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Military to civilian cultural transition experiences of retired military personnel: A systematic meta-synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Military organizations often demonstrate contrasting features compared to civilian ones, including indoctrination of military identity and mind-set. Therefore, on returning after retirement, military personnel undergo acculturation to reconnect to the civilian world. Many military retirees face difficulty readjusting in multiple professional and personal life domains, and report decreased life satisfaction due to this transition. The present review conducted a thematic meta-synthesis of 28 studies that had qualitatively assessed military to civilian transition experiences. The aim was to understand the military-civilian culture gap and identify the challenges faced during this transition. The analysis led to six themes – *"Military Institutionalization, Military-Civilian Cultural Contrast, The Three S's of Transition Challenges – Stereotypes, Skills, and Support, The Losses of Identity, Reconnecting with Family, Friends, and Civilian Counterparts, and Facilitators in Transition – Covering the Military-Civilian Gap."* Based on these findings, the review further presents possible intervention suggestions for retirement adjustment and future research direction.

What is the public significance of this article?—This meta-synthesis reveals that the transition in culture from military to civilian context encompasses a cultural gap and identity shift. This transition impacts veterans' multiple life domains, be it professional or personal. The findings suggest that veterans find transition support inadequate. Thus, studying this cultural gap is relevant for aiding retired military personnel to transition holistically. It has implications for organizations to employ veterans with multiple skills and contribute to policy-making for military veterans.

Introduction

Military service is a profession and a distinct way of life with which military members identify to varying degrees. Military culture is characterized by duty, honor, self-sacrifice, discipline, loyalty, obedience to authority, and dedication toward comrades and the nation (Collins, 1998; McCaslin, 2021). It is embodied in a cultural context that includes a risk-prone job profile, including armed encounters, deployments, and separation from the family, which may deteriorate physical and mental health. In the military setup, there is thorough indoctrination into the service culture. This

process often changes the trainees' values, beliefs, actions, work, and relationships (McCaslin, 2021).

In comparison, these values highly contrast with the more individualistic civilian culture, which incorporates *"liberty-based civic values, materialism, and excessive individualism"* (A. Demers, 2011, p. 162). The military and civilian cultures differ drastically on multiple dimensions: job profile, work ethic, core values, intensive and rigorous training, deployments, separation from family, and the overall community experience (Rose et al., 2017).

Retiring from the military and reintegrating into civilian society thus requires acculturation, demarcating the beginning of a new chapter in one's life. The bewilderment that retired military personnel experience upon returning home can probably be explained by interactions impacted by the military-civilian cultural gap (Collins, 1998). The reculturation perspective on the military to civilian transition also implied that the transition readjustment stress experienced is not just vocational but is essentially psychological due to the cultural identity dissonance experienced (Joseph et al., 2022). Thus, transitioning back into the civilian culture and rediscovering meaning can become a challenging experience for many retired armed forces personnel.

Furthermore, many service members transition from the military culture to a distinct civilian culture

relatively early, compared to a general professional career, where the retirement age comes only after one has crossed 60 years of age. This suggests that redefining self-identity and readjustment of military veterans into society should be solemnly looked into at multiple levels, including societal, individual, and military institution levels (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This early release also raises other issues, such as a mismatch between civilian work requirements and acquired skills, the perception of veterans in the civilian job market, and difficulty adapting to civilian work culture (Mael et al., 2022).

Most of the literature on military reintegration has focused on post-combat deployment problems and disorder-specific readjustment problems, either mental or physical, such as PTSD, traumatic brain injury, suicidal ideation, and physical injuries encountered (McCabe et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2021; Winter et al., 2020). Only some have focused on understanding the transition experience of retired armed forces personnel from military to civilian life and how they see through the cultural gap, readjust, create new meanings, and reshape their identities. Thus, the present review paper's objective was to unearth studies that have specifically focused on experiences of transitioning back into civilian life after retiring from the armed forces among the "non-clinical" veteran population. This systematic meta-synthesis focused on quality assessment of the included studies, understanding the experiences of the military-civilian cultural gap, and identifying challenges faced in multiple spheres of life, including work, family, and social domains while transitioning from military to civilian culture. The review further tries to provide possible meaningful intervention suggestions and future research directions based on the challenges identified, which could assist in making this cultural transition experience less challenging.

Method

For the present review, papers with only qualitative findings were included since the review aimed at understanding the "experiences" of the transition phenomenon among the "non-clinical" veteran population. Most transition-related quantitative studies found either assessed transition issues concerning physical or mental health issues, health care access, usage of programs and services, or were intervention-based studies. Hence, a systematic meta-synthesis was conducted to analyze primary data across the results of peer-reviewed published papers that reported qualitative findings. A meta-synthesis expands understanding of any phenomenon by integrating inter-related qualitative studies, re-

conceptualizing, and combining them into a transformed whole (Dawson, 2019). The approach involved search, selection, assessment, summarization, and combining qualitative evidence to help understand the cultural gap experiences of the military to civilian transition.

