihood of individuals and veterans not being able to seek, obtain, or retain employment.

These barriers alone can discourage individuals and veterans, and marital problems exacerbated by unemployment can present new layers. Tumin and Qian (2017) stated, "The role conflict experienced by married men who become unemployed exacerbates the marital strain that follows from the financial difficulties of unemployment and often ends in the breakup of the marriage" (p. 1390). Vogt et al. (2017) stated that veterans "may experience strained personal relationships as they and their families negotiate the many changes that come with the transition and reintegration process" (pp. 341–342). The complexity increases when "prevalent family issues include discord in spousal/partner relationships, disagreements around family responsibilities, and children seeming afraid of or estranged from the veteran parent" (Lawrence & Matthieu, 2018, pp. 271–272).

Several authors—Denning et al. (2014), Savitsky et al. (2009), and Sherman et al. (2015)—iterated that "the transition back to civilian life upon completion of military service has also been associated with financial, professional, and personal difficulties including unemployment, development of new social networks and supports, and changes in family roles and dynamics" (as cited in Lawrence & Matthieu, 2018, p. 282). Veterans not prepared for civilian employment may experience depression (Dittrich et al., 2015). Tran et al. (2016) posited

veterans who have separated from the military with successful careers and enter the civilian

workforce with little success are at risk for compromised physical health and health-related

behaviors. Veterans may also experience health issues unexpectedly due to their military service

and report more days of poor health compared to their civilian counterparts (Tran et al., 2016).

Summary

This chapter referenced key obstacles veterans with combat occupations encounter upon

entrance into the civilian workforce. It also reviewed self-leadership concepts. Many veterans

have little or no education beyond a high school diploma (Bullock et al., 2009; Miles, 2014;

Pease et al., 2015). Veterans may transition sooner than expected and may have health concerns

that exacerbate their transition (Libin et al., 2017). They may also have experienced stereotyping

from companies and hiring managers when applying for employment (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018;

Schreger & Kimble, 2017). Moreover, veterans may have difficulty transitioning from the

military culture and embracing the civilian workforce mentality without proper guidance in using

self-leadership tactics. Veterans with combat occupations are frequently categorized with all

combat veterans. This categorization may hinder the acquisition and use of transition tools

adequate for transition into the civilian workforce for veterans with combat occupations. The use

of self-leadership strategies including behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and

constructive thought strategies can assist combat-occupation veterans to prevail over transition

obstacles.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The research methods chapter includes the research method and design, population, sample, instruments, data collection, analysis procedures, methods for establishing trustworthiness, researcher role, ethical considerations, assumptions, and a summary of this chapter. Combat-occupation veterans were the specific group addressed in this research.

Research Design and Method

One factor that may influence combat-occupation veterans' difficulty with transitioning could be their military occupation. Veterans with combat occupations, including air defense artillery, armor, combat engineer, field artillery, and infantry, have a more difficult transition than other veterans (Bullock et al., 2009; McAllister et al., 2015; Miles, 2014). The voices of combat-occupation veterans gave understanding to the barriers encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce.

Qualitative research is an approach used to allow participants to give their perspective on a subject (Roberts, 2010). Ivankova (2015) defined qualitative methods as "the methods that collect and analyze narrative or text data expressed in words and images" (p. 410). The use of qualitative methods allowed me to collect and analyze combat-occupation veterans' perspective on transition readiness and barriers encountered when entering the civilian workforce. Qualitative research allowed me to listen to combat-occupation veterans recount their experiences with transitioning. Semistructured interviews were conducted with veterans with combat occupations who were willing to share their stories.

Patton (2015) explained that qualitative research allows researchers to gather in-depth data via interviews to obtain and analyze the participants' viewpoints. Hamilton and Finley (2019) iterated qualitative methods "add value by helping to describe what is happening" (p. 2).

Patton (2015) also explained the phenomenology framework addresses the meaning, structure, and essence of participants' lived experiences. Specifically, qualitative description (QD) was the method used in the study. Kim et al. (2017) stated, "QD has been identified as important and appropriate for research questions focused on discovering the who, what, and where of events or experiences and on gaining insights from informants regarding a poorly understood phenomenon" (p. 23). Sandelowski (2010) posited QD is still interpretive and "always requires moving somewhere: that researchers make something of their data" (p. 79). Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasized that researchers can listen and then sort, weigh, balance, and analyze what was heard. I kept the participants focused on the research questions during the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I also journaled immediately after the interview and during analyses in written formats. Journaling allowed me to document my thoughts through collection and analyses.

My role as the researcher included being reflexive while recording, coding, and making meaning of the data. Chilisa and Preece (as cited in Ngozwana, 2018) described reflexivity as "a way of ensuring that the researcher does not influence the study through the strong held perceptions, feelings and experiences while conducting a research, perhaps from over interaction with the participants or otherwise" (p. 24). The experiences "are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2015, p. 116). Bracketing is creating themes, subthemes, and major focus areas (Smith et al., 2009). The use of reflexivity, analyzing, documenting, and bracketing the data helps to establish credible collection of data.

Sample

The population for this study was U.S. military veterans aged 18–29 whose military occupation was a combat occupation such as air defense artillery, armor, combat engineering, field artillery, or infantry. The sample for this population was participants who met these criteria,

had access to the study, and were willing and able to participate. For the purposes of this study, the population consisted of military-enlisted veterans who had separated or retired with combat occupations. The reason was that researchers and society as a whole place combat-occupation veterans under the general umbrella of combat veterans without recognizing the specific challenges they face entering the civilian workforce. The estimated proportion of enlisted army personnel with combat occupations is approximately 20% of the total population (Military.com, 2019). The estimated population for the army is 450,000 (Statistic Brain, 2018; U.S. Army, 2017). The approximate number of soldiers with military occupations was calculated using numbers derived from the 2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength to be about 139,500 (U.S. Army, 2017).

The sample size for this research was small to achieve in-depth analysis for qualitative descriptive research (Smith et al., 2009). Wagstaff and Williams (2014) began their research with 14 participants and ended up interviewing seven. I invited 30 participants via social media sites. I located participants throughout the world and anticipated some would not complete the interview process. The projected sample size was 10–12 participants for adequate data analysis. In all, seven participants completed the interviews, but only six of the interviews were usable. One interview did not record correctly.

