

RESEARCH

African American Veterans Career Transition Using the Transition Goals, Plans, Success (GPS) Program as a Model for Success

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Increased deployments to combat operation areas have resulted in veterans transitioning from the military in more significant numbers. Likewise, African American veterans are also leaving the military in higher numbers. Transition assistance training is necessary to prepare these veterans for higher education and civilian employment since these are the most likely destinations for the successful transition of this population of veterans. Transition Goals, Plans, Success Program (Transition GPS) prepares military personnel for the transition back to civilian life. Transition GPS focuses on helping military personnel to become career-ready through mandatory curriculum-based training in a classroom setting before departing the military for civilian life. This study aims to understand better the transition experiences of African American veterans, their participation in the Transition GPS program, and the challenges they face obtaining employment and higher education after military service. Moreover, higher education is vital for the self-improvement and economic stability of African American veterans. The participants for this study were six African American veterans who served in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, and Army National Guard. Each participant served in their respective branch of the military for 20 years or more. Veterans in this study highlighted the challenges they faced during their transition from the military to civilian life and acknowledged the importance of higher education. The themes that emerged are representative of the participants' life experiences, military transition experiences, and demonstrates higher education's role in a successful transition. The participants expressed the importance of family during their transitions, but they need help to better understand civilian careers and employment before leaving the military. Furthermore, African American veterans need career counseling to help them understand their transition experiences and help to prepare an adequate resume that translates their military skills into a civilian job match.

Keywords: transition; veterans; career development; higher education**Introduction**

Military service is one of the most accessible means for young Americans to gain skills and employment experience. According to Kleykamp (2007), military service is designated as a labor market outcome since the all-volunteer force may have an impact on employment rates. A serious impact comes from more significant numbers of veterans transitioning out of the military services as a result of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As of 2012 approximately 200,000 veterans were projected to transition out of the military to the civilian sector every year (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). These wars have also led to African American veterans leaving the military service

in higher numbers as compared to other veterans (Ottley, 2014).

Combat veterans appear to have a harder time transitioning than other veterans. Minnis (2017) found the most significant challenge for veterans transitioning from the military was finding employment and procuring careers in their new environment. The transition to civilian life for military veterans is a complicated and challenging task. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) found 51 percent of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan reported their transition and adjustment to civilian life was complicated. Zogas (2017) found 61 percent to 68 percent of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan reported their transition

to civilian life was difficult. Likewise, Edwards (2016) found 75 percent of African American veterans reported a difficult transition to civilian life.

In this study, the problem addressed was African American veterans facing numerous barriers transitioning from the military to civilian life and employment. Additionally, these veterans are not receptive to nor are taking advantage of higher education and/or using the benefits they have earned (Aikins, Golub, & Bennett, 2015; Keillor, 2009). These veterans also have difficulty translating their military skills into a civilian job match. African American veterans' failure to seek higher education and utilize their benefits may result from their lack of knowledge about Veterans Administration (VA) education programs along with his or her mental status interfering with performance in higher education settings (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). African American veterans' transition experiences, education, and civilian employment are the focus of the study because seeking higher education and employment are the two primary barriers in which returning African American veterans face and have the most significant difficulty overcoming.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused many African American servicemen and women to transition from the armed forces with severe physical and mental health issues. As African American veterans reintegrate into society and the workforce, they may face more significant challenges because of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), lack of training, and/or higher education, as well as failure to participate in one of many vocational services programs. PTSD is "a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event—either experiencing or witnessing an event" (Roberts, Gilman, Breslau, Breslau, & Koenen, 2011 p. 71). Additionally, being both a woman veteran and African American increases the difficulty of the transition because of a variety of complex issues they face such as pay equity, work-life balance, and gender discrimination (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Additionally, the woman veteran's socio-cultural background and the challenges of reintegration add to their transition difficulties (Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

From a historical perspective, African American veterans' needs are greater than other veterans' needs due to racial discrimination embedded within the fiber of America (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Even perceived racial discrimination had been found to have negative outcomes for African American veterans' mental health (Chou, Asnaani, & Hofman, 2012). According to Chou et al. (2012), racial discrimination is viewed as the adverse treatment of an ethnic group because of negative feelings or beliefs about that minority population. They noted that perceived racism and racial discrimination could impact the mental health status of African American veterans (Chou et al., 2012; Loo, Ueda, & Morton, 2007). To address these issues a qualitative investigation using semi-structured interviews of six African American veterans were conducted.

Thus, factors such as veterans' identity, combat experiences, and military experience also have the potential to affect veterans' health (Sohn & Harada, 2008). As African American veterans face these challenges, they also face lower socioeconomic and educational status if they utilize the VA for medical and other healthcare services (Chou et al., 2012). The reason for this may be due to the number of hours spent waiting in a VA facility to receive care where the estimated rate of unemployment for veterans with mental health—which includes PTSD, substance abuse, and bipolar depression issues—was a staggering 65 percent (Kukla, Kelsey & Salyers, 2015). Combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in more cases of PTSD because of deployment experiences and exposure to combat stressors (Muralidharan, Austern, Hack, & Vogt, 2016). Socioeconomic factors such as minority race and lower educational levels influence black/minority veterans' risk factors for PTSD (Xue et al., 2015). However, the debate concerning why minority veterans have increased risks for PTSD continues. Circumstances such as pre or post risks factor and being assigned to combat roles may be a contributing cause (Xue et al., 2015).