Search strategy

The studies were searched systematically using multiple electronic databases, including EBSCOhost, Scopus, Sage, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, APA PsycNET, and PsycINFO. Appropriate keywords, including the following terms, were searched – "Military," "Veteran," "Armed Forces," "Soldier," "Transition," "Reintegration," "Readjustment," "Transition experience," "Retirement experience," "Civilian," "Civilian life," "Community." These terms were then searched using the relevant boolean search operators depending on the database being searched, such as *(Military OR veteran* OR "Armed force*" OR Soldier*) AND (transition OR "retirement experiences" OR readjustment OR reintegration OR "transition experience") AND (civilian)*. As the hits ran into lakhs, subject-wise filters were applied to make the search narrower and manageable, including studies in humanities and social sciences, psychology, psychiatry, behavioral sciences, management and organization studies, health sciences, and sociology-related studies. The search was also narrowed using the filter of journal articles only, and the search was limited to studies published from 1980 until October 2021. Following this search strategy, 6078 hits were retrieved and imported to EndNote Citation Manager software (Clarivate, 2020).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they (1) were primary qualitative studies or mixed methods studies reporting qualitative data, (2) were reported in peer-reviewed journals, (3) utilized armed forces veteran participants, (4) communicated about the military to civilian transition experiences including either reintegration, reemployment difficulties, readjusting with family or identity issues experienced, (5) were published after 1980 to include recent studies.

Studies were excluded if they (1) were not in English, (2) were quantitative studies, (3) were review papers, conference papers, theoretical discussion papers, handbook chapters, and dissertations, (4) were not available in full text, (5) described adjustment experiences exclusively related to either psychiatric or medical condition (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury) or student population, or were of those

returning after deployment but were still serving in the armed forces.

Article selection with PRISMA diagram

The search selection of the study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009) outlined in Figure 1. EndNote Citation Manager Software version 20.0.1 (Clarivate, 2020) was used to import all the citations. After deleting duplicates, 5268 articles remained. These were screened in a preliminary screening against the inclusion and exclusion criteria via their title and abstracts. All records unrelated to the military to civilian transition issues were excluded. Four hundred and seventy-eight papers related to transition remained and were reevaluated for eligibility. Papers irrelevant to the topic, handbook chapters, dissertations, conference papers, theoretical papers, or papers utilizing only quantitative methods

were excluded. Papers on transition, which were explicitly intervention-based, specific to deployment, disorders, or clinical population, were also eliminated. Six papers were unavailable, and 1 was not available in English. The remaining were 57 papers which were then fully read and examined on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, 28 papers were selected for the present systematic meta-synthesis.

Quality appraisal

The final selected studies were evaluated for quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist qualitative tool (2018). The checklist provided additional hint questions to ensure objectivity and accuracy. Following Butler et al. (2016), the studies were classified as high, moderate, or low-quality based on their checklist scores, with low-quality studies recommended for exclusion. The
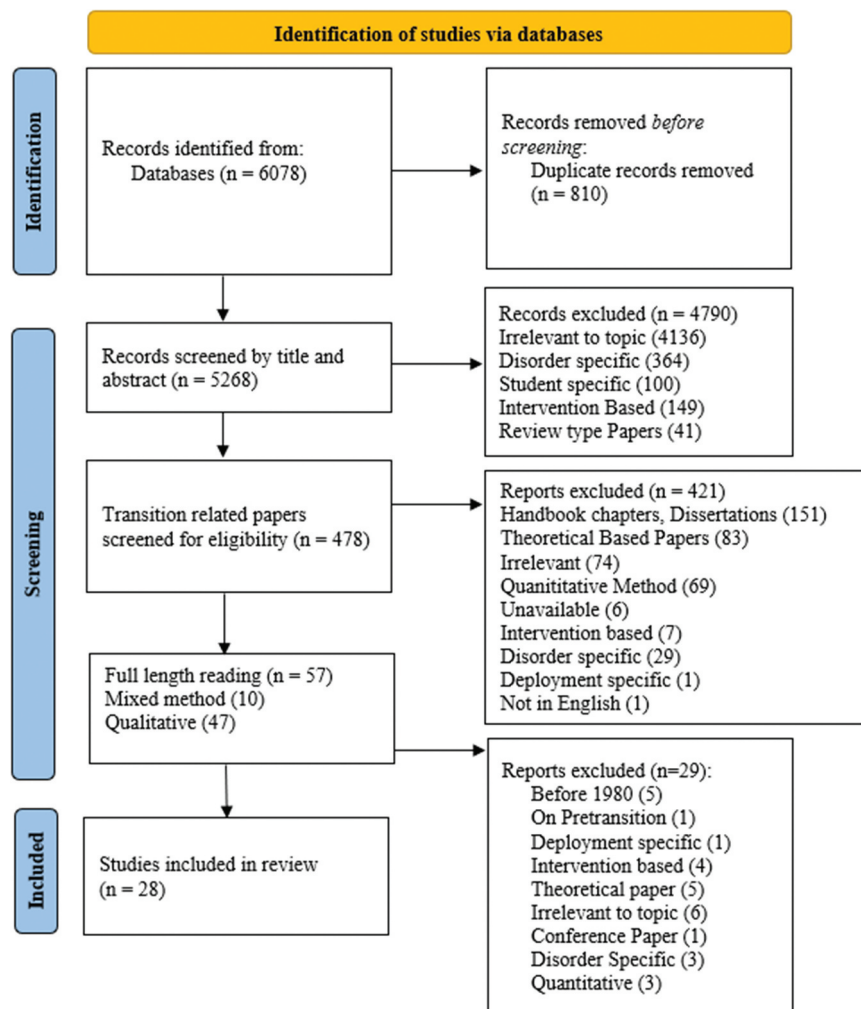

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of the selection process and included studies.

studies were also examined for methodological integrity, including any additional checks used during data analysis, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Journal Article Reporting Standards (JARS) – Qualitative Meta-Analysis Article Reporting guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018).