Materials/Instruments

Semistructured interviews were used to obtain participant data. Semistructured interviews allow participants to "provide a detailed account of the experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59). The questions consisted of a combination of in-depth interview questions, including descriptive, narrative, and evaluative prompts and probes. Digital recording devices and a videoconferencing application (Zoom) were used to conduct the interviews. Specifically, I used Zoom's recording

settings during the interviews. After I completed the interviews, I transcribed them. Then I sent participants a copy of the transcription to verify the content. After participants had verified the content, I coded the interviews. The initial interview questions are in Appendix A. I asked additional follow-up questions garnered during interviews using the interviewing-the-investigator technique described in the following paragraph.

With respect to field-testing, I used the interviewing-the-investigator technique that Chenail (2011) described. This technique allowed me to identify weaknesses in my interviewing and to identify questions to ask in the interviews. Chenail (2011) considered interviewing-the-investigator techniques to be a

> useful first step to create interview protocols that help to generate the information proposed and to assess potential researcher biases especially if the investigator has a strong affinity for the participants being studied or is a member of the population itself. (p. 55)

This technique guided me to ask open-ended questions that begin with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, or *how*. I asked follow-up questions to discover details that the participants may not have otherwise revealed. Additional advantages of the technique included not requiring IRB approval and identifying potential biases. Reflexivity and bracketing helped with bias identification. The test run helped me assess and adjust before the actual interviews took place.

The interviewing-the-investigator technique, as outlined by Chenail (2011) and originated by Peat et al. (2002), has these steps:

1. Administer the questions in the same way as in the main study

2. Ask the subjects for feedback to identify ambiguities and difficult questions

3. Record the time taken to complete the interview, decide whether it is reasonable, and

better record participants' time commitments in the IRB protocol

4. Discard all unnecessary, difficult or ambiguous questions

5. Assess whether each question gives an adequate range of responses

6. Establish that replies can be interpreted in terms of the information that is required

7. Check that all questions are answered

8. Re-word or re-scale any questions that are not answered as expected

9. Shorten, revise and, if possible, pilot again. (p. 258)

Chenail (2011) recommended journaling or recording thoughts before and after the interview to resolve bias. The journaling or recording of thoughts assisted with coding the interviews and defining and establishing new interview questions. In addition, Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) suggested researchers make notes of any thoughts, observations, and reflections that occur while reading the transcript or other text. Such notes are likely to include recurring phrases, the researcher's questions, the researcher's emotions, and descriptions of, or comments on, the language used.

Some aspects of the field notes assisted in the initial stages of data coding. I began the coding process during data collection and used empathy throughout the coding process. Phillippi and Lauderdale (2017) reported field notes "aid in constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document's valuable contextual data" (p. 381). Phillippi and Lauderdale also posited that field notes are helpful with subsequent analyses. They suggested taking brief notes during the interview to ensure engagement with the participant, noting the setting of the interview; describing the participant's appearance, mannerisms, and behavior during interview; and engaging in critical reflection once the

interview is completed. I referred to my field notes to identify any themes I missed during the initial coding of the data.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Participants were recruited via military and veteran groups on social media with approval from group administrators. I targeted military and veteran groups who were willing to give approval for participant recruitment. The participants were combat-occupation U.S. military veterans. Since this was homogenous purposeful sampling, when I was unable to recruit enough participants, I used snowball sampling to have participants recruit other participants who fit the sample. Homogenous purposeful sampling is for a specific demographic with a particular lived experience.

Patton (2015) outlined 12 tips for foundational qualitative analysis: (a) begin during fieldwork; (b) inventory and organize data; (c) fill in gaps in data; (d) protect data; (e) express appreciation; (f) reaffirm the purpose of inquiry; (g) review exemplars for inspiration and guidance; (h) make qualitative analysis software decisions; (i) schedule intense, dedicated time for analysis; (j) clarify and determine initial strategy; (k) be reflective and reflexive; and (l) start and keep an analysis journal to include coding information. Journaling throughout the process of each interview will aid in performing these steps. I used semistructured interviews with Atlas.ti to verify manual coding conducted during the interviewing the investigator segment of the study.

I used phenomenological reduction to narrow the data into usable segments (Alase, 2017; Bevan, 2014; Roberts, 2013). This reduction continued until narrowed to one- or two-word phrases or essences, often referred to as coding. The participants' experiences of the transition "concerned with the particular" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) were recorded via videoconferencing,

digital recordings, and field notes. The particular concern of this research was participants' transition experiences, known as ideography.

Geisler (2018) defined coding as "the analytic task of assigning codes to nonnumeric data" (p. 215). Coding of the data begins once the interview is completed. Using verbatim interviews along with field notes allowed me to discover themes. I further simplified the themes to phrases and then reduced the phrases to one- or two-word codes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Coding is taking mass amounts of data (e.g., the interview, field notes, verbatim transcript) and seeing a pattern emerge by repeatedly reviewing it to create themes (Keller, 2017). This framework is established through analysis of data from the interviews with participants with movement from codes to categories to themes. The movement to themes then circles back to the research questions.

The listening guide process entails four steps for in-depth coding: (a) listening for the plot, (b) constructing I poems, (c) listening for contrapuntal voices, and (d) composing an analysis (Petrovic et al., 2015). While reviewing recorded interviews, these steps assisted with reflecting, reflexing, and validating data. Geisler (2018) reminded us to ensure language complexity is managed when coding for qualitative research. Geisler detailed the four aspects of language complexity when coding: "code restructuring, segmentation in advance of coding, use of a full coding scheme, and retrieval of full context by code" (p. 215). I used manual coding with Atlas.ti 8.4 software during the interviewing-the-investigator segment to verify coding themes. Once I had established verification, I used coding software for subsequent interviews.

I ensured I maintained the confidentiality and integrity of participants. I saved the recordings to a Dropbox account that was password protected. I then locked the transcripts in a safe in my office that only I had access to. I will destroy them after the IRB-specified period.