Another concern is the high rate of unemployment among African American veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, which is currently at nine point six percent compared to six point seven percent for all veterans (Stern, 2017). Because of barriers African American veterans face, access to higher education is necessary to help improve their socioeconomic status and reduce the possibilities of becoming unemployed and homeless (Kelykamp, 2007). Ottley (2014) found unemployment and incorrect diagnosis of physical and mental health issues, coupled with veterans' lack of knowledge about VA housing benefits resulted in 56 percent of Black or Hispanic veterans' homelessness.

This study aimed to explore the transition experiences of African American veterans, their participation in the Transition GPS, and the challenges they faced obtaining employment and higher education after military service. This research also examined Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its application as an adequate framework for African American veterans transitioning to civilian life.

Problem Statement and Purpose

While preparing to leave military service, African American veterans experience various obstacles receiving effective transition assistance training to help with their successful transition to civilian life. Zogas (2017) noted the transition to civilian life was a challenging event for most veterans. The Department of Defense has implemented the Transition GPS program, but little has changed to provide African American veterans with the necessary assistance they need to reintegrate back to civilian life. Gaining meaningful employment and earning a college degree has been shown to help with the transition success of African American veterans. Unfortunately, these veterans are not often receptive to nor taking

advantage of higher education or using the benefits they earned (Ottley, 2014; Keillor, 2009). These veterans also have difficulty translating their military skills into a civilian job match.

Likewise, these veterans also leave the military with unrealistic expectations about the civilian workforce, which adds to the difficulty of their transition. Furthermore, African American veterans' failure to seek higher education and use their benefits may result from their lack of knowledge about VA education programs and his or her mental status which interferes with performance in higher education settings (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). According to Aikins et al. (2015), African American veterans are underrepresented in American higher education and adversely impact the national economic health because of the costs associated with their care. Furthermore, an adverse impact on social equity is also altered for African American veterans.

The Veterans Benefits Administration offers seven educational benefits programs to aid veterans and encourage their enrollment in higher education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). It is estimated that the national economic health cost to care for veterans with PTSD is six billion dollars a year and the cost is increasing by approximately two billion dollars yearly (Congressional Budget Office, 2012). Improving the mental health status of these veterans is an essential task that must be addressed to improve their social equity and to reintegrate them back into civilian society.

Developing an in-depth understanding of African American veterans and the challenges they face has implications for future research because of the limited research on this topic. Likewise, researchers have not sufficiently addressed why African American veterans have the highest rates of deployment to combat zones than other veterans, which may also contribute to the increasing rates of PTSD in African American veterans (Ottley, 2014). Unfortunately, many African American veterans refuse treatment for PTSD because of stigmas associated with their service-connected disability. As of 2012, African Americans made up approximately 16.9 percent of the active duty forces of the military. With this being the case, African Americans make up the second-largest percentage of the armed forces compared to Whites, although the African American population is 13.2 percent nationally (Ottley, 2014).

Overall, as noted by Aikins et al. (2015), African American veterans face greater challenges reintegrating into society and the workforce because of a lack of training and higher education and failure to take part in vocational services programs. Although the New Post-9/11 GI Bill has presented more benefits and opportunities for veterans to receive an education after their transition from the military, African American veterans continue to fail to use their benefits as compared to other veterans (Keillor, 2009). In response to this problem, an investigation about the transition experiences of African American veterans

was conducted. The investigation included higher education's impact on their transition and the training African American veterans receive when transitioning from the military. Understanding why African American veterans are underrepresented in higher education may help improve their higher education enrollment and the potential for future employment.

According to Minnis (2017), the successful transition of veterans from the military to the civilian workplace has the potential to improve their employment outcome during their job search. The role of the Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioner will also become significant to veterans' career development plans, education, and employment hiring process to improve the transition experience of veterans. Civilian employment of African American veterans after military service may be limited compared to other veterans due to exposure to combat (Minnis, 2017). However, developing an in-depth understanding of African American veterans, why they have lower college enrollment, the effect of PTSD on receiving a higher education, and the challenges they face transitioning from the military, have implications for future research.

Research Questions

1. What were the transition experiences of African American veterans as they left the military for civilian life?
2. How effective was the Transition GPS program in preparing African American veterans for their transition to civilian life?
3. What were the transition experiences that led to the successful transition of African American veterans to civilian life?

Summary of Study and Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used to ground this study and to interpret the findings. According to Schlossberg, a transition is any event or non-event that results in change. Relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles are affected by change caused during a transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Schlossberg's Transition Theory has been used in counseling adults in transition and has implications for counseling veterans. Several studies have found Schlossberg's theory to have valuable application for veterans transitioning to civilian life and employment (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Schlossberg's Theory 4S Model as a framework also has the potential to help African American veterans understand their transition experiences and to develop a perspective approach to interpret their transition.

