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# Crossing the Rubicon: exploring migrants' transition out of military service into civilian work

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## ABSTRACT

Leveraging intersectionality as a lens, we explore the life-history accounts of former military migrants (MMs) on their transition out of the military service into civilian work. Data for the inquiry comes from in-depth interviews with MMs from West African Commonwealth countries who joined the UK military between 1998 and 2010. Focusing on the intersectionality of contexts, situatedness, positionalities, and identities of MMs, we theorise how this group of veterans account for their '(un)gilded' transition from military service to joining civilian work. Played out as a process of 'way-finding', MMs' transition out of military service into civilian work, we found, is characterised by four salient tropes: sculpturing an angel in a block of marble; randomness, luck, and chance; figurational support networks; and the show of 'grace under pressure'. Providing situated insights into the transitioning experiences of MMs, our study delineates how this group of veterans rationalise their career choices and adds nuance to how they draw on their intersecting migrant and veteran identities to respond to and overcome everyday structural barriers. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for the theory and practice of human resource management and the employment of veterans in civilian work.

## KEYWORDS

Careers; civilian work; Commonwealth; intersectionality; military migrants; veterans

## Introduction

The military as an institution, with support from their administrative and logistic functions, focuses exclusively on force, combat training and the conduct of combat operations (Caforio & Nuciari, 2018). Its personnel are frequently viewed as 'mechanical beings', whose skills are characterised by the ability to follow specific orders embedded in training that require strict obedience and followership of clear-cut orders and

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instruction models (Blackburn, 2016; Caddick, 2016). Nevertheless, the military also actively utilize developmental assignments that equip recruits with essential life skills that can prepare them for stellar careers in the civilian world, post service (Chandler, 2021; Stone & Stone, 2015). As a consequence, many veterans have gone on to pursue successful careers in the civilian world. Nevertheless, some veterans have also reported experiencing difficulties in securing employment and succeeding with work in the civilian world (Roy et al., 2020). Existing studies suggest that re-identification of ex-military personnel with the civilian world of work can be challenging, complicated, and stressful (Agovino, 2020; Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Blackburn, 2016). Thus, a growing number of veterans become extremely anxious about finding work (Davis & Minnis, 2017) and wonder if they will fit or adapt and can forge a new identity in the civilian world of work (Beech et al., 2017). These concerns have been attributed to the non-preparedness of personnel for civilian life and work (Gordon et al., 2020), a lack of long-term personal planning and preparation by the transiting personnel (Ashcroft, 2014), and their inability to translate their military qualifications to fit into the civilian world of work (Ford, 2017). In this regard, the term 'transitioning', which simply refers to servicemen and women's post-service move from the military to the civilian world, has come to occupy contemporary discourse on military life (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017; Cooper et al., 2018).

The situation is even more complex and complicated for non-British citizens who enlist in Her Majesty's Forces, herein referred to as military migrants (MMs). Representing servicemen and women from across the Commonwealth and beyond, they sometimes worry whether they can secure, maintain, and keep civilian employment (Agovino, 2020; Mathis, 2021; Ware, 2010), and their situation is compounded by their everyday experiences of inequality and immigration controls, which have led to some MMs losing their jobs and livelihoods (Ware, 2010). There are reports of some living semi-clandestine lives, avoiding contact with the authorities for fear they could be detained and removed from the UK (Gentleman, 2020). Despite the UK public's general reverence for soldiers and their highly romanticised view of military service, many people see the service of MMs as a way of making a living and gaining citizenship (Gee, 2008). At worst, MMs may be seen as 'heroes' when in uniform but 'migrants' when they step out of service into civilian dress (Ware, 2012). Thus, many MMs end up not being able to take advantage of their much-vaunted wealth of knowledge and transferable skills gained in military service when seeking civilian employment (Cooper et al., 2018; Mathis, 2021). In this regard, never have MMs been so limited in entering civilian work or achieving the potential work identities they

once dreamed of after leaving the military. This potentially translates into many MMs ending up in elementary occupations (Chisolm, 2014) rather than the skilled-based ones ‘that require extensive specialised knowledge, such as architecture, education, engineering, healthcare and the law’ (Sarpong & Maclean, 2021, p. 2). Yet, we also know that many MMs have successfully transitioned out of military service into well-paid civilian work (Ministry of Defence, 2014; Stone & Stone, 2015). Existing evidence suggests nearly half of MM recruits, like members of the majority population on finishing their compulsory service period, decide to change track and take up jobs that can be far removed from what they did in the military (Ware, 2016). From education to the legal professions, many, against the odds, have managed to pursue what can be described as distinguished civilian careers and continue to contribute immensely to their country and communities. This, then, raises the following question: How do those MMs who manage to get into civilian work succeed in doing so? How do these ‘successful’ veterans appropriate their intersectionality of military service with their migrant identities, situatedness, and positionalities to account for their transition from the military to joining civilian workforce?

We argue that exploring MMs accounts of their ‘(un)gilded’ transitions from the military into civilian work could help extend our understanding of migrant experiences in the interstitial spaces of military-civic world of work, and gauge their sense of belongingness, integration, and inclusion in the larger society (Pringle & Mallon, 2003; El-Sawad et al., 2006). Providing insight into the lived experiences of this distinct group of migrants, such knowledge, we argue, could help the military, and policy makers to develop more ‘friendly’ policies and better evidence-based human resource practices that have the potential to improve the career experiences of the foreign nationals within its ranks, and in turn improve their military and post-military work experiences. Our objective in this study, therefore, is to explore how the intersectionality of the contexts, situatedness, positionalities, and identities of MMs constitutively shape and give form to their military to civilian transitioning outcomes. The analytical tools and insights we leverage from our intersectional approach proves invaluable to anchoring the mutually exclusive identities of MMs as migrants, foreign nationals, and ex-service men which intersect may intersect in various ways, to affect the experiences of MMs (Crenshaw, 1991, 2012) in their transitioning out of military service into civilian work contexts and settings. In leveraging intersectionality theory as a lens, we approach our study through the life history accounts of former MMs from West African Commonwealth countries to explore the experiences of this group of veterans in transition from the military into civilian work.