Trustworthiness

To build trust with participants, I notified them that I am an army veteran, though not a veteran with a combat occupation. This helped build rapport and began to establish trust. Researchers sometimes consider trustworthiness a vague concept because it cannot be measured. Ways to address this issue include using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability outlined by Shenton (2004) and adapted from Guba (1981). I established credibility by revealing my veteran status to participants. I then used triangulation to build credibility in my interviews with participants. Triangulation included specific combat occupation, region, age, and marital status. The marital status of participants did not allow for different responses for single and married participants. Participants' physical location could affect their employment opportunities and environments. Further, veterans' combat occupations could affect how these translate to civilian occupations. The use of quotes, metaphors, and contextualized expression aided in credibility. I used reflective commentary and thick description of the phenomenon. I also used peer debriefing and member checks to aid in building trustworthiness. The participants received copies of the transcripts to verify the content. All participants agreed with the original transcripts.

Transferability is described as "the extent to which the study findings are applicable to other contexts" (Ivankova, 2015, p. 265). I established transferability with rich, thick descriptions from the interviews. I addressed dependability with the same measures I used to establish credibility. I also used my reflection notes to address dependability and used triangulation to address confirmability.

I have conducted the Department of Labor Employment Workshop for transitioning service members for several years and have noticed those with combat occupations in air defense

artillery, armor, combat engineering, field artillery, or infantry who had little formal education appeared more stressed than service members with formal education and military occupations that easily transferred to the civilian workforce.

Researcher's Role

Patton (2015) emphasized that the researcher's role in qualitative description is to be the primary means of data collection. Researchers must be active listeners able to empathize and place themselves in the position of the participant. Researchers must be able to ask open-ended questions and allow the participants to articulate their lived experiences. Researchers must also acknowledge personal biases and be reflexive throughout the process of data collection, condensing, analyzing, and interpreting. Revealing my army veteran status was imperative to meeting ethical research standards. My veteran status could have been a source of bias that entered into the research. For example, my personal struggle when I left the military and my teaching the Department of Labor workshop could have presented sources of bias. I also was aware that participants' stories were not mine. The member checks aided in limiting bias. I anticipated lack of preparation and education to be factors in transition barriers as well as civilian stereotypes and military culture impacting transition for combat-occupation veterans. I was mindful of the individual experiences of participants and did not compare theirs to my own.

Ethical Considerations

I received IRB approval before beginning data collection. I was mindful of participants' emotions, feelings, and struggles. Participants were actively reflecting on their lived experiences, and this may have caused unanticipated thoughts that triggered emotions. I must also emphasize the impact the conversation may have had on participants. I emphasized that the participants could withdraw from the research at any time without explanation. I also continued to ensure

participant confidentiality in compliance with IRB guidelines and all rules and regulations required. I had help line information available for participants requiring assistance and a consent sheet available for signature before the interviews. I did not conduct any interviews without signed and dated consent forms. The participants used alternative names to maintain confidentiality. I secured the data collected electronically with password protection, and I was the only one with the password. I locked printed information in a secure lockbox and was the only one with the access code, key, or imprint.

Assumptions

My preliminary assumption was that education factored into the impact of barriers to transition into the civilian sector. Veterans' ability to employ self-leadership also affected their ability to successfully transition into the civilian sector. Veterans' ability to understand the behavior-focused, constructive thought, and natural reward strategies of self-leadership did not affect their responses to the interview questions or my ability to answer the research questions. I derived these assumptions from conducting employment workshops for transitioning service members. Participants may have wanted to answer the way they thought I wanted them to answer instead of answering honestly. As such, I preserved anonymity and confidentiality to ensure participants were comfortable speaking honestly. Participants may not have been aware of their ability to use their acquired skills to transition into the civilian sector with less stress than originally anticipated. Participants were combat-occupation veterans, and continued recruitment of men and women into the U.S. military implies that combat occupations will still exist in the future.

Limitations/Delimitations

This qualitative descriptive study was limited to participants' self-reported perceptions of their transition to the civilian sector. Participants were volunteers willing to tell their story, and these stories may not define the population. The participants may not have been aware of the self-leadership concepts and strategies used in determining transition barriers. Combat-occupation veterans of other ages have barriers as well, but this research was limited to those aged 18–29.

The delimitations include researching transition barriers of combat-occupation U.S. military veterans and the use of social learning theory with an emphasis on self-leadership strategies. The geographic region was worldwide, depending on where participants resided. Participants were U.S. military combat-occupation veterans aged 18–29.

Summary

I used a qualitative descriptive approach to research the transition barriers of military veterans who had served in combat occupations. These participants were enlisted and were not pursuing a career in law enforcement or security. I used homogenous purposeful sampling via social media groups to obtain participants with administrator and IRB approval.

The qualitative descriptive approach allowed me to collect data from participants about their transition. This lived experience was the focus of the study. When using qualitative description, I took the insider's view; showed empathy while asking questions by being reflexive and reflective during interviews and coding; triangulated the data using member checks, field notes, and comparative observations with the interviews (Patton, 2015); and repeatedly condensed the data into manageable segments until the analysis contributed to the themes I used to interpret participants' lived experiences.

I was mindful to use ethical practices throughout the process to protect the participants and provide quality research. I ensured participants had the opportunity to sign the informed consent forms before data collection began. I informed participants of my status as a veteran and facilitator, and I notified them of their ability to withdraw from the study without explanation.

Chapter 4: Results

Combat-occupation veterans are those who directly or indirectly engage the enemy (USMilitary.com, n.d.). Combat-occupation veterans have difficulty finding gainful employment upon leaving the military. Transition can be difficult for veterans entering the civilian workforce. Combat-occupation veterans have more difficulty than others because their military occupations do not directly translate to civilian jobs (Bullock et al., 2009). Additionally, a review of the current literature exposed a gap in understanding combat-occupation veterans' transition into the civilian workforce. This study was conducted to help address this gap. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive their transition readiness levels and the barriers they encounter when entering the civilian workforce. I used the self-leadership attributes of behavior-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought strategies (Manz, 2015; Mendoza, 2017) as guidelines to determine participants' level of transition readiness. In this research, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive their transition readiness levels when entering the civilian workforce?

RQ2: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive barriers that they encounter when entering the civilian workforce?

Participants

I recruited participants for the current study by using homogenous purposeful sampling via social media using LinkedIn veteran groups and veteran groups on Facebook and Instagram. I used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. I had difficulty recruiting participants even with a small monetary e–gift card incentive worth $20. All participants received an e–gift

card. Two participants had completed the interviews without the incentive but still received the

e–gift card.