Schlossberg's 4S Model was used to help analyze and interpret African American veterans' understanding of their transition. Schlossberg identified three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event transitions. Expected life events are anticipated transitions and occur as expected; but unexpected life events are

unanticipated transitions that are not expected to occur. Non-event transitions are the expected events that do not occur. The veterans in this study experienced anticipated transitions since they planned to leave the military for civilian life.

As an assessment and intervention tool, the 4S Model focuses on the situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & Goodman, 2014). According to Wheeler (2012), veterans experience the moving-in-stage when they enter the military, develop their military identity, and learn what the military culture expects. The moving-through-stage is like the moving-in-stage with the exception that the individual knows what is going on with their transition and understands their role. Veterans experience this stage while they are serving their country, whether on the military installation or in a combat environment. In the final stage, the moving-out-stage, the individual has completed their transition and starts to look for their next transition. For veterans, this involves leaving the military and becoming civilians (Wheeler, 2012).

This study incorporated the 4S Model to help answer the research questions. The 4S Model is used to develop a model of the veterans' transition in their present phase. In this study, the results from each interview were applied to the 4S Model to help answer the research questions. The 4S Model was also necessary to help with the collection and analysis of the data. The 4S Model can also help in the analysis of any transition and assist individuals in understanding and deciding if their resources are enough to support their transition (Schlossberg, 2011).

Situation

Situation in the 4S Model refers to what is happening at the time of a veteran's transition. The situation differs according to the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, prior experience, concurrent stress, and assessment. The veterans in this study were aware of their situation of leaving the military for retirement and becoming unemployed until they found civilian employment. The participants also moved their families to start their new lives in a civilian community. Leaving the safety of the military community was one of their fears that affected their situation during a transition. According to Demers (2011), 65 to 80 percent of veterans leave the military without a job and have unreasonable expectations of finding employment quickly.

Understanding the situation will help veterans make better decisions during their transition. Participants were focused on leaving the military and have not fully considered their situation. Many of these veterans believed being financially secure would lead to a successful transition. During the interviews, veterans expressed their transition experiences from their limited knowledge to analyze their situation. Career counselors are necessary to help veterans gain a better understanding of how to move through the transition process.

Self

Self in the 4S Model examines the individual experiencing the transition and what they bring to the transition. The individual's socioeconomic status, demographics, gender, ethnicity, age, and state of health impacts how individuals cope with their transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). These factors also affect how the individual navigates through the transition. African American veterans need more guidance in this area since they are members of a marginalized population that experiences discrimination in all areas of life (Sohn & Harada, 2008). Discrimination has been shown to have adverse outcomes on minority populations and their ability to function in society (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Support

Support in the 4S Model discusses the four types of support systems available during a transition. The four types of support—intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and the institution or community—help ease the transition process (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The individual should use these support structures to help them get through their transition. The Transition GPS program provided the mandatory briefing for veterans but did not assist veterans with an effective transition plan. Transition GPS requires veterans to receive mandatory training from the Department of Defense and the VA about their benefits, health and life insurance, education benefits, financial planning, resume writing, and relocation assistance. The transition assistance program is designed to provide service members with counseling of their earned benefits such as employment assistance, resume writing, educational benefits, and relocation assistance, no later than one year before they transition to civilian life (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017). Unfortunately, improvements to the transition assistance program have not resulted in meaningful transitions for veterans because the training is completed within weeks before the veteran transition (Zogas, 2017). The participants' knowledge about the Transition GPS was limited, and their focus was on attending the mandatory briefing and not on developing an effective transition plan. The transitioning service members' excitement about leaving the military contributes to an unsuccessful transition because they are not concerned with their transition training (Zogas, 2017).

Participants repeatedly discussed family support during the semi-structured interviews. After serving in the military and making it a career, the participants began to place more importance on their families and spending more time with family. Participants highlighted the importance of family and how the military caused relationships with family to become challenging to manage.

Strategies

Strategies in the 4S Model are those coping mechanisms used during stressful situations. The coping strategies can be used before, during, and after a stressful or challenging situation (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Understanding coping

strategies and how to develop coping strategies is crucial in a stressful situation. Transitions are stressful events in a person's life (Schlossberg, 1981). Servicemen and women often transition during their military service to include deploying to combat. The transition to combat is something servicemen and women train for and are excited about initially (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). As the excitement wears off, servicemen and women face challenges that can hinder their reintegration into society. Loss of family and military friendships can cause the veteran to withdraw from relationships, which increases the difficulty of their transition. Career counselors could help veterans develop strategies for their successful transition by helping veterans to understand the importance of family and military friendships since some veterans do not readily seek help or transition counseling (Miles, 2014).