Data analysis

For the present systematic meta-synthesis, thematic synthesis was employed within a constructivist/interpretive paradigm focusing on the individuals' and communities' social processes, meaning-making, and enactment of their realities. Thematic synthesis enables the researcher to incorporate more studies in the review (Lachal et al., 2017). Thematic synthesis involves data extraction and integration of findings from various primary qualitative studies. It has three stages: line-by-line coding of the text, developing *"descriptive themes,"* and deriving *"analytical themes"* which requires researchers to interpret and *"go beyond"* the primary studies, spawning new interpretive constructs, explanations or hypotheses (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Following this, the findings of the selected studies were inductively coded line by line, and the raw data was organized into preliminary codes and subsequently into descriptive and analytical themes. The researchers coded the data separately, met at all three stages for discussion, and ensured consensus at each level of analysis.

Results

Characteristics of included studies

Among the 28 studies, the majority, i.e., 14 studies, were conducted in the United States, 4 in the United Kingdom, 1 in Canada, 1 in Northern Ireland, and 8 utilized Swedish soldiers' data. All studies were conducted on veterans (those who had exited from the forces) from different armed forces services, including the reserve and national guard categories. Twenty-six of these were qualitative studies, while 2 were mixed-method studies. Of these, 18 studies used the semi-structured interview method, 7 utilized focus groups, and 1 used both. The two remaining studies used Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) of online expressive writing and self-report survey method. The most common qualitative approach for analysis used was thematic analysis, utilized in 12 studies, followed by narrative analysis in 8 studies. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used in 4 studies,

and 3 utilized grounded theory. The remaining 1 study did not specify the method of analysis used. The detailed characteristics of these studies are provided in Supplementary Table 1.

Quality appraisal and methodological integrity

The details of the quality appraisal and methodological integrity have been mentioned in Supplementary Table 1. The CASP Checklist qualitative tool (2018) was used, and all studies were found to belong to the high (24 studies) and moderate categories (4 studies). Thus, no study was excluded. The studies were also assessed on methodological integrity, focusing on additional checks used during data analysis, using the APA Style JARS Qualitative Meta-Analysis Article Reporting guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018). All studies discussed their findings *grounded* in the evidence, i.e., using quotes or excerpts from participant narratives. Most studies used a consensus coding process to improve their findings' inter-rater reliability and trustworthiness (see Supplementary Table 1). Two studies (A. Demers, 2011; A. L. Demers, 2013) specified using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles of *"credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability"* for validity, while one study (Boros & Erolin, 2021) mentioned using Yardley's (2000) four broad criteria to evaluate the validity of the data: *"sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance."* Many studies used member checks or participant feedback to improve the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data. Few studies also utilized other checks, such as using an iterative process in the case of grounded theory, providing detailed descriptions for case studies, and keeping author biases in mind prior to analysis (see Supplementary Table 1). Two studies used additional field notes to improve the credibility and reflexivity of their findings (Fulton et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018). Two studies did not specify any additional checks used for methodological integrity (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Smith & True, 2014).

Themes

The results revealed that the transition experience was relatively consistent regarding the problems encountered by veterans, regardless of the country. The synthesis of the primary studies' findings led to 6 major themes, each having subthemes. The six major themes and their subthemes are elaborated below. The papers contributing to each theme have been shown in Supplementary Table 2.

Military institutionalization

Before gauging transition difficulties, it becomes crucial to understand the military context of where veterans are coming from. The military as an organization is a self-contained community. It encompasses the internalization of military culture by "*fracturing the previous civilian self, stripping away outside influences, imprinting military relationships, mentalizing toughness, and moralizing*" (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020). The "Military Institutionalization" theme has further been divided into three subthemes – *Values and Strong Work Ethic, Structured Nature, Lack of agency – the By-product.*

Values and strong work ethic. The military instilled strong values, work ethos, and camaraderie principles. Fundamental ethics included the oath to serve, completing the mission, and following orders. The firm and cohesive military culture valued teamwork and leadership qualities, respect, trust, and integrity (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). The inculcation of unique cultural norms, values, language, and military structure created a shared reality where service and comrades always came before the self (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020). The strong work ethic warranted reshuffling priorities and dealing with profound concerns such as life versus death; this often led to a devaluation of what veterans regarded as insignificant (e.g., everyday concerns) when they reentered the civilian world. A participant's narrative highlights this: "*walking through the grocery store lamenting that the biggest decision of the day was whether to buy oranges or apples*" (Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020, p. 199). The military also ingrained a zero-defect mentality, making adjusting or seeking help difficult (A. Demers, 2011; McCaslin et al., 2021). Thus, military institutionalization indoctrinated a unique meaning and purpose for duty and service, patriotic responsibility, camaraderie, and sacrifice (Grimell, 2020).

Structured nature. The military's hierarchical structure required compulsory compliance with leaders, understanding the importance of competence, accountability, completion of work, attention to detail, uniformity, recognition, and facing the consequences of not doing a good job. One had to be neatly groomed and conscious about one's appearance, which indicated respect for self and others (McCaslin et al., 2021). With rules already laid out, the military structure became a safety net for the participants providing comfort in its "*black and white*" setting where orders were given and obeyed. This structure offered simplicity to decision-making and provided something to "*hold onto*" in the turmoil of war. For participants, the military structure became something "*. . . you get used to . . . And then you get out, then all of a sudden you've got to take care of yourself*" in the civilian world (Ahern et al., 2015, p. 6). The structure and order facet of military culture, leadership, and work ethics stayed imbibed even after service.

Lack of agency – The by-product. Structure and routine inculcated among soldiers could facilitate transitioning to a notably hierarchical organizational structure. However, it also became a barrier. Since veterans had to adhere to the military's total institutionalization – obeying strict regulations of when and how to behave, transitioning back to civilian life without a predefined framework became challenging. Participants wound up not knowing what to do in the absence of that hierarchical structure. "*Soldiers are trained to be self-reliant, but not self-advocate*" (Smith & True, 2014, p. 155). Furthermore, institutionalization also left some feeling helpless and disappointed since they were not allowed to question actions if they got superseded or experienced stagnation. "*A new colleague suddenly earned 5,000 more than me. We had the same position, we had about the same competence but he was a specialist officer*" (Grimell, 2015, p. 143).

Military-civilian cultural contrast

On transitioning to civilian culture, veterans experienced a shift in work ethic and surroundings, making life in civilian employment seem estranging and infuriating. Therefore, adapting to civilian life necessitated the development of new cultural skills and knowledge (M. E. Keeling et al., 2019). The following subthemes highlight the military-civilian cultural contrast experienced.

Civilian work ethos and individualistic culture. Veterans found the civilian work ethos and culture problematic and contrasting with their internalized values of the military setup. To veterans, civilians appeared to be somewhat disorderly and focused on materialism, triviality, and selfish concerns (Orazem et al., 2017). "*The biggest thing between civilian and military is the selfless service. You see a lot of this in the civilian world like 'how does this benefit me?' as opposed to 'what can I do to make things better?'*" (McCaslin et al., 2021, p. 615). This "*cultural clash*" made sustaining employment with civilians hard (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; M. Keeling et al., 2018). The military demanded greater responsibility involving protecting and defending one's comrades or subordinates. In contrast, veterans found civilian life duties insignificant, leading to

dissatisfaction and detachment from the civilian world. The shift in their work surroundings went further than job roles and duties (Bull Schaefer et al., 2013). There was an absence of ownership to team in the civilian world. As a result, veterans experienced nostalgia for the social camaraderie of the military – *"loss of social cohesion with similar minded individuals has been difficult"* (Roy et al., 2020, p. 432). The contrasting individualistic values of the civilian culture particularly made enculturation difficult for veterans (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Smith & True, 2014). Veterans were caught between two cultures: military culture, where they knew what was considered appropriate behavior, and civilian culture, where they did *"not know the rules of the game, [and] if you kill somebody, you'll go to jail."* This caused substantial confusion among veterans (A. Demers, 2011, p. 169). As a result, military *"codifying"* frequently clashed with civilian institutions, expectations, behaviors, and social conventions, and these clashes ranged from *"humorous to highly conflictual destructuring"* (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020, pp. 237, 239).

Lack of structure. Veterans also experienced a divergence between military and civilian work regarding structure. The military's highly hierarchical way of life contrasted with other flatter occupational environments of the civilian world. Earlier, there was a chain of command and limited personal decisions. On the contrary, civilian life felt chaotic. Its diverse context, civilian clothes, lack of uniformity, and an absence of military formalities and hierarchies made making own decisions overwhelming in the civilian world (Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020; Roy et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2018). In the military, veterans had worked hard to gain the respect of their comrades and reach leadership positions that gave them purpose. In contrast, veterans found that civilians lacked an understanding of *"the military concept"* and were neither punctual nor respectful to authority (A. Demers, 2011, p. 170; Ahern et al., 2015). Due to institutionalization, the military's disciplined regimes were deeply rooted, making life on civvy street unbearable for some ex-service personnel. Many perceived themselves as unqualified to work in the civilian sector (Williams et al., 2018).

Pace of life, communication style, and degree of job identification. Other contrasts between the two cultures were the pace of life, communication styles, and the degree of job identification. After exiting the service, many experienced that initial jolt of being in a non-war environment. Veterans found it challenging to let go of their past patterns of military readiness and adjust to a slower pace of life in civilian life where there was no urgency whatsoever (A. Demers, 2011; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). Regarding communication styles, veterans felt communication in the military was efficient and direct compared to the civilian world (Orazem, 2017). This also became a huge factor in maintaining employment in the civil sector – *"of course, I often heard during the evaluations that I was too direct, too blunt and almost on the border of mean, they did not accept well certain things that I did there, simply put"* (Grimell, 2017b, p. 841). Furthermore, the degree of job identification also influenced the transition. While the military training and the uniform reinforced identification with the military career, a less internalized military identity made transitioning back to civilian life easier (Binks & Cambridge, 2018).

The three S's of transition challenges – Stereotypes, skills, and support

Apart from dealing with a contrasting military and civilian culture, veterans also had to undergo other transition challenges, which were highly rooted in employment difficulty, stereotypes, prejudice of "us and them," and a lack of transition support. These have been elaborated below as subthemes.

Employment difficulty and employers' stereotypes. Veterans experienced great difficulty finding employment in the civilian sector. Most studies listed employer perception of veterans as a significant contributor to this. Employer stigma and prejudice against former services led to discrimination against veterans and feeling cast as an outgroup by society (Brunger et al., 2013; Grimell, 2018b; M. Keeling et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018). *"You know, I go to hospital [sic] to get a job, 'well you're crazy, you deployed, you know, you're going to flip out on us?' … 'We want to hire veterans,' that's what they say but none of them do"* (Sripada et al., 2018, p. 247). In Grimell's (2020) case study of David, he had a turbulent year post transitioning. This turbulence was related to his job search in the civilian context and the lack of importance given to his military background by potential civilian employers who did not acknowledge the value of military training and experience. *" … they said, 'the problem with you is that you've no experience of working with civilians,' I've no experience of working with civilians? What are we? Are we humanoids, or are we down from outer space? I find it an insult for a start to differentiate between people in uniform and people in civilian life"* (Williams et al., 2018, p. 8).

Veterans' own civilian perceptions. While the employers held a stigma against veterans, veterans also had their perceptions regarding civilians, which contributed

to their transition difficulty. Veterans perceived civilians as hard to trust (Roy et al., 2020) and felt as if they were being deceived in the civilian world (Grimell, 2017b). Their military identity differentiated them from civilians, making them feel *"We ain't fuckin' civvies"*(Binks & Cambridge, 2018, p. 5). Veterans perceived civilians as naive, ignorant, self-centered, or judgmental. This enhanced their perception that *"civilians don't understand you"*(Smith & True, 2014, p. 155). Veterans described three critical challenges to returning home: the dearth of respect from civilian counterparts, holding themselves on a higher pedestal than civilians, and not fitting into the civilian world (A. Demers, 2011). Many were frustrated and disappointed by civilians' behavior – mobiles buzzing at inappropriate moments, disruption of classes, and what was considered *"petty conversations about shit that means nothing"* (A. Demers, 2011, p. 171). Narratives suggested that veterans wished civilians respected the armed forces personnel better for their crucial role in society.

The military masculine stereotype. Veterans found themselves terrible in asking for help. To make matters more complex, masculine stereotypes of the military and the alpha male image of combat soldiers prevented them from seeking help. *"I can't be weak around them, you know, 'cause they all look at me as like some kind of like superman, you know . . . They just see me as like this strong person that's made it through so much."; "The military never, ever, tells you how to ask for help."* (Smith & True, 2014, p. 152). Many were reluctant to do so as they were uncomfortable talking about their emotions. Some considered emotions to be liabilities. *"Or you know, because in combat arms we are traditionally, we are the alpha males. We don't, we don't want to tell nobody our problems, we're uh, we're tough, tough, tough . . . "* (Sripada et al., 2018, p. 247). This further made them more distant, and they found it difficult to reestablish identity coherence between the two conflicting master narratives – military combatant and civilian.

Balancing military masculinity and civilian feminine expectations. While military men experienced the "military masculine" stereotype of being an alpha male, the Female Veterans' Story had a different narrative. On transitioning, female veterans felt the need to balance masculinity and femininity in the civilian culture. Others found it difficult to relate to them. *"He knows me as military, but I'm female too . . . They (men) don't know what to do with us . . . Do I treat you like one of the guys? Do I treat you like a lady? . . . "* (A. L. Demers, 2013, p. 503). Their families, too, experienced cognitive dissonance in their expectations from

them *"It's like they want you to be 'the lady,' and you've been used to . . . some of the (military) positions that we've held. So relating to that intimate part of people, and to my family . . . I wasn't able to adjust."* After deployments, it became more difficult for them to readjust to their conventional feminine roles – *"No one gives you training on how to rebuild that trust, that bond with your children."* As a result, in some cases, family dynamics led to divorce (Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017, p. 113). Another thing that stood out in female veteran transition narratives was that, unlike male veterans, women openly discussed the importance of seeking help and support from others to aid the transition (Boros & Erolin, 2021). Moreover, female veterans emphasized that not all veterans need to be *"pathologized"* to obtain assistance in transitioning from military to civilian culture. (A. L. Demers, 2013).

Difficulty in skill translation. Transferring skills to civilian life was also one of the significant challenges. Military having a different work atmosphere, communication style, skill set, values, and ethos made it very challenging for veterans to translate military duties, skills, and experiences to civilian roles (M. Keeling et al., 2018; M. E. Keeling et al., 2019). The transition was usually followed by anticipation and anxiety, acknowledgment of loss of job-related skills, and evaluation of employer and colleague support (Brunger et al., 2013; Bull Schaefer et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2018). The military experience, sacrifices, and skills remained unrecognized and unappreciated in the civilian world. This led to exasperation among the participants (Grimell, 2015; Orazem et al., 2017). Veterans needed to start navigating the civilian sector to find employment and financial stability. However, it was hard to adapt to civilian working practices and attitudes (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Roy et al., 2020).

Lack of transition support. Prior planning and adequate transition support can aid in transitioning successfully. However, many studies reported a lack of transition support, which led to unrealistic financial planning, culture shock, and feeling unprepared for the civilian world (Boros & Erolin, 2021; M. Keeling et al., 2018; M. E. Keeling et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2020; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2018). Despite the existence of some programs and channels, these were often found inadequate, irrelevant, and merely considered a*"check-box exercise"* (M. E. Keeling et al., 2019). Unit support existed and was seen as family. However, even among cohesive and supportive teams, topics discussed were superficial, with limited emotional disclosure and a reluctance to discuss

concerns related to mental health (Sripada et al., 2018). Women, specifically having experienced gender stereotyping in the military, did not feel supported outside their families (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). Veterans had negative experiences and experienced frustration and disappointment while accessing public services. " ... *you go and see a different person every time and then you have to explain the same story each time ...* "; *"You get promises and get told lots of stuff and it all comes to nothing ... "* (Fulton et al., 2019, p. 6). Stigma and skeptical feelings also added to these barriers. Confusion over seeking help for mental health "symptoms" was also emphasized, and the family wanted to know more about services and their accessibility (Fulton et al., 2019). A general lack of public support made veterans feel disoriented upon entering civvy street, making transitioning challenging. Additional support, such as basic training in civilian settings, may be required to help them successfully reintegrate once they leave the military (A. Demers, 2011; A. L. Demers, 2013).

The losses of identity

This theme tries to capture the essence of the experience of identity loss in transitioning from a military culture into a diverse civilian culture. The theme has been categorized into three subthemes, depicting different types of losses experienced in one's identity –

Loss of meaning, sense of purpose and belonging – "Feelings of emptiness." The military culture was seen as greater than oneself, providing meaning and a strong sense of purpose (Brunger et al., 2013; M. Keeling et al., 2018; Orazem et al., 2017). According to Grimell (2018b), the experiences of purpose, meaning, camaraderie, and sacrifice had become *"ultimate concerns"* (p. 392) for the participants. Losing one's *"ultimate concern(s)"* within the civilian context evoked existential questions of meaninglessness, emptiness, and loss of something vital among the participants. Many strongly identified with the military camaraderie and claimed that the military had shaped them and greatly influenced their lives (McCaslin et al., 2021). On the contrary, after transitioning, the civilian sector focused on individualizing, and socializing was no longer implicit in the job. Loss of extraordinary community and camaraderie was the most challenging part of *"limboizing"* (Grimell, 2018b, 2019; Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020). The asymmetry between the military and civilian cultures, internalizing the military camaraderie and losing one's community, purpose, and sense of belonging left veterans with an emptiness in civilian life.

Loss of power and status. In transitioning to civilian life, veterans had to separate from their military identity and experienced difficulty parting with their distinctiveness from being a *"somebody"* to being *"just a normal person on the street"* (Brunger et al., 2013, p. 93). They experienced a loss in their sense of status, self-esteem, and self-worth – *"I was good at my job in the marine corps. I was in charge of people, and I did a good job ... Out here, [I am] just a regular civilian."* According to many veterans, the most significant difficulty was dealing with *"the difference in the amount of respect [they] had"* in the military as compared to how they were perceived in civilian life (A. Demers, 2011, p. 170). The military also had many ways of recognizing service, such as awarding medals; however, such symbols had no value or meaning in civilian culture (Smith & True, 2014). *"Handing-back or removal of forms of 'official' identification such as military watches, equipment, and identification badges symbolically reduced participants to 'mere' civilian status."* (Williams et al., 2018, p. 6). Hence, veterans faced a solid challenge to their materialistic identification and underwent *"role stripping"* on their metaphorical sense of the self (Williams et al., 2018, p. 7). Grimell and Van den Berg (2020) case study also emphasized how the uniform further denoted a clear demarcation between those who have served and those who have not. Another participant stated, *"when you are wearing the uniform the silent nod, or just the recognition. That disappears when you are a civilian. You are, then you are just one of the crowd, perhaps. As a member of the military, you stand out of the crowd, or when you wear the uniform like that, I represent something"* (Grimell, 2015, p. 147). The loss of power and status affiliated with the military identity made participants feel lost and abandoned in the civilian world, judging themselves as worthless beyond the military context. The change from soldier to civilian thus led to a decrease in self-efficacy, associated with feelings of incompetence and helplessness among the participants (Brunger et al., 2013).

Loss of sense of self: Who am I?. At the time of joining, the military culture purposefully fractures the civilian self through the *"soldierizing"* process (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2020). On transitioning back post-retirement, veterans once again underwent an identity crisis experiencing a loss of the military identity, which erstwhile had so strongly been inculcated. This led to the existential question – who am I? (Boros & Erolin, 2021). Sense of self once again became fractured – *"like pieces of the house were kind of falling apart around me, and it was fast, and I didn't know how to deal with it."* (A. L. Demers, 2013, p. 501). This unleashed emotional

problems and the difficult task of finding a new meaningful role narrative for the existential self (e.g., employee, student, family man, retiree) to replace the existing military ones (Grimell, 2018b). There was a sense of disconnection, and they felt a dichotomy between their military and civilian selves, caught in a liminality stage of identity development (A. Demers, 2011). There were *"two separate worlds – there's the military and there's the civilian [world],"; "Who I am in the civilian world is completely different from who I am in the military . . . "* The certainty they experienced in the military disappeared upon reentering the civilian world. *"It's challenging to have to figure out who exactly I am . . . In the civilian world, it's like, who am I? What do I dress like? How do I talk? Where do I go? What do I do?"* (A. L. Demers, 2013, pp. 502–503). Thus, the loss of sense of self upon transitioning led to a multilevel conflict that required a different level of acceptance. *"Veterans must create hybrid identities that incorporate military and civilian cultural knowledge, values, and practices"* (A. Demers, 2011, p. 174).

Reconnecting with family, friends, and civilian counterparts

Transitioning from military to civilian life is not just an individual but is a broader social process. This theme focused on the experiences of reconnection and readjusting with family, friends, and other civilian counterparts.

Military experience and reconnection difficulty.
Military life often led to separation from family. Consequently, military personnel and their families end up leading different lives. *"That was just one little portion of their lives, versus that was everything there was for me that year"* (Worthen et al., 2012, p. 368). Therefore, returning veterans felt an absence of interpersonal understanding, making them feel like an alien in their homes. They became silent in the civilian context, estranged from loved ones, and felt a detachment from society and self. Veterans also experienced difficulties redefining family roles and had to relearn how to live together (Bull Schaefer et al., 2013; Worthen et al., 2012). They endured instability and muddled feelings that were difficult to communicate. This confusion often got expressed as social withdrawal or anger toward family members. *"I had no name for what I was feeling, so it just turned into anger"* (Smith & True, 2014, p. 157); *"I became more isolated from my family . . . they all support me but you can feel that you're not the same . . . "* (Worthen et al., 2012, p. 369). On the other hand, honest communication about deployment experiences increased intimacy with loved ones (Sripada et al., 2018). Veterans had to

acclimatize, resolve mismatched family life expectations, and slowly restore family rituals and routines to make the psychological shift and resettle with family (Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017; Sripada et al., 2018).

Feelings of being left behind.
Although very subtly present, this subtheme represents a critical emotion associated with readjusting to the civilian culture. For participants, especially those belonging to the reservist and national guard categories, deployment was an interruption in their lives (Bull Schaefer et al., 2013; Sripada et al., 2018). Participants felt left behind as civilian counterparts had moved forward and progressed while they stayed the same (Grimell, 2015; Orazem et al., 2017). *"My military training and skills are like a huge waste of time. because all it did was put me in last place in this race called life . . . . civilian life is hard"* (Orazem, 2017, p. 8).

Facilitators in transition – Covering the military-civilian gap

This theme tried to elicit the factors that helped veterans transition smoothly. These have been divided into the following four subthemes:

Family/friends and their supportive role.
Social support from family and friends acted as a huge facilitator in readjusting into the civilian world – *"his girlfriend, was a major promoter of his military deprogramming.,"* *"sister was a strong support throughout"* (Grimell, 2015, 2017a; Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020). In some cases, the family helped identify severe changes, such as personality or behavioral changes or more serious psychiatric problems and helped seek interventions (Worthen et al., 2012). The family provided space and offered a supportive presence. Spending time with family and close friends eased veterans' transition back into civilian life.

Veteran community support.
Accessing veteran support by connecting with other veterans, maintaining connections with other servicemen/women, and membership in veteran organizations enabled continued affiliation with military service (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; M. E. Keeling et al., 2019; Grimell, 2020; Williams et al., 2018). *"You get used to the brotherhood – you get used to the comradery . . . and it's like that environment is not something you can find easily unless you find it in other vets when you get out"* (McCaslin et al., 2021, p. 616). This veteran support system helped veterans maintain camaraderie and connection post-retirement, enabling experience continuity in the self. (Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020)

Veterans also acted as navigators, as those who had successfully transitioned supported others in transition. Being associated with veteran organizations such as the Royal British Legion (RBL) also enabled veterans to be a part of an "in-group" and construct identities in extended military contexts (Ahern et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018).

Looking for job continuity. Looking for jobs similar to the military culture, which involved teamwork, a sense of camaraderie, continued acts of service, or those which helped utilize some of the military experience, enabled veterans to seek continuity with their previous military lifestyles. This eased the transition process (Brunger et al., 2013; Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020). Some veterans even tried to find a civilian/military combination and opted for redeployment, becoming a military instructor or a reserve officer (Grimell, 2018a, 2020; Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020).

Cognitive reframing, rediscovering meaning, and embracing service. Being cognitively flexible and adapting also empowered veterans to manage their transition better. Modifying their expectations of civilian work ethics and altering their ways of communication helped them minimize the frustrations they experienced with the civilian work culture. Participants also found that rediscovering meaning in their lives, including making meaning and peace with one's service, feeling pride for their service, and feeling family agreed with their valuation of their service, also facilitated transitioning into the civilian world. Utilizing military perks to gain education for the future, appreciating personal qualities gained because of the military, and using military-acquired skills like stress management in daily lives also aided in transitioning into the civilian world (Boros & Erolin, 2021; A. L. Demers, 2013; Grimell & Van den Berg, 2020; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017)

Establishment of trustworthiness of the review

The authors established the trustworthiness of the review findings by following APA's JARS – Qualitative Meta-Analysis Article Reporting guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018). The CASP checklist was used for the quality appraisal of the included studies. Researcher notes were maintained for each study, and all author preconceptions and biases were noted separately and kept aside before the themes were derived. The themes were derived inductively using Thomas and Harden's (2008) three stages for thematic synthesis. Consensus coding was used, and the researchers met at all three stages to establish consensus, resolve disagreements, and ensure that the themes were rooted in grounded evidence.

Discussion

The present study conducted a systematic metasynthesis to extract studies that had qualitatively studied the military to civilian transition experience among "non-clinical" veteran population. The review included 28 studies. The thematic synthesis of the studies led to 6 themes (further divided into subthemes). The first two themes focused on the values, work ethic, and structured nature of the military; and how this contrasted with the individualistic and less rigid civilian culture upon transitioning. Utilizing Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory Framework (Hofstede, 1980), it can be postulated that the military culture is high on the dimensions of power distance index, collectivism, masculinity, restraint, and uncertainty avoidance. Comparatively, the civilian culture can be seen as low on the power distance index and uncertainty avoidance and high on individualism, femineity, and indulgence dimensions. Moreover, the military also expects and assesses organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) for performance evaluations, while civilian employees' OCB is discretionary (Rose et al., 2017). These findings also corroborate the reculturation perspective (Joseph et al., 2022), which suggests that the cultural dissonance experienced makes it harder to transition from the military to the civilian world.

The third theme of *"The Three S's of Transition Challenges – Stereotypes, Skills, and Support"* enumerated veterans' difficulties in getting reemployed, translating skillset, experiencing employer stereotypes, military-related stereotypes, the lack of transition support, and how veterans' own perceptions of civilians made it harder for them to transition. These were consistent with the military transition theory (Castro et al., 2015), which suggested that veterans' reemployment challenges were unique to the military organization, service, and society's perception of them. There is a gap between employers' perceptions of veterans' qualifications and the veterans' self-perceptions. Vitalo and Lesser (2017) also found similar results, indicating that employers were skeptical about veterans' soft skills and believed transferring military skills to the civilian sector was difficult. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (SIT) sheds light on stereotypes' role in military to civilian transition. The theory suggests individuals get defined by the characteristics of the group to which they belong, and social categorization leads to the division of the world into "them" and "us." The salience of a particular social identity can lead to stereotypical in-

group behavior and outgroup perceptions, which may lead to prejudice and discrimination. This ingroup-outgroup effect was evident in the subthemes of *"Employment difficulty and Employers' Stereotypes"* and *"Veterans" own Civilian Perceptions.'* Furthermore, *"the military masculine stereotype"* became a stereotype vulnerability that inhibited veterans from seeking help and emotional support.

The fourth theme explored how the cultural gap and transitioning experiences impacted one's identity. It highlighted the losses one experienced in terms of identity, including the loss of meaning and purpose, power and status, sense of belonging, and sense of self. The armed forces life has a long-term influence on identity (Oakes, 2011). Rooted in the symbolic interactionist view, identity theorists propose that the self reflects the more comprehensive social structure of the individual's role positions, representing the self as a collection of identities (Hogg et al., 1995). The dialogical self-theory also furthers this framework by suggesting that an individual has multiple narrative I-positions. This plurality results in a narratively constructed complex self (Hermans, 2001). As the transition begins, a reorganization of the preexisting and new narrative characters is required, which can cause friction, asymmetry, and clash between the multiple narrative selves (Grimell, 2017b). Thus, throughout their transition, veterans try to understand the roles they no longer play and try to figure out their place in the civilian world. This process of making sense of one's identity post-retirement can also be seen as akin to the process of grieving, where veterans mourn their military identity and recreate their sense of self in the civvy street by undergoing the five stages of *"denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance"* (Kübler-Ross et al., 2009).

Theme 5 elaborated on how the military gap made reconnecting with family, friends, and other civilian counterparts difficult. Schuetz's (1945) homecoming theory explicitly supports this, asserting that separation between military personnel and their home leads to disconnection, lack of understanding, familiarity, and knowing. The last theme of the meta-synthesis addressed what helped veterans in their transition.

The present review's findings also aligned with Arnold van Gennep's (1909, as cited in Ratiani, 2007) *"anthropological theory of liminality"* framework. The term *"liminality,"* which means *"betwixt and between,"* was adapted to social anthropology by Turner (1967, as cited in Ratiani, 2007) and has since been utilized by several organizational researchers. According to liminality theory, three phases characterize each process of passage or transition: *"1. isolation or separation; 2. marginality or liminality; 3. incorporation or reaggregation"*

(Ratiani, 2007). The first phase in the current transition context involved separating from the military's secured social and cultural structure. The second phase, *"liminality,"* demonstrated the uncertain state and the passage into the intermediary ambivalent social zone, the so-called *"limbo"* or *"transition"* period, where veterans tried to reconstruct their notion of self and adapt to the civilian life world. Finally, the last stage of *"incorporation or reaggregation"* occurred when returned veterans moved toward acceptance and integrated into civilian society with a renewed social status.

Contributions, implications, and future directions of the present review

The review presented a detailed systematic literature review and identified the main difficulties retiring military members encounter while reentering the civilian culture. The differences in military and civilian culture have been emphasized in the review findings, which can aid in developing psychoeducational and intervention programs to help reintegrate retiring service members. In order to help with the transition, intervention programs could use the *"Three S's of Transition Challenges: Stereotypes, Skills, and Support"* theme. Helping veterans translate their military skills into the civilian sphere, countering their negative civilian preconceptions, and reshaping attitudes can help in improved reemployment possibilities and overall better reintegration. Furthermore, reducing veteran-related stereotypes and addressing the inefficiency of existing transitional support at the organization and policy-making can help improve preparedness and retirement planning.

Mental health interventions should be culturally informed to enable veterans to work through the conflicts of culturally intersecting identities. Although a significant impact of military retirement and transition, as found by the present study's findings, is dealing with the loss of military identity due to reculturation, counseling interventions hardly exist to address this issue. Intervention research in the military reintegration literature has mainly used a treatment-based approach focusing on physical or mental "disorders." Therefore, future research can focus on applying selective prevention and promotion-based approaches to mental health, promoting positive wellbeing, and improving individuals' coping capacities rather than ameliorating symptoms and deficits. Utilizing this approach can equip veterans to accept identity losses and deal with the cultural dissonance better, thus preventing the onset of severe mental disorders.

Another interesting contribution of this review was the different retirement challenges faced by women

highlighted in the subtheme *"Balancing Military Masculinity and Civilian Feminine Expectations."* Future research can probably study gender role differences in transition and military retirement contexts more comprehensively. Lastly, the family is known to act as a strong support system at the societal level. The transition aiding interventions can also include family training modules on improving support, which could assist in reducing the veterans' sense of alienation after homecoming.

Overall, the thematic synthesis facilitated an understanding of the military-civilian cultural gap and the challenges faced during the transition experience. Although the study tried to include multiple databases, all databases could not be targeted due to limitations, and some articles may have been missed in this review. The findings of the present review suggest that irrespective of country or armed forces branch, the transition challenges faced are largely common and make readjusting into the civilian world difficult. It further suggests a strong need for adequate support programs that focus not only on vocational rehabilitation but also on different life domains, following a holistic approach to help bridge the military-civilian cultural gap and aid this transition.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Details of all the papers reviewed in this meta synthesis review have been provided in Supplementary File and References. If any further details are required, these can be made available on request from the corresponding author.

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