Fifteen participants responded to the recruitment flyer, but only nine were qualified. Two

of the eight did not complete the interview. One did not attend the scheduled interview and did

not respond to requests to reschedule. One decided not to interview before scheduling occurred.

The remaining six participants fit the criteria and were interviewed. All had the option to sign the

consent form. Three chose to sign, and three declined to sign but completed the interview

anyway. The participants were advised at the beginning of the interviews that they could

withdraw at any time. All participants received the transcribed interviews to review. This action

fulfilled the member check requirement confirming that no changes were necessary.

I field-tested the interview questions using the interviewing-the-investigator technique

described by Chenail (2011). This allowed me to clarify the questions and reflect on my personal

bias. The assistance of field-testing allowed for smooth transition between questions, with

several being answered before being asked. I conducted initial coding using the field test. Patton

(2015) advised researchers to begin analysis during fieldwork. In vivo coding along with taking

notes and creating memos throughout interviews assisted me with beginning my analysis

mentally as well as in writing. Lambert and Lambert (2012) advised the use of a straightforward

summary of the informational content of the data. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) iterated that the

> use of analytic description of the phenomena [is] not affected by prior assumptions made
>
> by the researcher, the importance of order, structure, and meaning, as well as a general
>
> sequential phasing of the date analysis; 1. organizing the data, 2. generating categories, 3.
>
> identifying patterns and themes, and 4. coding the data. (p. 98)

I kept this sequencing in mind while recognizing that data analysis is more cyclic than sequential, with some steps happening simultaneously. Patton (2015) introduced question-by-question analysis to researchers, which aligns with an emphasis on giving voice to each participant. Table 1 provides background information for each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Anonym	Military branch	Military occupation	Age group
Charlie	U.S. Army	Combat engineer	25–29
Delta	U.S. Army	Infantryman	18–24
Echo	U.S. Army	Spotter	18–24
Golf	U.S. Navy	Aircraft boatswain handler	18–24
Yankee	U.S. Navy	Aviation ordnance	25–29
Zulu	U.S. Army	Infantryman	25–29

Charlie is a veteran who used 1 year of his education benefits to attend welding school once he left the military. He was a combat engineer and joined the military to serve his country and help prevent casualties. He lost confidence in the military during the restructuring that changed deployment orders. Instead of the entire battalion going, only a few companies went, and there were mass casualties. He served his 4-year tour and was honorably discharged. He credited the support of family with assisting with his transition. Charlie mentioned that some veterans had no support system, and their transition was worse than his. The loss of structure the military provides can cause veterans to have difficult transitions (Tran et al., 2016). He and other veteran friends assisted a fellow veteran who had no family support. Charlie credited discipline, routine, and being placed in leadership roles as necessary as aiding in his transition. He stated that though the transition was not easy, it could have been much worse.

Delta is a veteran who transitioned after one tour of duty. Delta knew what he wanted to accomplish in the military, and he was able to do that. He prepared for his transition by saving money, selling what he could, and enrolling in school. He completed any paperwork he thought he might need to complete before he left the military and right after he left the military. COVID-19 arrived shortly after Delta left the military. He credits his parents and friends with helping to ensure his transition went smoothly. He did not have time to assimilate before the pandemic, and he was concerned it would hinder his interactions once it was safe for him to interact with others. Delta credited his leadership roles in the military, his preparedness, and his support system with aiding his transition thus far.

Echo is a veteran who was medically retired from the military. He did not complete his first tour. He had planned to make the military his career, but injuries prevented that from happening. Echo was a spotter for snipers. He was unprepared for transition and struggled to find his place. He stated that family and friends have tried to assist with his transition, but it may have been easier if he had used a professional counselor. His transition was still difficult. He believed he was playing catch-up to those who did not enlist in the military. He was still adjusting in all aspects of his life.

Golf is a veteran who served one tour in the military. He felt he had learned all he could from the military, so he made plans to leave. He did some research in real estate and decided to pursue that once he left the military. He was still learning the real estate market and missed the stability of housing and a steady paycheck. His transition had been difficult. He wished he had more knowledge about grants for entrepreneurial veterans. He believed in himself, and it helped to keep him focused and positive. He did not believe the military provided any leadership skills.

Yankee is a veteran who served one tour in the military as an aviation ordnance man. He left because he was unable to get downtime or decompression time. He was continually denied vacation. He felt that leadership had let him down. He did not receive mandated out-processing time either. Yankee was very disillusioned with the military. He immediately became employed where his father worked. He felt his transition was difficult, but he did have family support.

Zulu is a veteran who served one tour and part of a second tour. He left the military because he was not coping well with losing some close friends in combat. He was later diagnosed with PTSD. He left the military with a general discharge that was later upgraded to an honorable discharge. He struggled his first year of transition with drug and alcohol abuse. His mother eventually took him to get help. He did have to go for substance and alcohol abuse treatment several times to get healthy. Zulu credited his military leaders with looking out for him by giving him a general discharge. They allowed him to terminate his contract and become eligible to receive veterans' benefits.
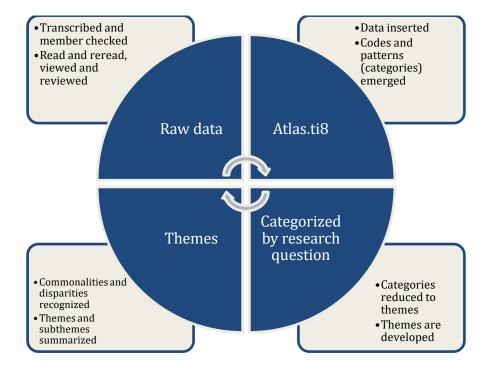
Analysis

The raw data for this research included interview transcripts, field notes, and videos from the participant interviews. I conducted the initial coding using the interviewing-the-interviewer technique described by Chenail (2011). I used Atlas.ti 8.4 for the participant interviews. The shortest interview was 15 minutes and 14 seconds, and the longest interview lasted 23 minutes and 36 seconds. Although the interviews were completed in a short amount of time, the data I collected were thick. I asked all of the interview questions, and participants answered all of them. I video recorded five of the six interviews. The sixth interviewer chose to type in the chat area of the Zoom call. This participant (Echo) was wheelchair bound. I respected the boundaries he established and was able to maintain trust and open dialogue by doing so.