Method

A qualitative research study was conducted to answer the three research questions. The goal of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the transition experiences of African American veterans and whether the Transition GPS program supported a successful transition. A phenomenological approach guided this study because of its capability to help explore the lived experiences of the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the transition experiences of African American veterans, their participation in the Transition Assistance Program, and the challenges participants faced obtaining employment and higher education after military service. Veteran organizations and a military headquarters unit were used to recruit participants for this study. The organizations and their leaders were supportive of this research study. Additionally, these organizations support veterans with mental disorders daily. These organizations also encouraged veterans to take part in studies and projects to help other veterans from all service organizations and wars. From the interview questions five themes emerged (see Appendix semi-structured interview questions). Themes aligned with the research questions. Constant comparison of the transcribed interviews and the observation notes proved crucial to analyzing the data. The participants reviewed transcribed interview data to ensure the correct information was captured and accurately stood for what they meant to express to the interviewer.

Data Collection

Communication between the researcher and the participants occurred several times to confirm participants met the criteria to take part in the study before conducting the first interview as well as to develop trust and build rapport. Participants agreed to one recorded interview during the data collection. During the interviews, each veteran was asked to discuss their transition experiences from the military to include experiences with family, higher education, and the Transition GPS Program. Each participant was

provided with a copy of the informed consent form and reviewed it entirely before signing the document. After the informed consent was signed, each participant was provided a copy of the informed consent for them to review later if they had additional concerns about their rights and participation. The Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board approved this study ensuring the study met the ethical requirements of the university.

Data Analysis

After completing the data collection from the six interviews, each interview was transcribed and inputted into the NVivo software system which is a software program to store, organize, and retrieve data. The rationale for using this software was its ability to increase the process, enhance rigor, provide flexible data analysis, streamline the exchange and reproduction of data, and allow for more significant reflection by the researchers (Oliveira et al., 2013). The transcriptions were read and reread looking for similar responses to the interview questions. The data was examined again to identify the key ideas that emerged to help understand the veterans' experiences. Coding of the analyzed data was grouped according to the topics that arose repeatedly and nodes developed from those experiences. Before running a query to justify the themes, sorting of the nodes by themes and sub-themes occurred. Some interview responses aligned with several nodes or themes. Therefore, listing the themes under the corresponding nodes played a significant role in developing the categories. Five overarching themes were developed based on the six semi-structured interviews and data collected from those interviews: (a) Family Matters, (b) Career Expectation, (c) Education is Key, (d) Failure to Launch, and (e) Plan Early. Schlossberg's Transition Theory 4S model was used to explore each theme with the goal of answering the research questions.

Findings

African American veterans face many inequalities that are racially manifested including employment opportunities, substandard housing, and health care inequalities (Fleury-Steiner, 2012, p. 8). Veterans, in general, face many challenges and, after serving their country, are released to the civilian community to continue fighting for their lives and benefits they earned. African American veterans may face additional challenges due to their feelings concerning their role and status in society. In his book, *Disposable Heroes: The Betrayal of African American Veterans*, Fleury-Steiner (2012) discussed several presidents and the political systems which implemented and made decisions aiding in African American veterans leaving the military for a socio-economic condition in distress. As African American veterans leave the military, transition assistance training and career counseling should be the first steps in their path to a successful reintegration into civilian life.

In this study, several findings emerged and were analyzed. There was one unexpected finding: it was expected to find

African American veterans' transition experiences challenging and difficult at best. However, only one veteran characterized their transition experience as challenging. This participant had not earned a college degree at the time of their departure from the military. This finding highlights the importance of African American servicemen and women to earn their college degree before transitioning out of the military. Career veterans may have a better understanding of their transferable skills and feel their military pension will ease the transition process to civilian life. Career veterans may have more significant difficulties transitioning because they have been under the rigor of military life for most of their lives. This group may also face challenges securing employment because of their age at transition.

The Transition GPS program was implemented and restructured to help improve the transition experiences of veterans as they left the military for civilian life. Many veterans did not feel the program helped during their transition. According to this study's findings, study participants conclude the Transition GPS program has failed to provide effective transition assistance to African American veterans. The failure of the Transition GPS program is rooted in the lack of knowledge veterans have about the benefits they have earned and the services offered by the Transition GPS program. Likewise, the participants hold military officers responsible for adding to the ineffective transition assistance, since they are not allowing service members to attend the Transition GPS program as mandated by the Department of Defense.

Family Matters

Military families have a critical role in the success of their service member's career. The family support group includes parents, spouses, partners, siblings, children, grandparents, and other loved ones who may give care to wounded warriors (Calhoun, Beckham, & Bosworth, 2002; Hazel, Wilcox, & Hassan, 2012). During deployments, military families are left behind to maintain the family's functionality and provide emotional support. Families transition several times during the career of their service member and relocate to military installations across the United States and internationally (Hazel et al., 2012). Military families living off the military installation in a civilian community face challenges of poor schools and little employment opportunities for spouses. Living on the military installation provides families with a supportive community compared to those families that live off the military installation who may also face isolation and a lack of community support (Hazel et al., 2012).

Family support during the transition was also crucial and veterans felt it was essential to include the family in their decision to transition. Consistent with Schlossberg's 4S Model (1981) the participants' social support system was important and the participants acknowledged the support they received from their families. They emphasized leaving the military was a family matter. Married career veterans' transition was not significantly different from single

career veterans' transitions. After transitioning from the military, the participants returned to the geographical area where they joined the military because they understood the importance of family support and desired to be near family after a long military career.