Our study, therefore, makes two contributions. First, in extending our understanding of the nuances and challenges associated with the transition out of the military into civilian work, our focus on MMs brings into sharp focus how a distinct but growing minority group of UK veterans employ their migrant and military identities to help them transition into civilian work (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Blackburn, 2016; Ware, 2012). Second, in deploying intersectionality as a lens to theorise MMs' transition to civilian work, our study provides rare insight into how MMs interpret and experience the interactivity of their multiple social identity (Gopaldas, 2013; McBride et al., 2015), and how their potential material affects their military-civilian transition outcomes.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on veterans' pursuit of a career in the civilian world by focusing on their military work lives and their preparation and support for entry into civilian work. Next, we present the research methodology, after which we show our research findings. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and the implications for the theory and practice of human resource management and the employment of service leavers, reservists, and veterans.

### **Transitioning from the military to careers in the civil world**

The military remains an institution that is frequently promoted as providing many opportunities for education, and for occupational and skills training. It is lauded for instilling ethics, leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, and persistence, all qualities which are highly valued by civilian employers (Crabb & Segal, 2018; Stevelink et al., 2019). In this regard, some employers are known to specifically look for applicants with military backgrounds and skills (Davies & Minnis, 2017; Cooper et al., 2018). Service leavers, reservists, and veterans who find themselves in military-featured but civilian-associated careers, like engineering, medicine, and piloting, tend to capitalise on their experiences and training garnered in the military to excel in their civilian careers (Stone et al., 2018). Thus, extant research has repeatedly emphasized the high numbers and has focused on the stories of leavers, reservists, and veterans that have left the military and moved on to pursue stellar civilian careers (Roy et al., 2020; Stone & Stone, 2015).

However, transitioning from the military to careers in the civilian world remains the most indeterminate and confusing phase of life for service leavers, reservists, and veterans (Blackburn, 2016; Cooper et al., 2018). With many enlisting directly from school without having acquired any academic qualifications, the work opportunities available to ex-service men can be limited (Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Liggans et al., 2018;

Spilsbury, 1994). The problem is exacerbated by the fact that military-provided occupational training and qualifications are frequently not accredited and not recognised by many employers, as the skills purportedly gained from them often have little economic value or are not directly transferable to the civilian labour market (Flynn & Ball, 2020; Hardison et al., 2017). Beyond qualifications and transferable skills, the issues of over-institutionalization, regimented organizing practices, and military indoctrination (Ashcroft, 2014; Stone & Stone, 2015) in general have been identified as contributing to ex-service personnel often feeling alienated and disconnected from the civilian world of work (Bergman et al., 2014; Binks & Cambridge, 2018). For example, Bergman et al. (2014) observed that the contrasting rules guiding the military environment/work and those of the civilian world/work result in a complex and daunting adjustment experience for ex-military personnel. In this regard, it can be impossible for ex-service personnel to find meaningful work, as many employers do not provide the support and necessary retraining required for them to remodel their skills and cultural fit with their workplace (Bouton, 2015).

A major advance within the literature on service leavers, reservists, and veterans has redirected attention to a plethora of intractable emotional and health issues, which may operate in combination or serially, to deter employers from supporting ex-service personnel to enter and thrive in the workplace (Gordon et al., 2020). Of salience here are the post-military health challenges veterans face, including physical, psychological, and emotional issues and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Stevellink et al., 2019; Van Til et al., 2013). That notwithstanding, the media's framing of combat injuries, in particular, has also had a significant impact on public perceptions of veterans as potentially disturbed individuals (Caddick et al., 2021; Pitchford-Hyde & Parry, 2020). As argued by Mathis (2021), these real and, sometimes, imaginary challenges not only stereotype veterans, but they also impede their potentialities to securing, maintaining, and retaining civilian employment (Stone et al., 2018). They also make employers reluctant to commit to investing in the hiring of ex-service personnel (Phillips, 2020). At worst, veterans are frequently associated with PTSD, resulting in service personnel being stereotypically viewed as Mentally unstable in their communities (Pike, 2016). This systemic stigmatization of service people in general makes it difficult for ex-service personnel to find jobs that meet their level of skills or desired income (Bowes et al., 2018; Woodward & Jenkins, 2011).

In sum, prior research on service leavers, reservists, and veterans has not only provided insight into the context, opportunities, and challenges veterans encounter in transitioning to and coping in the civilian world of work; it also emphasises how targeted support helps veterans and

future veterans to transfer their acquired skills into the civilian workspace (Hardison et al., 2017). However, we still know very little about the career transitions of MMs given that ethnic minorities, as Ware reported (2012), are posted at a disproportionate rate into less prestigious and what could be described as more dangerous specialities. The peculiarities of the potentialities, limits, opportunities, and challenges MMs endure, both in military and civilian dress (Blackburn, 2016; Ware, 2010), are instructive and suggest that the transition experiences of veterans as a broad social group are far from homogenous. Paying attention to the ways in which MMs' migrant and veteran identities operate in tandem to (re)produce their differential experiences, we delineate how intersectionality as a lens could provide some rare insight into MMs' military-civilian transitioning

### **An intersectional perspective to MMs' transitioning**

Calls to unpack the mutually constitutive relations and interactivity among social identities has led to the use of intersectionality in contemporary social theory (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hancock, 2016; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality brings into sharp focus how the interactivity of social identity structures, such as race, sexuality, class, and gender, may combine to shape the everyday life experiences of individuals (Gopaldas, 2013; Hodge & Harrison, 2021). As argued by Crenshaw (2017), 'intersecting identities' means that people caught up in a web of identities are likely to be affected by multiple social justice and human rights issues. Thus, we follow Hancock (2016) in arguing that intersectionality provides the grammar and metaphorical schema for unpacking and understanding the interactions of the identities MMs hold and how they may combine to constitutively shape and give form to their concealed experiences of uncomprehending potentialities (and limits) in their transitioning out of military service into civilian work.