Qualitative descriptive research works well with thematic analysis because it can show similarities and differences in participants' perspectives (Cahill et al., 2021; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) posited that the researcher's judgment is necessary to determine what a theme is and its importance. A theme "represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

I identified codes by repeatedly reading and viewing the data until patterns and themes emerged. I reduced the data to four main themes: military occupation, leadership and self-leadership definitions and traits, Research Question 1, and Research Question 2. In vivo coding began with inputting the raw data into the software program Atlas.ti 8.4. I then reduced the codes by eliminating redundancy and combining similar codes. Finally, I categorized the codes according to the research questions and acquired the above themes.

Themes emerged through constant reading, viewing, rereading, reviewing, and creating researcher notes. The participants all agreed that they would not go back to the military and believed their decision to leave was best for them and their situation. The themes aligned with the research questions and leadership concepts. I created Figure 1 to demonstrate the cyclic movement to obtain the emergent themes.

Figure 1

Theme Emergence Cycle

I used inductive thematic analysis to answer the research questions. Braun and Clarke

(2006) stated that inductive thematic analysis is ideal for investigating underresearched areas.

Transition barriers of combat-occupation veterans are an underresearched topic. There were eight

interview questions and two research questions. I used three interview questions to address

Research Question 1 and three interview questions to address Research Question 2. I used the

first interview question to identify participants' combat occupation. Interview Question 7

addressed the definition and traits of leadership and self-leadership.

Research Question 1: Perceived Transition Levels

Theme 1: Military Leadership Factors

Analysis of the interviews revealed that half of the participants left because of decisions

military leaders made. Charlie was unable to recover morale after military leaders decided to

send only a small portion of the brigade to Afghanistan. His morale plummeted after the loss of so many casualties and friends. Delta wanted freedom from the rigid structure. Yankee wanted work–life balance.

Charlie struggled with leadership's decision to send a small segment of the brigade to Afghanistan. He joined the military because of 9/11, and he wanted to be part of the solution of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. Leadership deployed only two battalions without support. Charlie stated, "The army was restructuring" and "felt that they'd had no need for a[n] infantry brigade inside of an armored division. . . . They got rid of the infantry brigade. . . . They really got messed up down in Afghanistan." Charlie was discouraged by the results: "They took a lot of casualties. One of their sergeant majors was killed. Yeah, it really bothered me because I had friends in both of those. And I think all of our morals went down."

Yankee wanted work–life balance. Leadership would cancel his leave and not give him time to acclimate to new duty stations before going out to the ocean on drills or assignments. He stated he was stressed because he was not afforded the time to visit or rest. He said, "I was tired. I was always out to see and felt I got screwed over too much." He was stationed in Japan and not allowed to visit family once he received his new duty station in the States. He said, "Yeah, plus I was stationed overseas for 3 years, and they didn't even let me go home when I finally came back stateside to my new base." He talked about being upset. He stated, "So I think it was 3 days after I arrived back. I left Japan and I went to . . . and I got there on a Thursday, I think it was, and on that Monday, I went out to sea." He decided to leave the military.

Delta felt the rigid structure did not allow him to progress. He stated, "It's just I didn't enjoy having to get every little thing approved by five different people, if I just wanted to go down the street and hang out." Delta wanted to be trusted to make his own decisions.

The combat-occupation veterans left the military because leadership decisions were not beneficial to their core beliefs or self-preservation. They no longer felt that leadership was making wise decisions concerning them and their well-being.

No Longer a Fit. Echo was injured and unable to stay in the military. He said, "I sustained injuries, which meant I was no longer physically fit to serve anymore." Golf wanted to find something better. He stated, "Honestly, the reason why I left the military [was] because I believe it was time for me to go, because I wanted to branch out and do more for my life." Zulu was suffering from diagnosed PTSD, drug and alcohol abuse, and possibly depression and grief. He expressed,

> I deployed twice to Afghanistan, and first one I came back with PTSD and whatnot already. . . . I just fell into a lot of heavy drinking . . . recreational drugs. . . . I talked to my commander, and I told him that I wanted to get out.

Culturally the veterans and the military were no longer aligned. Hill (2015) iterated that military cultures have "their own sociology, history, values and beliefs . . . built on these principles of shared history and values" (p. 86). The participants no longer shared the values and beliefs of the military culture.

Theme 2: Transition is Hard

As noted in Theme 1, the participants were ready to leave or were forced to leave. They felt unprepared for reentering the civilian workforce and sector. Four participants were aware they would not reenlist. Two were unaware they would be leaving the military soon. Four mentioned adjusting to the lifestyle, and two mentioned financial security. Five participants mentioned the support system they had once they left the military.

Although many participants knew they were leaving, they still felt unprepared. Echo did not know he was leaving the military. Echo said, "Nothing had been easy for me. I went in whole and left on a wheelchair. Except I get to oversleep." Echo felt he was trying to catch up with those who did not enlist in the military. Delta wanted to know about grants for transitioning service members. He was not aware of the Boots to Business track of the transition program for those wanting to start their own business. Golf mentioned "knowing you're about to get paid, having a place to stay guaranteed, and having all the guarantees there, and then transition[ing] out and not have nothing behind you." He knew he had to provide these things for himself and sometimes felt overwhelmed. Zulu left the military because he was getting in trouble because of his poor decisions concerning drug and alcohol use. He was diagnosed with PTSD but was having difficulties. He said,

So my transition was really rough. Like I said, I fell into it really heavy drug and alcohol addiction for probably the first—and it was kind of off and on, but initially getting out for that first year, especially. At least the first year, I was really into a lot of heavy stuff. And then I was in and out of jail a little bit. And then finally my mom, she basically dragged me by the ears to the VA, and I'm grateful that she did. I was kicking and screaming at the time. I didn't want anything to do with it, but of course I'm really grateful now. And so I eventually was in and out of rehab and stuff a little bit.