Career Expectations

Many organizations do not provide mentor-based orientation training to its employees, or the orientation is ineffective leading to frequent turnovers. Veterans transitioning to civilian life and employment need orientation training and clear expectations of the organization's operational procedures and norms (Miles, 2014). Consistent with Miles (2014), veterans must have realistic career expectations. Their military role, status, and rank have little if any bearing on the organization. Entering civilian employment requires veterans to understand the expectations of supervisors, peers, and subordinates (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The role and impact of military culture on a veteran's career expectations and employment success are necessary to understand. Consistent with Ahern et al. (2015), lack of discipline and control in the civilian community impacts a veteran's career expectations. Military and civilian differences have always existed, but have noticeably increased over the last decade, highlighting issues in lack of discipline and control as a challenge to veterans (Ahern et al., 2015). Several participants expressed how they were not able to maintain employment because of the organizational structure. Leaving the structured environment of the military for the fragmented and unstructured civilian environment presents challenges for veterans. The distinct needs of African American veterans may interfere with their transition, as this population may have a higher feeling of isolation because they have lost the bond of comrades and the security of the military community.

The military culture is built on creating strong relationships with comrades, which make combat operations successful. During service members' time away from families they need to be reassured their families are safe and being cared for on the military installation. As a total institution organization, the military installation restricts the entry of civilian personnel and ensures the safety of personnel on the installation through monitored systems. Furthermore, as expressed by several of the research participants, racial discrimination is always in the back of their minds, and they are always on the lookout for racial discrimination. Unfortunately, their perceived discrimination may interfere with their view of the situations they face.

The Transition GPS program provides transition support to all military personnel leaving the military. The career veterans in this study attended the required briefings. Their reason for attending was to meet the military requirement that all transitioning service members attend the mandatory briefings. More emphasis may be needed to get transitioning service members to attend more transition training. After serving in the military service members may not attend

additional transition training because they are in a rush to exit the military. The participants expressed concern about the level of support received with writing a resume. The participants had difficulties identifying their transferable skills and equating those skills to civilian jobs. This finding is consistent with the research of Davis and Minnis (2017). Ainspan (2011) noted the translation of military skill as a barrier to the hiring of veterans and could have an impact on an employer's decision to hire.

Education is Key

Participants in this study acknowledged education as a factor in their successful transition. Although the participants faced challenges attending college while on active duty, they always saw the benefit of earning a college degree. Noticeably, 50 percent of the participants in this study attended college before entering the military services. The three participants that attended college before entering the military were influenced by family to attend college with the goal of changing the participant's socioeconomic status.

Notably, all participants in this study took advantage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which was not consistent with the research of Kellior (2009), which indicated African American veterans were not using their educational benefits as compared to other veterans. Likewise, consistent with the research of Ruh, Spicer, and Vaughn (2009) the veterans in this study acknowledged higher education's role improving their potential for employment because some of their military skills may not transfer to civilian employment. The participants in this study may have used their Post 9/11 GI Bill educational benefits because of their experiences and that they understand the need for education, since most of their life was spent in a military culture that took care of their needs.

Failure to Launch

The Transition GPS Program is designed to prepare service members for a successful transition from the military to higher education, the workforce, or starting a business (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017). The program is designed to give service members, commanders, and Transition GPS managers roles and responsibilities in creating a successful transition plan. Transitioning service members are responsible for attending the mandatory training and meeting three required goals 180 days before being released from active duty:

1. Participate in pre-separation counseling to develop an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) which focuses on career planning needs;
2. Attend VA Benefits Briefings I and II, which explain what benefits the service member has earned and how to obtain them; and
3. Attend the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Workshop, which focuses on the mechanics of obtaining employment in today's job market and includes

resume preparation and interview skills practice (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017).

Commanders and TAP managers are responsible for ensuring service members are educated on the importance of career planning. Additionally, commanders and TAP managers must communicate and coordinate services for these service members transitioning out of the military service. A new component of the transition assistance program, known as the military life cycle, was launched in 2015 and is meant to help service members prepare for transition earlier in their military service.

Failure to Launch highlights the importance for service members to develop knowledge about the programs and services available to help them transition from the military. Although the military service branches under the guidance of the President of the United States has developed and revamped the transition assistance program, many of the participants in this study had little knowledge about what programs were in place when they transitioned out of the military. Many participants could not distinguish the differences between the old and new transition programs. Several of the participants believed it were the same old program with a new name.

Service members, commanders, and Transition GPS managers should be held accountable for ensuring the guidelines of the transition program are being met. The participants in this study worked until the last minute maintaining mission readiness before attending the mandatory briefing and were not able to plan early for their transition. Consistent with Zalaquett and Chatters (2016), veterans in this study were not provided effective transition support. The veteran's lack of knowledge about the services offered through the Transition GPS program may attribute to the veteran not receiving the necessary help during their transition.