Our intersectionality approach as a lens through which to explore MMs' transitioning experiences therefore emphasizes how their simultaneous identities as migrants, colonial subjects, or ex-service personnel foster their life experiences when transitioning from the military to careers in the civilian world. Thus, transitioning for MMs, we argue, is far more complicated than for their fellow veterans, as it has the hallmark of ushering this group of veterans to crossroads or interstitial spaces where their multiple identities meet, collide, and blend to shape their experiences. Thus, a British-born person is likely to experience the transition out of military service into civilian work differently than an MM, who is not only a veteran but also a migrant, a black African, and a former colonial subject. In practice, MMs' migrant identity,

including the vestiges of being seen as a hero when in uniform and a migrant when in civilian clothes, could exacerbate the potential problems of the inequality they face in a labour market that is not blind to ethnicity (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Watson et al., 2021). Not all the identities the MM veterans come to hold, vis á vis the new civilian identity they have to assume on leaving the service, affect how they are viewed, understood, and even treated, but many represent an additional hurdle for this group of people regarding entering and thriving in the civilian labour sphere.

Our intersectionality approach therefore places emphasis on the intersectionality of the contexts, situatedness, positionalities, and identities (Grabham et al., 2008) of MMs. These markers of identity are not simply additive; rather, they constitute the distinct experiences of MMs transitioning out of military service into civilian work and (re)produce a collective narrative about the interactive effects of these overlapping multiple categories on the transitioning outcomes of MMs. Thus, the situated accomplishment and distinct transitioning experience for MMs, we surmise, provide an avenue for developing useful explanations of the potential outcomes of the connections between the multiple axes of veteran and migrant identities and their situatedness in navigating the labour market. In the next section, we provide an overview of the empirical research context within which we develop our contribution.

### **Empirical setting and context**

For many years, the British army recruited migrants, but the number of migrants who enlisted increased significantly following the British government's lifting of a five-year residency requirement for Commonwealth applicants to the British Armed Forces (BAF) (Heinecken & Soeters, 2018; Ware, 2012). This move, some commentators observe, was to enable the rapid recruitment of personnel to reinforce and support the UK's intervention in major global conflicts, and especially, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Heinecken & Soeters, 2018; Ware, 2012). Thus, from 1998 to 2013, the BAF recruited heavily from those Foreign and Commonwealth (F&C) countries that share close historical and political ties with the UK. The New Labour government in 2008 pushed the number of F&Cs to nearly 12,000 (Ware, 2012, p. 234). Thus, by 2010, 7,895 soldiers from the Commonwealth countries, Ireland, and Nepal were part of the British Army. The number of Africans included Ghanaians (935), South Africans (910), Zimbabweans (430), and members of other African nations (1,185) (Ware, 2012, p. xvii). By 2011, there were Ghanaians (1630), Gambians (520), and Nigerians (360) in the UK regular forces (Ware, 2012, p. 284). At one point, the number



of nationals from F&Cs in UK military bases reached 33 per cent (Ware, 2012, p.249). Currently, there are over 7,500 F&C soldiers enlisted in the BAF, and over 5,000 of them were serving in the army (Militarymigrants.org, 2020). Existing data suggest that over a third (38.7%) of BAME personnel in UK regular forces did not have UK nationality (Ministry of Defence, 2021). The diversification of those wearing the uniform through the BAF diversity and inclusion recruitment drive means that migrant military personnel are now a common feature of the UK's modern and culturally diverse armed forces. Beyond the enormous contributions and commitment of commonwealth personnel during the Great War (Fennell, 2019), their sacrifices remain a significant part of the UK's defence capability (Caforio, 2018; Sweeney, 2019),

Reports on MMs' careers in the military can be noble but also uninspiring, with many struggling to find work and live a meaningful life after service (Gee, 2008). Much has been made of how the military has been renegeing on their promises of camaraderie, personal development, and job security that were used to persuade MMs to sign up (Gee, 2008). Nevertheless, we also know many of them have gone on to claim UK citizenship after four years' service, with many transitioning into well-paid civilian work (Ministry of Defence, 2014). However, we know very little about the careers of MMs, and in particular, their experiences when transitioning into civilian work post-military service. In this regard, we posit MMs of West African origin are an interesting research population through which to examine MMs transitioning into civilian work. The military literature remains largely silent on the career journeys and experiences of this distinct veteran group, and they are rarely studied as a singular defined group (Dandeker & Mason, 2003; Ware, 2012). In our effort to fill this lacuna, we turned our attention to MMs from West African Commonwealth countries who joined the UK military between 1998 and 2010 to develop our contribution in extending our understanding of the careers of MMs. Specifically, we focus on this group of MMs not only because many of them 'signed up' during this period. West African migrants also represent a growing and diverse group of migrants living in the UK who are seldom researched as a distinctive group because of the perceived cultural differences between West African states (Sarpong & Maclean, 2021). Following Sarpong et al. (2020), we group these West African migrants together because they tend to share similar socio-economic experiences, colonial histories, and religious syncretism (Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012). Their ethnicity, situatedness, and migrant identities tend to also bring them together to forge transatlantic solidarity networks in European cosmopolitan marketplaces (Sarpong & Maclean, 2017).

In the next section, we explain our research methodology and data analysis.

## Research methodology

Owing to the paucity of existing research into the experiences of MMs and the particularity of the group of veterans we studied, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach for our enquiry (Denzin et al., 2006). We had no access to any database on MMs, so following a strenuous and exacting university ethics application, an associate of one of the researchers put us in contact with two MMs who kindly agreed to help negotiate research access to their comrades, and in a link-tracing fashion (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017), they managed to arrange for us a meeting with the convenors of the Foreign and Commonwealth Comrades Network (FCCN), a military charity providing support for F&C nationals who serve in BAF. The FCCN asked for a formal letter about our research, after which they responded in writing to confirm they were happy to support our study. The FCCN support letter was then forwarded to the University Ethics Committee, who then granted final ethical approval for the study. The FCCN, after receiving a copy of our ethics approval, then announced our study to their members and put us in contact with those who expressed an interest in taking part in the study. While we did not offer any incentive for participation (Zutlevics, 2016), we agreed to share our findings with the FCCN. We devised two purposeful sampling criteria to select our research participants (Emmel, 2013). First, they needed to be nationals of a West Africa Commonwealth country when they joined the British Armed Forces between 1998 and 2013. We adopted this time-bracketing strategy because it was in 1998 that the UK government, seeking to boost the numbers of the military, gave the green light for significant numbers of nationals of F&C countries to join the army (Gee, 2008; Ware, 2012). In 2010, a new UK coalition government re-introduced a five-year residency requirement to signing up, which subsequently saw a steep decline in migrant recruitment (Ware, 2013, 2016). Also, like joining the Calvary in 1914, the period 1998–2010 was presumably a poor time to be entering the British army, as the UK was involved in multiple lethal wars in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan (Gee, 2008). The second criterion is that they should be currently employed in the civilian world. In total, twenty MMs met our theoretical sample criteria. We gave each of our research participants a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity. [Table 1](#) gives a biographical outline of our research participants.

Reflecting the historically skewed gender and ethnicity distribution in the military (Parry et al., 2019), where only 12% female and 8.8% Black,

**Table 1.** Biographical profiles of military migrants.

No.	Name	Age	Pre-entry qualification	Years in service	Rank achieved	Reason for leaving	Current occupation
1	Kikky <sup>a</sup>	39	Diploma in Health Science	2004–2008 (4)	Lance Corporal	Family commitment	Aesthetic Practitioner
2	O'Dunn	38	BSc Mechanical engineering	2002–2010 (8)	Lance Corporal	Family commitment	Teacher
3	Wasiu	39	BSc (Hons) Education	2003–2008 (5)	Private	Further studies	Trainee Barrister
4	Barry	35	BA (Hons) Accounting	2001–2007 (6)	Lance Corporal	Injury	Digital Entrepreneur
5	Davido	39	HND Software Engineering	2000–2005 (5)	Movement Controller	Family commitment	Teacher
6	Idibia	38	BA (Hons) Agriculture	2002–2007 (5)	Regular Soldier	Start a new business	Trader
7	Teju	42	Foundation Degree	2001–2007 (6)	Non-communication Officer	Further studies	Lawyer/Reverend Minister
8	Abdul	34	Diploma in IT	2006–2011 (5)	Communication Officer	Career discontent	Security Supervisor
9	Joe	37	Bachelor of Commerce	2005–2011 (6)	Provost Guard	Career discontent	Truck driver
10	Evans	39	High School	2002–2007 (5)	Regular soldier	Family commitment	Entrepreneur
11	Andrew	41	BBA Business Administration	2003–2008 (5)	Lance Corporal	Family commitment	Priest
12	Dan	34	BSc Business Administration	2003–2008 (5)	Lance Corporal	Family commitment	Retail Entrepreneur
13	Damijo	39	BSc (Hons) Computer Science	1998–2014 (16)	Range Conducting Officer	Injury	Fashion Entrepreneur
14	Isaac	39	BA (Hons) Humanities	2002–2007 (5)	Administrator	Further studies	Project Manager
15	Richard	40	BSc (Hons) Accounting	2002–2008 (6)	Lance Corporal	Career discontent	Operations Analyst
16	Kojo	33	BSc Business Administration	2004–2009 (5)	Private	Career discontent	Pensions Administrator
17	Mofe	35	High School	2000–2004 (4)	Leading Hand	End of service contract	General Nursing
18	Taju	42	Technical Training	2000–2008 (8)	Chief Petty Officer	Career discontent	Electrical Engineer
19	Desmond	42	BA (Hons) Sociology	2007–2014 (7)	Lance Corporal	Career discontent	Accounting Officer
20	Kosoko	39	BSc (Hons) Accounting	2011–2016 (5)	Private	Career discontent	Procurement Officer

<sup>a</sup>Female participant.

Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) are represented in the UK Regular Forces (Ministry of Defence, 2021), our research participants comprised nineteen males ( $n=19$ ) and one female ( $n=1$ ). Aged between 33 and 42, the average age of our participants was 38.2 years old, and they had spent an average of 6.05 years serving in the military. Through the reflective gaze of life-history narratives, data for the inquiry were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted 1.5 hours and was remotely conducted via Zoom, a virtual private video meeting platform that enables immersive virtual meeting experiences. We began each interview with assurances of confidentiality and the collection of relevant socio-demographic data (Sarpong et al., 2020). In accordance with our life-history approach, we invited participants to talk about their childhood upbringing, education at school and college, and how they came to the UK. We delved deeper to persuade the participants to provide accounts of their decision to join the British army and their military careers. Finally, the participants were invited to recount their experience of transitioning to civilian life, subsequent careers, and progression with a focus on opportunities, potentialities, barriers, and sources of support they had received from their friends, family, and the army.

Our data analysis followed three main stages. First, we engaged in open coding by reading and re-reading our textual data for re-familiarisation and making sure the raw data we had assembled reflected and matched what was heard in the field (Oliver et al., 2005). We did this through close line-by-line analysis to also identify recurrent comparative phrases. Since we had no a priori hypotheses (Boeije, 2005), we focused on the opportunities, potentialities, barriers, and sources of support our MMs said they received to assign responses and accounts onto the three broad military situation phases, specifically, pre-military, the military, and post-military, which also served as our basic social processes (BSP) (Glaser & Holton, 2005). We did this by engaging in an iterative line-by-line coding of our data to ensure the relevance of our BSP and to 'analytically convert' the recurrent phrases we found to fit into our categories (Bansal et al., 2018; Elliot, 2018). In the second stage, we embarked on what could be described as a cross-life-history analysis (Lanford et al., 2019) to compare and search for potential relationships among the initial categories we developed in stage one. We then systematically and iteratively probed the salient sayings and doings of participants across our data set to further categorize them based on their emerging thematic similarities. This produced a broad array of themes that were further classified based on the divergence and convergence of participants' subjective experiences of 'signing up', 'taking the Queen's shilling', and 'transition into the civilian work (Berends & Deken, 2021). In doing this, we paid close attention to the qualifications given by each participant while explaining their career transition experiences and the incipient challenges,

they encountered in entering and thriving in civilian work. In the final stage of our analysis, we engaged in iterative comparison of our resultant data with the extant literature on military migrants and the broader literature on military careers. The resulting data were then further analysed and interpreted iteratively until some salient common themes emerged and the data became saturated (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018; Hennink, & Kaiser, 2020). We further coded the emerging categories and their descriptions to converge on the four key overarching themes: sculpturing an angel prisoned in a block of marble; randomness, luck, and chance; figurational networks; and the demonstration of 'grace under pressure'. These themes were then applied to the entire data set, after which we annotated the data with numerical codes, which were in turn supported with short descriptors that elaborated on the individual headings (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Before we present the fine details of our research findings, we wish to reflect on some potential methodological limitations of our study. First, while our life history approach provided opportunities for our MMs to reflect on their lived experiences and post-military career journeys, we could not demonstrate how the trajectories of the civilian careers of our MMs could be observed outside language (LaPointe, 2010). Thus, we risk not accounting for how the salience of individual specific circumstances or personal qualities might have contributed to shaping the transitioning accounts of our respondents (Woods et al., 2013). Second, we were also not able to rule out potential egocentric bias that normally makes people embellish their narratives when invited to account for their life-histories (Gilovich et al., 2000). Finally, care should be taken in generalizing our findings to other veteran groups whose backgrounds, military experiences, and socializations could be markedly different from the category of migrants we studied.

## Research findings

Unlike the members of the majority population, whose regular entry into the military happens after school and often without any qualifications (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 2009), our data evidence suggests that most of our MMs signed up in their mid-20s, having already been involved in higher education and/or some form of formal work experience. The accounts of our MMs' transitions into the civilian work in practice, we argue, cohere as a process of 'way-finding' into a brave new world of work and career (Briken et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2018). These subjective accounts and experiences, as narrated by our MMs, we found, relied on critical logics of explanations characterised by four specific tropes that gave shape and form to their entering and thriving in the civilian work. We delineate these tropes and explanations around for

four salient lines of attention. The first ‘sculpturing an angel prisoned in a block of marble’ refers to the perceived sense of being freed from the ‘long arms’ of the army to pursue their ambitions and careers in civilian work. The second emphasises the inherent role of ‘randomness, luck, and chance’ in getting a foothold in the civilian work and how their post-military careers unfolded over time. The third is figurational networks, which refers to our MMs’ shifting and transient web of relational networks, comprising comrades, family, and friends whose counsel and support help them to direct their attention and focus their minds on the possibility of ‘making the best’ of their experiences and skills, and their potentialities for forging successful careers in civilian work. The fourth, which is referred to as ‘grace under pressure’, highlights the civil courage exhibited by MMs within the contingencies of transitioning to identifying, exploring, and exploiting opportunities otherwise overlooked by others to enter and forge careers in the civilian work. We now present the fine details of our research findings.

### **Sculpturing an angel prisoned in a block of marble**

As noted earlier, most of our MMs completed their higher education, with some having completed a few years of formal work experience before they entered the military (Ware, 2012). Much more mature than their British counterparts at the time of joining, our MMs recounted they had great ambitions after reading the recruitment literature, which contained ‘pie-in-the-sky promises’ of attractive military career experiences and benefits, only to enter to discover, at a time they could no longer leave, that they had entered a monotonous profession, devoid of natural progression (Gee, 2008). Like ‘angels prisoned in a block of marble’, our MMs explained they had to forgo the careers they trained for or ended up being asked to do jobs they had never once envisaged themselves doing. Signing up as recounted by Kojo, was a great leap of faith into the unknown:

I had a first-class degree in Business Administration from the University of Ghana. I left because I did not enjoy my role as a Royal Engineer. I wanted to join the army in an administrative role but was not allowed. [Kojo]

The Army recruits the "best of the best" from other countries, but then the job roles opened to migrant soldiers do not tend to match their home achievements and abilities. This creates an issue of job dissatisfaction. A vast majority of migrant soldiers are degree holders who are working and sharing accommodation with their UK counterparts who are mostly "school drop-outs." You feel a bit stuck in there. [Richard]

Home truths about persistent racial divisions of labour, where MMs are frequently assigned the least desirable tasks in service (Ware, 2010), forced some of our MMs to view their transition from the military back to the civilian world as gaining their freedom to consciously choose

what they want to be, enter the civilian work they trained for in their home countries, or achieve the potential work identities they once dreamed of achieving (Obodaru, 2017). Transitioning, therefore, for some of our MMs, felt like an opportunity to sculpture themselves out of the block of marble in which they were ‘imprisoned’, ascribing their successful transition into civilian work to their pre-military education and work experience. For those who were assigned work in the army that was organized around their pre-military acquired skills and education, their time ‘imprisoned in the marble’ helped them to hone invaluable skills that allowed them to return to the civilian work they trained for before signing up. The case of Isaac is illustrative:

I was into the logistics and aviation side of the DHL workforce in my country. I went back to DHL to become a Hubs Operations Analyst because I not only understand the UK logistical systems very well; I also understand the supply chain systems in the army, and so the experiences in the army were a plus when I left to rebuild my life again as a civilian. [Isaac]

The skills Isaac acquired in service served as a springboard to getting a foothold in the civilian work he trained for before joining the service. However, emphasising the nuances and similarities in the stories recounted by our MMs, many of whom ended up in service units doing jobs far removed from their past education and training, their time in service was often uninspiring, as they felt de-skilled and underutilised. Thus, imprisoned in the ‘block of military marble’, they lost their abilities to perform at a high level the craft they had once mastered during their pre-military higher education and training.

### **Randomness, luck, and chance**

Employing the Ecclesiastes reference to ‘time and chance’ as something that happens to all men, we describe what we interpreted as randomness, luck, and chance as a salient trope that runs through our MMs’ accounts of their enlistment and their subsequent (un)gilded transition into the civilian work. The ‘signing up’ as inferred by our MMs, they saw as a lifetime opportunity to either break free from the shackles of unemployment or to seek a better life in Europe, or they saw a means to regularise their stay in the UK. For many, it was indicative of both an opportunity and an ingrained agentic disposition to what one MM described as ‘chucking your career ball into the roulette mill’ in the hope that Lady Luck would smile at them. Randomness and chance are key characteristics because for many of our MMs, the decision to enlist was mostly unplanned, fortuitous, and often co-incidental. The following MMs recount with relish how they took a leap of faith to sign up:

On a visit in the UK, I met an old school friend on the train in London. I told him I didn't want to return home; I wanted to stay. He advised that the best route for me was to join the army. I got the directions to Kings Cross, where I signed up! [Joe]

Our MMs' subsequent transition into their subsequent civilian work were also mostly unplanned, and powered by luck and chance, because of their gnawing sense of how 'the stars got aligned' for them, when decisions that were out of their hands shaped and positively affected their smooth transition from the military to the civilian work, and their subsequent career paths. The case of Taju is instructive:

I went on job scouting when I was just about to bow out of the service. Before that, I was privileged to attend a course in general electrical technology at HMS Collingwood before I became a PO (Petty Officer). I got interviewed by an engineering firm but was just about to be turned down as my previous certificates were not really considered great. Fortunately, my Collingwood training gained traction from one of the panel members. To confirm I went to Collingwood, he asked questions about the training establishment and the course I attended. The next day, I was employed. [Taju]

In a related development, Mofe, who joined the service with a high school certificate, also narrated this engrossing account:

I went for nursing training with some comrades.... We made some efforts to get our certificate accredited, but we were not successful. We later gathered the information that we would have potentially been allowed to leave the military service if we had managed to get our training certificates accredited. Knowing the worth of this training, I went into the civil organisations. I was fortunate to meet medical personnel who appreciated my training, and I got employed. [Mofe]

Demonstrating that many employers have positive views of veterans' skills, capabilities, and qualifications (Stone & Stone, 2015), the contextualized accounts of our MMs are also indicative of the perceived situated and historic challenges associated with the transfer of skills from military service to civilian employment (Hardison et al., 2017). Nevertheless, these challenges, we argue, leave transient space for individual MM agency and the possibilities for a change in career. Thus, while our MMs frequently drew on luck and chance in their accounts of their transition, we follow Bornat et al. (2011) in suggesting that such framing also suggests and emphasizes an incipient a role for agency in entering and gaining a foothold in the civilian work in contexts which may not be significantly conspicuous in our MMs' accounts.

### **Figurational support networks**

The term 'figurational support networks', as used in organizing our findings, refers to the shifting and transient web of relational networks



made up of comrades, church members, hometown fellows, family, and friends of our MMs. Our data evidence suggest that aspects of our MMs' social and kinship identities combine to create a durable material and relational support which powers the career 'way-finding' of our MMs by directing their attention and focussing their minds on the possibilities of 'making the best' of their experiences and skills, and their potentialities to forge successful careers in the civilian work. The one fundamental piece in the figurational network jigsaw that came up, repeatedly in our MMs' accounts was their spouses and immediate family relations both in the UK and their home countries.

I count myself as a very lucky man because the emotional, spiritual, and social support I had from my friends and immediate family was just tremendous. It made me feel at peace when I stepped out of service. [Kosoko]

The military gives you support, I must be frank, but my family has been wonderful. They have really supported me all through the transition. Especially my wife... I really thank her. [Idibia]

Our MMs were unequivocal about how their 'family and military kindred spirit' kept them sane in their difficult moments. Their spouses, they argued, acted as 'sounding boards', provided them with the stability, emotional support, and the required peace of mind to re-organize their lives (Fossey et al., 2019). Some of our MMs went to the extent of making casual references to how marriage instability had negatively affected the ability of some of their colleagues to get on or reach their potential in the civilian work. Beyond the family, the durability and embeddedness of this network was also frequently brought into sharp focus. Kikky, the only female among our MM research participant, had this to say:

The bond I had formed with others from my brother countries whom I met during training and when I finally got to my regiment, has been nothing but invaluable after I left ... These interpersonal ties represent a prism through which I make sense of the world. [Kikky]

Kikky went on to explain that, but for the support and encouragement from her West African comrades, she would have struggled to turn her life around after experiencing a mild form of PTSD after service. Closely linked by their shared experiences and the military identities they came to hold, her former military friends, who were mostly men, understood her experiences better, and rallied around her in her darkest moments. The Commonwealth Legion (CLG) charity, she also observed, was on hand to help her navigate the labyrinth of enrolling onto some college courses, which drove her to get her foot in the door of her current trade.

## Show of 'grace under pressure'

We employed Hemmingway's definition of courage—'grace under pressure' (Lopez et al., 2003)—as an organising device to describe the heterogeneously ingrained 'courageous' actions undertaken by our MMs within the contingencies of transitioning to identifying, exploring, and exploiting opportunities otherwise overlooked by others to enter and forge careers in the civilian work. In their egalitarian pursuit of opportunities to enter and forge careers in civilian work, our MMs emphasised how they leveraged their military ethos of 'discipline' as a steppingstone to reach a positive outcome in their careers:

It was not easy, but I was determined to be positive and committed to this cause. With my acquired British citizenship, I had the world at my feet, but it also required a lot of discipline to walk the path to making any good out of it. I am thankful I learnt a lot of that in the military. This helped me to work on myself, make informed career choices, and put in the shift that made me master my new trade in no time. [Mofe]

I have learnt to be disciplined, which has also augmented my cultural training which I received from back home in Ghana. So, I know how to control myself and my team to deliver and achieve targets on time, and this is a rare and difficult skill to develop, and I believe that's why I am thriving in my job. [O'Dunn]

These dispositions of courage in the accounts of our MMs played out in the form of endurance, resilience, and the display of sheer courage, we surmise, helped them to overcome real, imaginary, or perceived structural barriers to achieving their potential in their everyday lives. Such disposition, we note, provides valuable insights into how this group of veterans managed to turn some of their negative and unpleasant experiences into productive career outcomes, and overcome their previous sense of not belonging when caught in the crossfire between the highly politicized position of being the heroic soldier and the abject immigrant (Gentleman, 2020). Standing outside the mainstream, and straddling two worlds as a migrant or MM, we found, is what leads characters to show their strength in demonstrating the virtue of grace-under-pressure to survive the career transition process.

I was driven by my understanding of who I am and what I wanted from life. The boldness derived from my African ancestry has really helped me. This fuelled my inquisitive nature, drove my hunger for information, that would improve my life in the civvy street. After all, you cannot rise beyond your thinking. [Barry]

Emphasizing triumph over adversity, the narrated accounts of our MMs often veered off to focus on overcoming problems such as acute health problems and underscored their strong cultural confidence and the refined sensitivities regarding their own competencies and abilities

in the face of the existential realities they face to entering and thriving in the civilian work. Desmond succinctly summarised a rendition of a narrative that weaved through the accounts and stories of all our MMs which we found were frequently told but seldom heard:

West African commonwealth soldiers are known to be hard core and resilient. We come from a region with adverse socio-economic histories, so we are born fighters. Hardly will you see any of our comrades becoming homeless or succumbing to PTSDs. Sadly, that's not the case for many of our counterparts who were born and bred in the UK. They sign up at an early age, say 17, so the regimental life is the only world and career they have known all their life. We are told what to do in there. So, for some, when they come out, they have no direction; no one is telling them what to do. [Desmond]

Caught up in a web not of their own weaving, the somehow uninspiring story of the 17-year-old who, Desmond claims, may end up exiting the service '[having] no direction, no one is telling them what to do' sheds light on how the situatedness and migrant and military identities of MMs, for example, get replicated in career wayfinding, helps compensate for deficits in situated social capital and constitutes a primary determinant of success in military-civilian transition. Permeating this line of reasoning is that many MMs, by virtue of their life circumstances, had been limited to signing up as a way to legalise their stay in the UK. Emphasising nuances and similarities in the situatedness of our MMs, some had to make career sacrifices and then spent a significant part of their lives in service, in the hope of securing a better life for themselves and their families. They faced the challenges they encountered on their own terms, stayed loyal to the Crown in the service of duty, and accomplished the extraordinary feat of moving on, entering, and thriving in the civilian work.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Ever since MMs became recognized as a distinct and significant portion of the UK military, numerous scholars have documented their career patterns, motivations, and experiences in serving in the military (Ware, 2012, 2016) However, an account of their transition out of military service into civilian work remain elusive, even at a time when the careers of leavers, reservists, and veterans have come to occupy the centre stage of discourse on military futures (Blank, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2018). Empirically, we studied the retrospective accounts of the military-civilian transition of migrants from West African Commonwealth countries who joined the UK military from 1998 to 2013. Adopting an exploratory qualitative research approach, we were able to explore the life-history accounts of former MMs on their transition out of the military service into civilian work. These readily

available life-history accounts, related by agents of a discrete group located outside the conscious frame of traditional military research programmes, provided us with invaluable insight into the high degree of agency of MMs which powers their transition out of the military service into civilian work. Focusing on the competencies and logics of critical explanations these veterans employ to account for their career-making decisions and actions, our study provides insight into their military-civilian careers experiences, and how they employ their unique forms of identity emerging from their military careers to respond to and overcome structural barriers in their everyday lives (Atherton, 2009). Played out as a process of 'way-finding', we theorize that our MMs' subjective 'way-finding' in(to) the civilian work is characterized by four salient and distinct tropes: (1) sculpturing an angel in a block of marble; (2) randomness, luck, and chance; (3) figurational support networks; and (4) a show of 'grace under pressure'. Providing rare insight into the dynamics and meaning of actions, our findings suggest that, for decades, veterans' transition into the civilian work within the contingencies of the migrant situation has always been in flux, with each new veteran chiselling his/her skills into its institutions and infrastructure, which could make it hard for MMs with qualifications or otherwise, to maintain their career 'way-finding' into the future.

Our research and its findings contribute to the extant literature on veterans' careers in two ways. First, while existing research has extended our understanding on MMs' pre-military and military career experiences (e.g. Ware, 2012, 2016), our study makes a significant advance by focusing on their experiences when transitioning out of military service into civilian work by revealing how the interactivity among social identities may shape the transition experiences of this ethnically diverse, yet specific group of MMs. Second, our theorizing of MM experiences of transitioning out of military service into civilian work redirects attention to the need for a broader understanding of equality, diversity, and inclusion, and how it plays out in practice. In particular, our intersectionality approach sheds light on the mechanisms through which intersecting identities could nuance career experiences (Tomlinson et al., 2019), and leveraged to caution against what McBride et al. (2015) called the over-generalisation that tends to obscure the labour and marketplace experiences of minority groups, thereby refining our intersectional sensitivities to the structural opportunities (or barriers) of people caught up in the interstitial spaces of multiple identities face to entering and thriving in the labour and everyday marketplaces.

From the anodyne to the transformative, our study and its findings also make invaluable contribution to the practice of human resource management and point to some salient implications for HRM

practitioners. First, our study provides in-depth understanding and knowledge of a time when the British Army's recruitment campaign led to a significant number of Commonwealth nationals queuing to sign up (Ware, 2010). The experiences of this distinct group of veterans in transitioning out of military service into civilian work, we argue, does not only broaden the scope and breadth of diversity in practice. It also provides guidance for managers considering how to use HR practices to broaden diversity and influence organizational outcomes. In this regard, managers should assess whether or not MMs as a distinct group of veterans are included in their equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programs and initiatives (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). Such programmes, we suggest can include targeted recruitment of MMs. Second, our intersectional approach, within the specific contexts of MMs transitioning out of military service into civilian work, brings into sharp focus incipient needs and values of MMs that may be overlooked in policy formulation. In this regard, our study and its findings provide opportunities for rethinking and sensemaking about the tensions around, for example, meritocratic recruitment and career opportunity construction for individuals with 'intersecting identities'. Third, we encourage HR practitioners to view MMs like 'composite materials'. In the words of Fitzsimmons (2013), composite materials are preferred in manufacturing because they are not only suitable for their task; they are also lighter, flexible, and cheap. Nevertheless, composite materials frequently require more work up front in order to realise their potential. In the same way, MMs like composite materials are frequently full of potential, flexible, and very keen to work. However, like all veterans, MMs will always require some assistance in the very early days of stepping out of the military (Flynn & Ball, 2020; Ford, 2017), and may require a lot of preparation in reaching their potential. Deepening managerial understanding of MMs military-civil transition experiences, we suggest is the starting point to setting organizations up to benefit from their human resource 'composite materials'. Such understanding on the part of corporate managers, in particular, could help them in fitting their diversity programmes and initiatives with their organization's strategy (Roberson, 2006), in ways that allow senior managers and policy makers to pursue changes through the development of new HR practices that may work better for veterans with marginalized multiple identities.

Clearly, the educational background and advanced skills some MMs bring with them suggest that the military may need to develop better focused support and intervention programs for MMs, so they can thrive better and reach their full potential both inside and outside the service. The pace of policy changes to supporting the careers of MMs within and beyond the military, as observed by Ware (2012), has been glacial,

but we believe our study could potentially jumpstart a new commitment to making best use of their skills and experiences. For those employers interested in exploring novel ways to support veterans and MMs in particular, our MMs' accounts of having to depend on the luck inherent in 'friendly' MMs-related policies, and better evidence-based human resource practices that have the potential to enhance and support the career experiences of MMs in the civilian world are crucial.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

Our study extends our understanding of the rich career experiences of MMs by reconciling their military life with civilian employment. However, it also has some limitations, thus offering opportunities for future research in the broader area of veterans' careers. First, while the life history accounts of the MMs in this study shed light on how their mutually constitutive relations and interactivity among their social identities fosters shape their '(un)gilded' transition out of military service into civilian work, they only provide us with what we surmise is a snapshot of MMs' career transition experiences. In so doing, our research opens up possibility for exploring the intersection between migration and military status, and their implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion (McDonald & Parks, 2012). To explore, the dynamic and agentic-relational processes characterising these transient relations, we suggest that scholars carry out longitudinal research that has the potential to track the career journeys of MMs, and how they transition out of military service is needed to help unpack the full temporal dynamics of MM career transition. We also concede that not all MMs are able to transition from military service to forge careers in the civilian work. In this regard, any comparative studies of the lived experiences of MMs falling into these subcategories could show whether there are differences in the transition experiences of MMs from other regions. Transitioning out of service into civilian work is a major turning point in the life of veterans, and the case of MMs is much more acute because many are unfamiliar with the UK civil market, as they moved from their home countries straight into service in the UK (Ware, 2016). Research into the impact of their transition out of military to civilian work on their spouses and families are also welcome. Such studies have the potential to shed light on the impact of household finances on transition decisions and may also go further to examine how tied-migrant military wives also justify the careers of their spouses.

Owing to the particularities of the subgroup of MMs we studied, that is, those from West African Commonwealth countries, it is difficult to extrapolate our findings. We are not even confident our findings could

apply to a white Zimbabwean male in the same way as to a black female Cameroonian. In this regard, we encourage future researchers to study other groups of MMs to ascertain whether similar or additional insights can be generated. Finally, given the choice of intersectionality as a lens, and the group of veterans we studied, we cannot totally ignore issues associated with colour, prejudice, discrimination, racism, etc., especially when reports of MMs being discriminated against in the British army are rife (King, 2021). Asked to sum up their experiences of transitioning out of military service into civilian work, our MMs favoured three words: uncertainty, worry, fatigue. Do they have good reason for their apprehension? Perhaps this is a common experience for veterans in general; however, we surmise that the intersectionality of race and their identities as migrants and veterans belie how they preferred to sum up their experiences. In this regard, we invite future researchers to explore MMs' experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion within and beyond service.

In conclusion, we concede that contextual issues and the recursive relationship between structure and agency makes it difficult to reconcile military life with civilian employment and careers outcomes (Higate, 2001; Mayrhofer et al., 2007). In this article, we have sought to account for and theorise the military-civilian transition experiences of one distinct but growing group of UK veterans from West African Commonwealth countries. Our study contributes to what can be described as more realistic, granular, and context-specific studies on veterans' careers and offer a new lens for understanding the rich career experiences of military migrants.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, D.S, upon reasonable request.

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