These veterans had different stories, but they all emphasized the difficulties of transition for veterans, specifically combat-occupation veterans. All the participants said in the beginning transition is rough. Some of the participants were still adjusting more than others. Golf was getting his business going, and Echo was finding his new normal. Losing the safety net the military provided was a big adjustment.

Change in Lifestyle. The military has a culture that is different than that of the civilian sector, and readjusting to the civilian sector can be a major culture shock (Hanna et al., 2018). Two-thirds of participants had or still had a difficult time readjusting. The loss of structure the military provides can have veterans feeling as though they have no purpose.

Charlie focused on the cultural differences. He said, "The switch in lifestyle . . . in the civilian world, you're just thrown out there. If you make it, you make it or you don't." The military provides a roadmap that the civilian workforce does not; veterans must create their own roadmap. Delta mentioned the loss of a safety net. He said, "It's not knowing what you are going to do. It's the sense of financial and the security that you had while you were inside. . . . It's just not there. You are on your own." Echo mentioned the disconnect: "Fitting back in, the society has—I mean, I left for 5 years, stopped my life literally, and came back to find everyone else and everything has moved on. I'm in a race to catch up." He felt that the military had caused him to lose valuable time by having to readjust and get to the level of his civilian counterparts.

Golf mentioned the loss of a safety net. He said, "Transitioning out of having somebody there for you, knowing you're about to get paid, having a place to stay guaranteed, and having all the guarantees there, and then transition[ing] out and not having nothing behind you." Yankee mentioned the readjustment: "trying to adjust back into civilian life." Zulu mentioned his struggles. He said, "My transition was really rough. I was really into a lot of heavy stuff. And then I was in and out of jail a little bit." The transition has many different facets, and the participants spoke about the ones that really stood out for them.

Support System. Ahern et al. (2015), Drebing et al. (2018), Hill (2015), and Rose et al. (2017) showed that having a support system is conducive to lessening the stress of transition. The participants smiled while talking about their support systems. Most of them mentioned

family; a few mentioned friends. One participant talked about being a support system for fellow veterans. Charlie stated that the easiest part of his transition was "coming home and having my family's support. The support structure helped me a lot." Delta stated he was able to get everything set up before the COVID-19 pandemic. He had a lot of support from his parents and friends when he got out. He said, "Just getting back was really easy because I had a lot of support when I came home." The participants who mentioned having a strong support system appeared to adjust better and more quickly than the participants who did not have a support system in place when transitioning to the civilian sector.

Theme 3: Transition Preparedness

Five participants did not prepare for transition. Delta was the only participant who mentioned saving money and enrolling in school in preparation for separation from the military. Charlie thought he was prepared until he got out. He recovered quickly, went to school, and created his own routine. Yankee knew he would have to find work quickly and stick with a routine like the military to assist with the stress of transition. He started working where his father worked and used his connections and support system to stay on task. Echo and Zulu reached out to friends for assistance with living arrangements; they both had a very difficult transition. Golf had his business but no other income to rely on.

Charlie prepared by moving back near his support system and enrolling in a trade school. He stayed connected with his friend from the military. Charlie said, "I did not prepare well, and it showed. I didn't really have anyone show me what I would actually need to prepare for civilian life." Delta stated saving money and selling whatever he could helped him prepare. He said, "Lot of dudes, they just do the paycheck-to-paycheck type thing. I was like that for a while myself, but once I knew that I was getting out, there was not question about it. I really started paying

attention to my finances. I tried to save as much money as I could." Echo used his network. He said, "I called on old buddies and relations, found myself an apartment. Though it came unexpected."

Golf went to an entrepreneurial event and resonated with the real estate endeavor. He started his own business while he was still in the military. He closed his first deal during transition. He felt it was destined. He said, "I was looking for another outlet to do once I got outside the military. I was like, okay, this is something I could do." Once Yankee let his chain of command know he was getting out, he felt they decided he could figure it out on his own time. He said, "Usually, the military, they put you through a—it's called a preseparation class. Well, I was out to sea. I didn't get to go through that class." They told him he could do it on PowerPoint because it was easy. Yankee said, "I felt like I got dropped out and figure it out yourself." Zulu tried to strategically plan his transition but knew it was not a solid plan. His command was supportive. Zulu said, "They told me if I kept my crap together long enough to go through the process, that they would do it [let me leave the military] . . . They wouldn't give me the shaft with a dishonorable." He lived with a buddy who had recently left the military. That was the extent of his transition plan.

The lack of a solid transition plan caused the participants to take longer to acclimate to the civilian sector. The lack of leadership support in transition services caused participants to be unaware of transition guides and networks to aid in reintegration into the civilian sector and workforce. Leadership traits and skills assisted the participants in eventual reintegration into the civilian sector and workforce.

Research Question 2: Perceived Barriers Encountered

Theme 4: What Leadership Means to Me

The participants expressed several beliefs: leaders are examples for others to follow, know your people, treat people right, and let us learn from strong leaders. Sivarat et al. (2021) defined leadership as "a form of interpersonal influence" (p. 208). This definition closely resembled how participants used the term during the interviews. Five of the six participants were frustrated with the leadership. Delta felt the leadership was more interested in reports than people. Yankee felt the leadership dismissed him once they knew he was leaving the military. Golf did not have faith in his leadership. Charlie lost morale because of leadership decisions. Leaders who set good examples were commended but overshadowed by those in higher leadership who did not work directly with personnel.

Leading by Example. The participants heard what leaders said, but they believed what the leaders did. When leaders did not allow participants to go to beneficial trainings or provide necessary support, the participants lost faith in them. Militaries have their own culture "built on the principles of shared history and values" (Hill, 2015, p. 86). When service members no longer believe in their leaders, a disconnect occurs. Leaders who care more about reports than people lose good people. This is true for the militaries and the civilian workforce.

Self-Leadership. Participants all expressed traits of self-leadership. Their words included self-esteem, determination, discipline, goal setting, and being consistent. Self-leadership traits have assisted the participants with transition. They all are determined to succeed. Their transition plans may not have been solid, but their self-leadership skills are assisting with their personal successes.