Plan Early

Participants in the study recommended preparing early for transitioning from the military. Their transitions were successful because they obtained employment that was similar to the responsibilities they had in the military. The participants also felt that earlier preparation would have assisted in their resume writing and developing skills relevant for civilian employment. The participants did not have negative perceptions about themselves or their military careers. They did note racial discrimination was an issue they faced in the military and feared it would be more prominent in civilian life and employment.

Consistent with the findings of Gaither (2014), discrimination is a problem on many levels, and the participants noted discrimination during their military service and because of their military service. Not all civilians or all employers support military service. Age discrimination may also be a challenge faced by African American veterans seeking employment. This type of discrimination may be devastating to career veterans who are all over the age of 40 at the

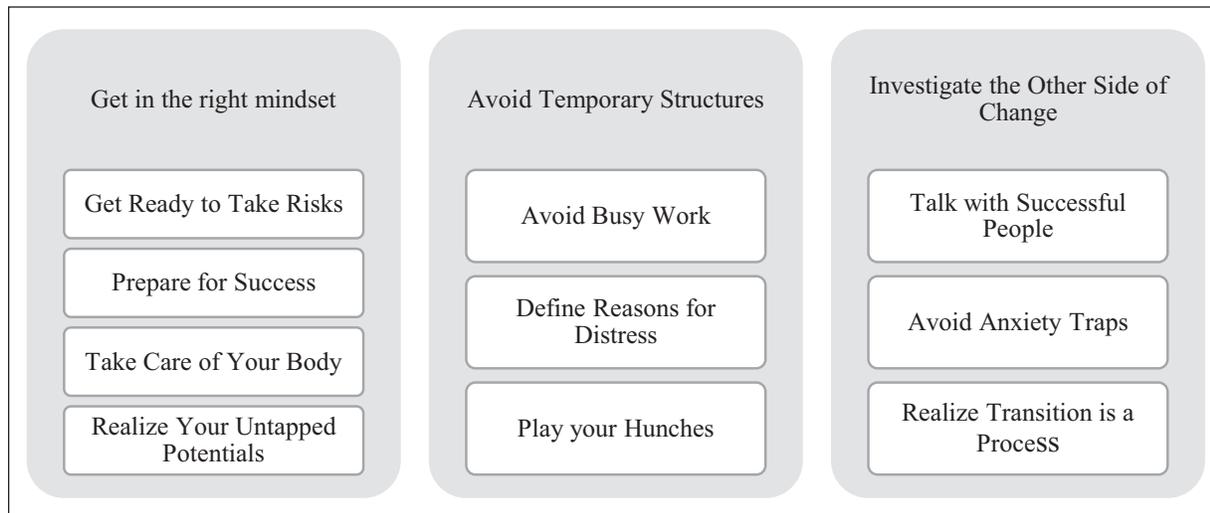


Figure 1: Tips for Managing Transition adapted from Gaither, 2014.

time of their transition from the military. Race and ethnicity discrimination add to the challenges veterans faced during a transition.

Managing transitions should be an area of concern for career counselors. Gaither (2014) provided a list of tips for managing a transition in his article *Tips for Managing Transition*. **Figure 1** illustrates the three areas for managing transitions and their applicable tips.

As previously mentioned in this study, the transition of African American veterans to civilian life is a challenging process. However, Wands (2013) noted a successful transition was critical for veterans' well-being throughout their lifetime. In this study several factors were highlighted that improve veterans' opportunity for a successful transition. First, the support provided by the family was the most crucial factor for the successful transition of African American veterans. Secondly, veterans expected their service to be honored and to receive support from the community and the VA. The support from the community and the VA were necessary for veterans' successful transition back to civilian life. Finally, the development of peer support and mentoring supported the successful reintegration of veterans to civilian life.

Addressing the Literature Gap

A gap in the literature exists about African American veterans' transition to civilian life, employment, and higher education. The mental health of these veterans increases challenges to their transition. Military culture may hinder a veteran's transition to civilian life since service members live according to military language, symbols, norms, standards, and institutional expectations (Hazel et al., 2012).

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Career counseling is needed for African American veterans; career counseling should be researched to examine methods to improve services for African American veterans. As noted in the findings, African American veterans view edu-

cation and obtaining a college degree as an essential step in preparing to transition from the military to civilian life. However, the transition assistance training they received does not meet the needs of this population. Career counseling has the potential to help African American veterans identify skills they learned in the military and translate those skills to meaningful employment. Employment plays a vital role in the successful transition from the military and adds a sense of purpose to the life of veterans (Miles, 2014). A future research study on the experience of African American veterans' transition can add additional knowledge to help human resource development practitioners in training and development.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore the impact Transition GPS has on helping veterans to avoid becoming homeless. Specifically, future research should explore the transition of homeless veterans to determine whether ineffective transition programs increase the possibility of African American veterans becoming homeless. African American veterans account for 33 percent of the homeless veterans in American (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). In 2017 veteran homelessness was down 47 percent because of the VA Open Door strategic plan implemented in 2010. The VA Open Door strategic plan is the combined efforts of federal agencies that coordinate and share the responsibility to assist veterans with housing and services intervention (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Like all veterans, African American veterans are leaving the military at unprecedented rates. It is crucial for HRD practitioners to understand African American veterans' career concerns so they can potentially help reduce the number of homeless veterans.

Another area of consideration for future research is the transition experience of female veterans. Greer (2017) found women veterans faced unemployment, underemployment, and career development challenges in higher numbers than

their male counterparts. Compounding women veteran transition challenges is helping career development practitioners to understand the military culture of these veterans in order to make meaning of their experiences and transition to civilian life (Reppert, Buzzetta, & Rose, 2014). The population of women in the military is expected to increase while the population of males in the military is expected to decrease (Reppert et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). The Business and Professional Women's Foundation conducted a research study for the Women Veterans in the Transition Project and found women veterans needed practical and psychological support when transitioning to civilian life and employment (Business and Professional Women's, 2007). Future research on African American women veterans could improve their transition experiences and civilian employment outcomes. **Table 1** highlights some of the directions for new research. Future research in the focus areas listed could help to improve African American veterans' outlook on transitioning from military to civilian life.

Implications for Practice

This research sought to better understand the transition experiences of African American veterans as they transitioned to civilian life and employment. Veterans made recommendations which, may lead to a smoother transition to employment and civilian life for African American veterans. The veterans consistently highlighted assistance with resume writing as a crucial skill to support them during a transition, and the veterans also noted feeling isolated in their employment experience, which led to them seeking employment that was like their earlier military occupation.

Resume Writing

The participants in this study expressed their desire to have more training and help with resume writing so they would have an excellent resume that translated their military skills. Many of the veterans had the feeling they were not competitive for civilian jobs because of their resumes. Resumes are crucial to helping veterans secure the first interview when seeking civilian employment. Several factors are challenges for veterans getting the first interview, but the transition from a military to civilian resume was the most challenging (Sargent, 2014). **Table 2** displays areas for potential new research. The focus areas may help veterans with their job searches, interview skills, and resume writing.

Career Counseling

The veterans taking part in this research study recommended those responsible for the transition of veterans to provide career development services as well. The veterans suggested the implementation of career-focused training in conjunction with the education services office on each military installation. Education and employment are crucial to the success of transitioning African American veterans and gives meaning and purpose to their life (Miles, 2014). **Table 3** highlights the future direction for new research in career counseling. Research in the focus area could provide insight into counseling and mentoring African American veterans through a successful transition. Several career counseling theories have application for helping all veterans transition. These theories include the Super's Developmental Theory and Happenstance Learning theory.

Table 1: Implications for Future Research.

Focus	Implication for Future Research
Career Counseling	Career development staff training on how to aid veterans with résumé development and interview preparation is necessary to help practitioners understand African American veteran's culture and experiences with the nuances of military work.
Preventing Homelessness	Homeless veterans need transition assistance and should be researched to discuss ways that can help these veterans. Minority veterans may face higher odds of being homeless.
Female Veterans Transition	Female veterans face more significant challenges than male veterans. African American female veterans may face more significant challenges than their White counterparts. African American female veterans' transition assistance is necessary to help them improve their transition to civilian life.
Training and Development	Training and development programs are necessary to help veterans understand their transition experiences and to help African American veterans make better decisions during their Transition GPS program briefing.

Table 2: Implications for Practice – Resume Writing.

Focus	Implication for Practice – Resume Writing
Professional Coach	Give veterans the choice to seek professional coaching and writing assistance with their resume.
Transferable Skills	Veterans need to develop skills to help them translate their military occupational specialty and duties into articulated skills employers understand. Practitioners can also play a role in helping African American veterans translate their skills.

Table 3: Implications for Practice – Career Counseling.

Focus	Implication for Practice – Career Counseling
Transition GPS	Implement human resource development practices into Transition GPS training. Staff members at all Transition GPS locations should receive training in human resource development so, they can help veterans identify careers related to their military skills and provide training to help veterans understand their transition.
Mentor or Sponsor	Implement a sponsorship program for transitioning veterans. Throughout their career veterans are supported by a sponsor when they arrive at a new unit. Sponsors help with the acculturation of unit members. Therefore, it is important for career counselor to understand how to help each veteran population to transition to their new roles as civilians and employees.

Discussion

Findings from this study offer a theoretical framework aimed at helping to understand the transition experiences of African American veterans. The methodology, data collection, and data analysis were discussed in-depth to provide the reader with a better understanding of how the study was conducted. The broader interpretations of the findings and the contributions to the literature are presented. Furthermore, it articulates how this study addresses literature gaps as well as discusses implications for HRD research and practice. This study concludes with recommendations for future research and reflections on this study. The study aims to explore the transition experiences of African American veterans, their participation in the Transition Goals, Plans, Success Program, and the challenges they faced after military service. The research data and findings are the results of the lived experiences of African American male and female career veterans.

Participants in this study highlighted the challenges they faced during their transition from the military to civilian life and higher education's impact on meaningful employment. Hermeneutic phenomenology guided this study to help understand the lived experience of the participants. The participants were career veterans retired from the military with over 20 years of service to the country. The participants overwhelmingly cited their families' influence and the desire to take control of their lives for the decision to leave the military. Participants acknowledged the importance of higher education and most completed their college degree before they left the military. The participants believed earning a college degree before leaving the military improved their possibility to gain employment. Although they experienced several setbacks assimilating into the organizational culture, participants acknowledged their fears as they transitioned and understood the need to develop coping strategies to handle their fears.

This study also aimed to contribute to the sparse research on African American veterans' transition to civilian life and employment by examining their lived experiences and feelings about the world through semi-structured interviews. Analyzing the participant's transition experiences as they left the military for civilian life and employment also contributed to the limited research in human resource development of this population.

Reflection on the Study

As a collective force, veterans lose their cultural identity when they joined the total institution environment of the military. It is crucial to understand veterans according to their ethnic group because the challenges veterans face during their transition are different based on their ethnic group. This study was challenging but resulted in significant joy in some instances and distress in other instances as participants discussed their experiences. Precautions were taken to prevent getting too close to the veterans during the interviews. The precautions taken to maintain the integrity of the research was to focus on the participants' experiences and keep a neutral stance.

There were several moments during the research where assumptions were made about the participants' experiences. The recorded interviews were listened to three times and the transcribed interviews were reread to reduce personal biases and assumptions. Furthermore, there still exist the potential that there may be some bias in this study since it may not be possible to eliminate all research bias. Leading question bias, respondent bias, and cultural bias may be present in this study. However, every attempt was made to ensure that leading questions were not asked by avoiding summarizing what the participant said. Furthermore, the research questions were open-ended questions, so the participant could tell their story. Lastly, the need to remain positive and keep culture from impacting the participants' responses was acknowledged.

Study Limitations

One limitation of the study was the limited number of African American veteran participants. It was challenging to get African American veterans to participate in the study, which may be a result of their cultural beliefs. The veterans that did volunteer all served in the military for over 20 years. The participant's age and the length of time they have been out of the military is also a limitation of this study, since the military is always changing its policies and procedures. The study did not examine the experiences of younger veterans who have their own unique set of challenges and barriers when transitioning from the military. It could have been helpful to have a broader range of veterans taking part in this study to get a picture of African American veterans in all age groups. Unfortunately, when asked to participate in

the study the younger veterans refused. The African American veterans recruited for this study were recruited using veterans service centers and a military unit, which may have an impact on the analysis of the data depending on the veterans' motivation for taking part in the study. The hope is that the veterans positively took part, gave honest answers, and were not taking part through a negative lens of their military experiences and service.

Another limitation of the study was that none of the participants were combat arms veterans; the participants served in the combat service support specialty for their branch of the military which do have civilian equivalent job matches. Another limitation of this study was it included the lived experiences of officer and senior enlisted members from various branches of the military. Researching younger groups of enlisted service members may yield different results. Additionally, the participants were male and women veterans, which is a limitation of the study, since women veterans have a unique set of challenges when transitioning from the military.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study was conducted to understand the transition experiences and higher education experiences of African American veterans. In this study, six African American veterans shared their transition experiences and made recommendations to improve the transition training for military personnel leaving the military service in the future. The findings from the semi-structured interviews of the study participants resulted in several areas of concern for this population of veterans as they transition out of the military. The veterans expressed their concerns about employment as they transitioned because of their desire to take care of their families financially. Furthermore, the participants' willingness to share their lived experiences during the semi-structured interviews contribute to the sparse literature on this population of veterans. This research also highlights the need for further research on African American veterans' higher education experiences and employment after they leave the military.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory can help African American veterans to transition from the military and to understand their transition. The 4S Model Framework was presented as the guide to support veterans understanding of their transition. The desire was for this study to provide meaningful contributions to the understanding of the theory and research on African American veterans' transition. It was also the hope that human resource development practitioners will develop a deeper understanding of African American veterans' military service, culture, language, rank structure, and cultural norms to assist them with a smoother transition to civilian life and employment.

This research contributes to human resource development and African American veteran's employment by presenting the transition experiences of military career African American veterans. The need to provide career counseling

for African American veterans will help them to identify their skills gained during military service. Nevertheless, faced with the challenges of civilian life, this population needs to understand and prepare for life after the military. Subsequently, higher education and employment will improve the socioeconomic status of this population. Gaining a better understanding of this population will help to improve their transition experiences and result in successful transitions to civilian life and employment. Moreover, this research should inform human resource development professionals on how to help this unique population with their career development and transition challenges.

Another contribution of the study was to inform African American veterans about their role during their transition to civilian life, higher education, and employment. The successful transition of African American veterans requires not only for key individuals to follow the guidelines of the Transition GPS program, but for this population to take charge of their transition. The hope is that this population will take an active role in their transition and seek more transition training beyond the required mandatory training. Like other veteran ethnic groups, this population has made significant contributions during their military service, and as they leave the military, it is crucial to ensure their successful transition.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Semi-Structured Interview Questions. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.122.s1>

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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