Charlie defined self-leadership as follows: "Self-leadership is, for me, it would be finding the motivation to move forward even in the absence of a direction, a direction from other people." He was also a team leader. Delta defined self-leadership as

> setting goals for yourself. Then once you achieve that, you just up it and up it. I feel like that self-motivating factor is good because if you focus on yourself and you become a better individual, then I bet it'll show for you being a better soldier. Then you will find that other people will come to you, and you just become a natural leader from that perspective because people come to you, seeking advice. . . . What helped me be a good leader, because I was a team leader for a little bit, was the fact that I took the time to listen to people and stuff. So I feel like me focusing on myself to help better myself transitioned to how I interacted with other people.

Echo's definition of leadership was "being able to guide, do what you expect others to do, and be there for them." The traits of leadership Echo saw in himself were "being assertive and high self-esteem. They've pulled me out of the darkness when I'd lost hope." Golf's definition was "being able to show people the way of doing something without having to necessarily tell them. But be an example of what you're trying to lead them to do." Golf felt he did not learn leadership traits from the military:

> The leadership choice I've adopted really came from me working my business, and people see me being consistent with something and wanting to follow at the time. So I feel like that's where it came from, from my own personal.

Yankee defined it as follows: "My definition of leadership is someone that can actually guide you on the right path. To me, a leader, that's the dead on what you need for leadership. Someone that is there to guide you the right way." Yankee also noted, "I had to figure everything

out on my own. I tried my hardest to stay on the right path . . . so I made sure I stayed on the

right."

Zulu combined the definition of leadership with the traits of leadership:

I was a team leader . . . which carried over nicely now that I got my crap together.

Communication is a leadership trait. I guess for me being a leader, it's all about

relationships. It's all about relationships and empathy. . . . I've made a transition to

where, as a leader, I want to build other leaders. I want to help other people to become

leaders. I got to be able to serve those who I am leading. And that ties to my faith and

everything. That's how my Lord and Savior, that's how he did it, and that's the best way

to get it done. I just try to lead by example.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how U.S. military

combat-occupation veterans perceived their transition readiness level and the barriers they

encountered when entering the civilian workforce. This chapter provided an in-depth account of

the data obtained through semistructured interviews with U.S. military combat-occupation

veterans between the ages of 18 and 29. I interviewed six combat-occupation veterans and used

in vivo coding and inductive thematic analysis for data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006)

posited inductive thematic analysis is ideal for investigating underresearched phenomena such as

transition barriers for combat-occupation veterans. Data coding helped to identify and explain

the transition perspectives of the participants. Table 2 details emergent themes.

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Theme	Subthemes	
Military leadership factors	No longer a fit	
Transition is hard	Change in lifestyle	Support system
Transition preparedness		
What leadership means to me	Leading by example	Self-leadership

The themes provided views of combat-occupation veterans' transitions and their personal struggles with transition. The participants had to learn new cultures, find a new purpose, create their own plan, and use their self-leadership traits to transition to the civilian sector and the civilian workforce. There were similarities but also divergent views that showed the complexities of their lived experiences. Most participants allowed their support systems to assist with their transitions, whereas others wanted to use their support systems for specific things like housing and transportation. Chapter 5 discusses the study findings and answers the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceived their transition readiness level and the barriers they encountered when entering the civilian workforce. I believed that using combat-occupation veterans' voices concerning transition would provide key insights for assisting future combat-occupation veterans with their transition. I asked each participant the same questions (see Appendix A) during the semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom. I transcribed the interviews electronically, and the participants member-checked them. I completed the analysis via Atlas.ti 8.4, and five major themes emerged: (a) veterans are underprepared for transition, (b) transition is difficult, (c) a support system is key, (d) leaders must allow service members to prepare for transition, and (e) self-leadership is a catalyst for successful transition. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from six in-depth interviews with combat-occupation veterans aged 18–29. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive their transition readiness levels when entering the civilian workforce?

RQ2: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive barriers that they encounter when entering the civilian workforce?

The following is a discussion of the findings with details that support and explain each finding. The emphasis was on the voices of the participants. Their experiences of their transition were the focus. Each participant had their personal phenomenon, and I diligently adhered to their individual views. Thick descriptions are needed for qualitative research (Patton, 2015), and these were evident in participants' perceptions.

Discussion of Findings

Participants of this study consisted of combat-occupation veterans from the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years. The combat-occupation veterans discussed their transition and what helped or hindered their transition to the civilian workforce. They also told their definitions and perceptions of leadership.

Veterans are Underprepared for Transition

Schlossberg (2011) described transitions as life-altering changes that include "roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159). The participants emphasized the lack of routines, the loss of roles, and the assumptions of others as factors in their lack of preparedness. Although two participants had solid plans for their transition, they still struggled with their transition. One of the two was concerned with reintegration once the pandemic was over, and the other was surprised that it was so difficult.

Two other participants left the military unexpectedly: one asked to leave so he did not receive a dishonorable discharge, and the other left because of his injuries. The remaining participants left once their military obligation was completed. One did not have the support of his military leaders, and the other was ready to grow his entrepreneurial business. Although the participants were aware of the decision, they did not thoroughly prepare. They learned and adapted as they moved through their transition.

Transition is Difficult

The military provides a culture and supports service members in ways absent in the civilian sector. Hall and Yip (2016) mentioned the self-serving aspects of the civilian workforce as opposed to the overall support and guidance the military provides. The participants were not expecting the transition difficulties they encountered. When asked what the most difficult part of

the transition was, participants mentioned loss of their safety net, having to catch up with their civilian counterparts, finding a routine that works for them, and lack of support. Pease et al. (2015) suggested that reintegration includes finding purpose, developing interpersonal relationships, having employment or entering school, and having the basics of housing, health care, food, and other necessities.

Participants also had health issues to contend with such as PTSD, guilt, and other psychological issues. Physical issues included navigating with a wheelchair and the added stressor of peoples' perceptions of those physical limitations. Many had to find a new normal, which could take time, even years.

A Strong Support System is Key

All participants talked about having support systems to help them navigate the civilian sector and workforce. They state that having that positive support helped them to establish new routines, become gainfully employed, provide tough love, and offer advice. Two of the six mentioned having their family and friends embrace them and welcome them back with open arms. They mentioned how important that was to them. One participant talked about knowing he had to become gainfully employed and using his family connections to work so that he was financially stable. Yankee said, "Luckily, where I'm working at, my dad works there. . . . I started working there a month after I got out, and I made sure it would put me on the right track."

Two participants mentioned having family support but wanting to be independent. These participants used their family and friends' connections to help with housing but wanted to find their own way. One was in school, and the other was an entrepreneur. They had access to their support networks. Jakubiak et al. (2019) mentioned that invisible support may be easier for

service members to accept than visible support. Support systems could lessen transition stress (Ahern et al., 2015; Drebing et al., 2018; Hill, 2015; Rose et al., 2017).

Leaders Must Allow Service Members to Prepare for Transition

The major consensus was that military leaders did not provide participants with expected qualities. One participant said his leaders supported him when he wanted to leave the military; they allowed him to leave before his contract ended as long as he followed the rules while they prepared the paperwork. Zulu stated, "Thankfully my command was really cool, really understanding with everything, and they worked with me so I got out on a general discharge." Others stated their leaders did not allow them to participate in transition training that may have helped them better prepare for their transition. One participant said he was not even allowed to attend mandatory training; he was given PowerPoint slides. Once he finished out-processing, they gave him a set of instructions on how to return his military identification and complete other paperwork. Four of the participants said military leaders were no longer concerned with them once participants disclosed that they were leaving the military. Military leaders need to provide leadership throughout service members' military career, not just on the first day but through the last day. Delta stated, "If it wasn't specifically mandated by SFL-TAP . . . and even sometimes when it was . . . just do stuff that you knew that were no longer pertinent to you." Yankee said, "When I got out, I didn't—usually, the military, they put you through a—it's called a preseparation class. Well . . . I didn't get to go through that class."

Self-Leadership Is a Catalyst for Successful Transition

All six of the participants used self-leadership attributes to assist with their transition. Bandura (1977) listed these attributes as self-regulation, self-management, self-determination, and self-motivation. Marques (2017) said, "Self-regulation, self-control, and self-management

form a strong and solid foundation for self-leadership" (p. 20). Self-regulation entails learning from previous mistakes and taking appropriate actions. Self-control entails setting goals and performing necessary tasks to complete those goals. Self-management is controlling one's goal accomplishments by using internal and external measures for fulfilling those set goals.

Participants were determined to achieve their transition goals by using the self-leadership attributes acquired or honed during their military service. They went to school, work, rehabilitation centers, and other places to help them transition to the civilian sector and the civilian workforce. Kirchner (2018) stated that veterans have a natural embedded leader development that happens from enlistment to completion of service. The participants added validity to that statement.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, I have concluded that transition is difficult, especially when cultural changes are involved. Military leaders need to actively support the transition to the civilian sector, and self-leadership is further developed and honed by military service. I recommend that the military begin preparing service members for transition at their first duty assignments. I recommend that military leaders connect with veterans who have had difficult transitions and see the difficulties the veterans have with transition. I also recommend that self-leadership attributes be introduced to service members upon entrance into the military and developed throughout their military careers.

Researchers can examine the challenges that combat-occupation veterans encounter when articulating which of their skills are assets to civilian employers. Researchers can examine the different transition approaches of the armed forces. Researchers can also examine what veterans want to be addressed when transitioning to the civilian sector.

Statement of Implications for Practice

The government agencies that work with and for the U.S. military can create specific programs and practices for service members and transitioning service members with combat occupations who are targeted for a successful transition once those veterans leave the military. The findings indicate their transition is more stressful and difficult because they do not have occupations that transition easily to the civilian workforce. The U.S. military can ensure the transition programs are being used properly. Any transitioning service member should be allowed to attend the training and should not be pulled from it. The supervisors should be held accountable for preventing or hindering transitioning service members from attending transition programs. The transitioning service members should be made aware a year before transition, if possible, that they can attend the transition programs. Transition policies need to be enforced and not just written.

Limitations

Participant recruitment was very difficult. I recruited through social media sites with military and veteran groups. I used snowball sampling to help recruit when I interviewed participants. After 14 months, I had six participants. I am aware of the small sample size and that participants gave brief interviews. I believe their debriefings kept them from volunteering to participate. Their experiences may have also factored into their willingness to participate.

Reflection

As a veteran who transitioned out of the military twice with occupations that were transferable, I remember the difficulties I faced. Once I started facilitating the Department of Labor Employment Workshop, I saw a pattern with specific groups of service members. I made myself available before class, during lunch, and after class for those wanting additional

assistance or resources. The service members with combat occupations and little or no education beyond high school began asking questions, so decided to focus on that specific population for this study.

I wanted to honor my fellow veterans and give them a voice in their transition. When a service member enters the military, they are embraced by this large family. When they leave, the family gets much smaller, and the members who led and guided them are no longer available. Military culture is all-encompassing. Once service members take a different path, they are now excluded. They must make major changes rapidly, and if they are unprepared, have no support system, or do not have easily transferable skills, they struggle with their transition.

I used the voices of the participants to tell their transition stories. I spent countless hours and several years working on this study to let their voices be heard. I gave them a safe space with an understanding of the military culture in which to speak. I am thankful and grateful of their trust. These veterans are not statistics or reports to me; they are my veteran brothers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceived their transition readiness level and the barriers they encountered when entering the civilian workforce. To examine the lived experiences of participants' transition readiness and barriers, I used a qualitative descriptive approach with semistructured interviews. Findings from this study indicated that (a) military leaders factored into the decision to leave the military, (b) the participants felt they were no longer a cultural fit, (c) transition is difficult, (d) the lifestyle changes play a major role in transition barriers, (e) having a strong support system helps, (f) unexpected challenges occur even when veterans are prepared for transition, (g) leadership is

shown by action and not words, and (h) the military does introduce or hone self-leadership traits that aid in transition.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research Question 1: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive their transition readiness levels when entering the civilian workforce?

Interview questions

- Why did you leave the military?

- What has been the easiest part of your transition? Why?

- How did you prepare for transition into the workforce?

Research Question 2: How do U.S. military combat-occupation veterans perceive barriers that they encounter when entering the civilian workforce?

Interview questions

- What has been the hardest part of your transition? Why?

- Is there anything that would have better prepared you for this transition? How?

Appendix B: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

April 15, 2020

Carole Thomas
Department of Educational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Carole,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"Transition Barriers of U.S. Army Veterans with Combat Occupations",

(IRB# 20-047   ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs