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Beyond Iraq:

The Socioeconomic Trajectories of Private Military Veterans

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Abstract

Through the lens of veterans studies, we know a great deal about the fate of those soldiers who have recently returned home following a period of deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet counterintuitively we know nothing about the plight of the private military contractors who worked alongside them. Addressing this blind spot, the article explores the socioeconomic trajectories of 'private military veterans' from a life course perspective. It explores three questions regarding the status of private military veterans in the civilian labor market. What occupations do they work in? To what extent do they work in similar occupations to public military veterans? To what extent do they work in similar occupations to the general population? Focusing on the UK, it reveals that private military veterans are significantly overrepresented in the 'protective service occupations', where they primarily work in the private security industry, and offers an explanation for this clustering effect.

Keywords

Private Military, Private Security, Veterans, Labor Markets, Employment and Occupations, Life Course Perspective, LinkedIn

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Introduction

The field of veterans studies rests on the proposition that for most soldiers the war does not end the moment they leave the battlefield, but continues to impact upon their life courses in positive and negative ways for decades to come. Through this lens, we know a great deal about the fate of those soldiers who have recently returned home following a period of deployment in the Middle East (Hicks et al., 2016). Counterintuitively, though, we know nothing about the plight of their private sector counterparts. While there were an estimated 54,000 armed private military contractors working in Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of the War on Terror (Krahmann, 2012, p.344), employment opportunities in the region have long since been in decline following the drawdown of Coalition operations, forcing many contractors to move on and assume new identities as 'private military veterans'. Yet we have no idea where these individuals are, what they are doing, what condition they are in, how they are being treated or what impact they are having upon their families, communities and societies. Are they following similar patterns to public military veterans or are they establishing new ones?

The purpose of the article is to advance a first-cut answer to this question. It does so by drawing upon the 'life course' perspective, which provides an analytical framework for interrogating how directional changes in the lives of individuals and communities are shaped by the different contexts in which they find themselves embedded over time (Mayer 2007). At the center of this framework are three interrelated concepts: 'trajectories', 'transitions' and 'turning points'. Trajectories are the most common developmental pathways in any given life course, such as socioeconomic status, family relations or physical and mental health.[i] Transitions refer to contextual shifts within these trajectories, such as starting a new job, having children or being diagnosed with chronic illness. Turning points denote those transitions which interrupt established trajectories, rerouting them in new directions. The

relationship between these concepts is not fixed but open ended, as Clausen (1998, p.203, emphasis added) puts it: ‘every major role transition can quite reasonably be considered as *potentially* constituting a turning point’. Over the past few decades, military scholars have found great value in applying these concepts to different cohorts of public military veteran to assess the extent to which their military careers have represented notable turning points in their various life course trajectories (Elder, 1986; Elder et al, 1991; Maclean and Elder, 2007). Following in this tradition, the article focuses on three specific questions relating to the socioeconomic trajectories of private military veterans in the civilian labor market. What occupations do they work in? To what extent do they work in similar occupations to public military veterans? To what extent do they work in similar occupations to the general population?

It answers these questions through an inductive line of enquiry. It begins by defining what a ‘private military veteran’ actually is, for it is an entirely new concept. It then profiles the employment patterns of 381 private military contractors at two points in space and time. The first point locates each of these contractors in Project Matrix, a high profile Iraq-based outsourcing arrangement between the United States Department of Defense and Aegis which ran from 2004 until 2011. The second point focuses on where each of these contractors was employed in late 2015, four years after Project Matrix drew to a close. Centering on a cohort of soldiers-turned-contractors who had by this time returned to the UK as private military veterans, the article reveals that most were employed in the ‘protective service occupations’, where they were significantly overrepresented as a proportion compared to UK public military veterans and the UK general population. Breaking the data down further, the article illustrates how virtually all of the private military veterans in this category were in fact working in the private security industry as managers or street-level operatives. Reflecting upon this clustering effect, the article contends that making the transition from the public

military sector to the private military sector does appear to represent a notable turning point in the socioeconomic trajectories of many private military veterans and goes on to advance an explanation for this phenomenon which incorporates the following contextual variables: occupational culture; military skillsets; training and recruitment; occupational licensing; and professional networks. The article accordingly concludes that (in the case of the Project Matrix cohort at least) private military veterans are not following similar trajectories to public military veterans and, as a consequence, we need to construct a new empirical and conceptual knowledge base if we are to comprehend this new category of veteran – a process which requires nothing less than uprooting the concept of 'veteran' from its traditional state-centric foundations and laying it bare to the messy realities of 'postmodern' warfare (Coker 2012).

Before commencing with this line of enquiry, however, a brief note on interdisciplinarity and terminology is required. Over the past couple of decades, scholars writing in the discipline of international relations (IR) have variously termed those individual contractors working in international military contexts as 'private military contractors', 'private security contractors' or 'private military and security contractors'. At the same time, scholars writing in the discipline of criminology have termed those individual contractors working in domestic policing contexts as 'private security contractors'. The same term – 'private security contractor' – has therefore been used to describe two related but ultimately different occupations. While this terminological overlap has the potential to cause confusion, this has largely been avoided to date because contractors have for the most part remained in either international military or domestic policing contexts and have been studied within the disciplines of international relations or criminology respectively. However, the contractors under examination in this article are interesting precisely because their lived experiences break down these scholarly distinctions. To sidestep any potentially confusing terminological overlaps, then, in what follows the term 'private military' relates to the international military

workspace and the term ‘private security’ relates to the domestic policing workspace. These terminological specifications also serve to highlight the interdisciplinary scope of the article, which not only bridges the fields of private military studies and veterans studies, but also stands at the ‘crossroads’ of IR and criminology (Bigo, 2016).

Definitions

The first task is to define the concept of a ‘private military veteran’. To do this, it is necessary to briefly sketch out the contours of the private military labor market. The origins of this market can be traced to the mass demobilization which followed the end of the Cold War. Eager to realize the much anticipated ‘peace dividend’ after the fall of the Soviet Union, leaders throughout the Global North initiated extensive military downsizing programs amounting to a collective reduction of something like 7 million soldiers, thereby significantly reducing their frontline military capacity (Singer, 2008, p.53). The assumption of a sustained post-Cold War peace settlement proved to be a false one, however. The thinning out of superpower military presence had the unanticipated effect of releasing many long-suppressed civil tensions across Eastern Europe, Africa and South Asia, causing a groundswell of small-scale wars (Kaldor, 2012). While many states saw it as being in their interests to intervene in these wars, they no longer had the immediate capacity to do so. Following neoliberal logic, they proceeded to address this shortfall in part by turning to the many private military companies now being formed by shrewd entrepreneurs seeking to profit from this situation (Ortiz, 2010). While in the period 1950-89 these companies featured in 15 conflicts, between 1990-2000 they were present in no less than 80, including those in Yugoslavia, Albania, the Gulf region and East Timor (Rosen, 2008, p.79-80). The emergent private military labor market then experienced a further period of unprecedented expansion following the post-9/11 interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Coalition forces found themselves facing down

unexpected resistance from insurgents and once again turned to the market in order to compensate for a shortfall in frontline capacity (Isenberg, 2009).

For many years, however, it was not really known how many private military contractors there actually were in this labor market – estimates of workforce size were often accompanied by so many caveats they were rendered unusable. Fortunately, the picture became a little clearer in the mid-2000s when, faced with a series of questions about the controversial use of contractors in US military operations, Congress instructed the Executive to keep more accurate records of its dealings in this market (Cancian, 2008). This resulted in a running count of private military contractors – that is, protection and intelligence contractors as distinct from base support, translation/interrogation, construction, transportation, logistics/maintenance, communication and training contractors – in Iraq and Afghanistan traceable to the Department of Defense (DoD) payroll (recall that Project Matrix was funded through DoD contracts and so is represented in this count). According to this count, numbers in Iraq peaked at 15,279 during June 2009 and numbers in Afghanistan peaked at 28,686 during June 2012. Following these high points, numbers soon tailed off to the extent that by 2015 there were hundreds rather than thousands of private military contractors working for the DoD in these countries (Peters, Schwartz and Kapp, 2015). While these data relate to just one buyer – albeit the biggest one in the market – given their systematic nature in an otherwise haphazard numbers game, they do serve as a valuable guide to the fluctuating scale of the private military labor market.

In the mid-2000s, the controversies surrounding the private military industry also began to attract the attention of IR scholars, who duly brought into effect the field of private military studies. These scholars have tended to focus more on the role of powerful states and companies than they have on individual contractors (Eichler, 2014). Yet a reasonable amount has nevertheless been discovered about the dynamics of the private military labor market.

While the most prominent lines of enquiry in this vein relate to issues of health (Dunigan et al., 2013), race and nationality (Chisholm, 2015) and gender (Eichler, 2015), it is the research on past employment which interests us the most here – in particular the common observation that virtually all private military contractors are public military veterans. As Singer (2008, p.76) puts it: 'the very name "ex" – ex-Green Beret, ex-Paratrooper, ex-General, and so on – defines the employee base of the private military industry'. This is mainly because skillsets developed in the armed forces – especially the pre-reflexive discharge of violence – serve as the key determinant of value in the private military labor market (Higate, 2012). The significance of this observation is that it brings into focus a distinctive life course transition from the public military sector into the private military sector (Hawks, 2014). However, the extent to which this transition actually constitutes a turning point in the long term life course trajectories of these individuals remains an unanswered question because we still know nothing about what happens to private military contractors after they leave the sector – a lacuna which becomes even more striking when we remind ourselves that the private military labor market in Iraq and Afghanistan has been shrinking from 2012 onwards, thereby forcing an increasing number of private military contractors to seek out alternative opportunities.

Against this backdrop, the article puts forward the private military veteran as an object of study. While there are many variables at play in the makeup of this new category of veteran, it is here defined in line with four key variables: contract type, environment, function and duration. A private military veteran is an individual who has previously (i) worked on a private sector contract (ii) in a hostile environment (iii) performing military-like functions (iv) for at least one day in duration. Of course, as Dandeker et al. (2006) point out, any definition of 'veteran' is contestable and inevitably serves a particular end. This definition is no exception. It is informed not only by a particular reading of the private military labor market, but also by a desire to understand the dynamics of the Project Matrix cohort.

Hopefully, though, as more private military veteran case studies come to light, this definition will be challenged and refined, giving rise to a more robust taxonomy through which to investigate this phenomenon. The importance of this definition is that it encourages us to pick up the different threads of military life course research – socioeconomic status, family relations, physical and mental health and so on – and weave them through this new category of veteran. As a first step in this research agenda, the remainder of the article focuses on socioeconomic trajectories. While these particular trajectories are usually further broken down into four interlinked components – employment patterns, education, earnings and mobility (Maclean and Elder, 2007) – due to data limitations we focus here exclusively upon employment patterns in the civilian labor market.

Methodology

Data for life course research generally come in one of two forms: cohort study data specifically collected for the purpose of life course research and longitudinal data originally collected for some other purpose but retooled for life course research (Colby 1998). Given the limited number of available cohort studies (which are resource intensive undertakings), together with the relative newness and invisibility of the often secretive private military industry, the ensuing analysis (unsurprisingly) draws upon retooled longitudinal data. That said, finding any kind of longitudinal data relating to the employment patterns of private military veterans is no easy task. Indeed, the reason why there is so little research on these patterns is not simply down to scholarly oversight, but also because of their elusiveness. At first glance, the most obvious data sources are the main buyers and sellers in the market for military outsourcing: neoliberal states and private military companies, respectively. Neoliberal states are of no use, however. While many collect data on public military veterans – for instance, through the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the US or the Ministry of Defence

(MoD) commissioned Career Transition Partnership (CTP) in the UK – none collect data on their private sector counterparts.[ii] Private military companies are little better. With only a few exceptions – usually at senior management level – companies do not employ individuals on open ended contracts. They instead issue short term contracts which relate to specific time-limited roles in the hostile environment. The moment individuals complete or terminate these contracts, their formal terms and conditions of employment come to an end, thereby leaving companies largely in the dark as to where they go next. Given these dead-ends, it is necessary to think laterally and to be more imaginative about possible data sources. As Gade (1991, p.195) notes: 'the life-course literature is replete with examples of very creative ways of teasing life-course information from data sources that were not designed to yield such information'. With this in mind, we turn our attention to the professional networking website LinkedIn.

The expansion of the post-9/11 private military industry coincided directly with the prolific growth of social networking sites on Web 2.0. Given that private military contractors spend the majority of their working lives in dangerous and inaccessible locations, these sites soon became an especially useful and popular vehicle in scoping out employment opportunities. As with most other sectors, LinkedIn – the world's largest professional networking site launched in 2003– soon became the preferred interface.[iii] For present purposes, this serves as a valuable methodological 'in'. On joining LinkedIn new members are asked (though not required) to upload their employment history and current position. While these data have been presented in a variety of formats over the years, van Dijck (2013, p.208) notes how, 'after 2009, the site noticeably revamped its interface to present professional identities more uniformly and chronologically'. This interface thus in theory makes it possible to generate data on the employment patterns of private military contractors as they move both into and out of the private military labor market.

In practice, however, realizing this strategy on any kind of meaningful scale involves finding an appropriate cohort of private military contractors on LinkedIn. This is where the role of 'groups' come into play. A sizeable proportion of networking on LinkedIn takes place not in free flowing virtual space, but through open access and closed access 'groups', each of which has a specific purpose and identity, such as connecting together professionals in a particular sector and/or location. For present purposes, it is necessary to find a group which satisfies three criteria. First, its members must have made the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector. Second, its members must have worked together inside the private military sector. Third, a critical mass of its members must have then proceeded to seek out new employment opportunities beyond this sector. One group which more or less satisfies these criteria is the 'Matrix Association' – a closed access group which arose out of Project Matrix.

Project Matrix is the informal name given to a series of 'Reconstruction Security Support Services Iraq' (RSSS-I) contracts awarded by the United States Department of Defense to Aegis, a prominent company founded by a former British infantry officer in 2002 and subsequently acquired by GardaWorld in October 2015. These contracts – which commenced in May 2004 and drew to a close in August 2011 – had a cumulative value of $1.3 billion, making them among the largest ever awarded in the sector.[iv] While the precise contents of the contracts changed over time, Aegis was essentially tasked with delivering three core services across Iraq: protecting the United States Army Corps of Engineers; carrying out threat assessments; and acting as a kind of intelligence clearing house for Coalition allies and the private military sector (Kinsey, 2009; Isenberg, 2009). During its operational peak, there were approximately 1,600 individuals working on Project Matrix sites across Iraq – about 900 British, 250 Iraqis, 200 Nepalese and 250 'expats' (mostly American and South Africans, with a few Australians, New Zealanders and continental Europeans) –

and the turnover rate was around 3%, creating a relatively stable workforce. However, as the United States government slowly edged towards its target of withdrawing troops from Iraq by the end of 2011, it was becoming increasingly clear that the latest Project Matrix contract was not going to be renewed beyond August of that year. By May 2010, staffing levels had dropped to 1,200 individuals and on the final day just 4 remained, thus bringing to a close one of the most prominent private military contracts ever let.[v]

During the last few months of the drawdown period, the Matrix Association was established by departing contractors as a way of keeping in touch once Project Matrix came to an end. During the course of 2015, I negotiated entry into this closed access group and, with permission, harvested employment profiles from its 381 members on 5th October of that year. Through this process, it was possible to collect data in accordance with the selection criteria outlined above. First, of the 67 members of the Matrix Association who had uploaded a complete employment history, 66 were ex-military (62 ex-British, two ex-United States, one ex-Australian and one ex-French), with about two-thirds coming from the infantry and marines (n=40). They were also experienced and fresh from service. The average length of service was 12.5 years and most had not left active duty until the post-9/11 era (n=60). This suggests that, by and large, members of the Matrix Association had only recently made the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector. Second, we know that all members were employed inside the private military labor market towards the end of Project Matrix. Third, we know where almost every one of these members was employed on 5th October 2015 – no less than 378 out of 381 had entered details of their present position – allowing us to trace the employment patterns of those who had departed the private military labor market by this time. Through the Matrix Association group, then, it is possible to trace the pathways of private military veterans into the civilian labor market.

The final challenge of this methodological puzzle is to develop a mechanism for comparing the occupational profiles of those private military veterans who had returned to the UK labor market with the occupational profiles of UK public military veterans and the UK general population. This process requires a little context. Unlike the US census, the UK census does not include any questions on veteran status, so there is no routine UK-wide dataset through which to compare the occupational profiles of UK public military veterans and the UK general population. Recognizing a need for a dataset in this vein, however, the MoD has assembled a proxy by combining datasets from two other sources: the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS), a quarterly survey of UK employment patterns compiled using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2010,[vi] which categorizes occupations at four levels running from the general to the specific ('major group', 'sub-major group', 'minor group' and 'unit group'); and the CTP, a non-mandatory employment program available to UK public military veterans for two years after leaving service. To facilitate a comparison between these two datasets, the MoD annually recodes CTP occupational outcomes to the SOC 2010 'sub-major group' level. This means that by following the MoD's lead and recoding the appropriate Matrix Association profiles to the SOC 2010 'sub-major group' level as well, it becomes possible to set up a direct comparison between the occupational profiles of UK private military veterans, UK public military veterans and the UK general population.

However, there are (at least) five problems with the preceding methodology. First, there are questions marks over the authenticity of self-reported data on LinkedIn (Case et al., 2013) – though a survey by Guillory and Hansock (2012) did find that LinkedIn profiles are actually less deceptive in reporting work experience and responsibilities compared to traditional (offline) resumes. Second, while LinkedIn provides a valuable source of employment data, we remain blind to other antecedent contextual data – age, sex, nationality,

family history and so on – which may hold important clues to the factors shaping the life course trajectories of private military veterans. Third, we are also without the reflective qualitative data which is often so integral to life course research – so although we may identify a turning point at the aggregate level, we do not know if the individuals themselves would perceive it as such. Fourth, the crucial part of the Matrix Association dataset is relatively small (111 individuals) – especially compared to the CTP dataset (4,254 individuals) and the LFS dataset (30,950 individuals) – thereby increasing the likelihood of a false reading. Fifth, because it is not possible to establish the characteristics of all those contractors who have cycled through the private military labor market over the past couple of decades, there is actually no way of knowing the extent to which the Matrix Association cohort is representative of this broader population, meaning we have to be careful about generalizing from this case study. Given the difficulties in conducting any kind of empirical research on private military veterans, however, the article proceeds on the basis that, so long as these drawbacks are acknowledged, it is worthwhile operationalizing this methodology as a mechanism through which to generate a first-cut study on this new category of veteran.

Results

Four years after Project Matrix drew to a close, just under half of the Matrix Association cohort were still working in the private military labor market (n=186). The largest proportion was located in Iraq (n=71) and the second largest in Afghanistan (n=22). So even after the major drawdown of Coalition troops from Iraq and Afghanistan between 2011 and 2014, these particular private military contractors were still able to find employment in these highly unstable transitional countries. Beyond these established labor markets the picture becomes a little more nebulous. A few were located elsewhere in the Middle East (n=6), which had endured yet more instability following the turmoil of the Arab Spring. A dozen or so more

had moved into the maritime sector (n=13), which had experienced a period of rapid growth around the time Project Matrix was being wound down, primarily in the form of anti-piracy operations around the Horn of Africa (Cullen and Berube, 2012). Roughly the same number had migrated over to the various hostile environments in Africa and Asia (n=10), which have always been a mainstay in the private military labor market. Another sizeable proportion had chosen not to specify where exactly they were based (n=58) and a handful were actively seeking employment (n=6) and therefore had no present location specified. For present purposes, the key message here is that the drawdown of Coalition troops did not – for the Matrix Association cohort at least – instantly transform all private military contractors into private military veterans. There was still sufficient demand in the wider private military labor market to make this a gradual and piecemeal process, slowly unfolding over time.

By October 2015, however, just over half of the Matrix Association cohort had departed this labor market to assume new identities as private military veterans (n=192). Most had relocated to the UK (n=137). Given that well over half of the 1,600 strong Project Matrix workforce was British, and that virtually all those who had provided a complete employment history had served in the British Armed Forces, it seems likely that this particular group was comprised of UK citizens heading home to their country of birth following a period in the private military labor market – though in the absence of any concrete data on nationality this is no more than an educated inference. The second largest proportion had moved to North America (n=24) and two smaller clutches had gone elsewhere in Europe (n=9) and to Australasia (n=4). This means that about nine in every ten of these private military veterans had journeyed to the Global North after leaving private military labor market. Countering this trend, however, just under one in every ten had settled in the Global South, namely in the Middle East (n=5), Africa (n=5), Asia (n=2) and Central America (n=1). Lastly, a minority declined to specify their present location (n=5).

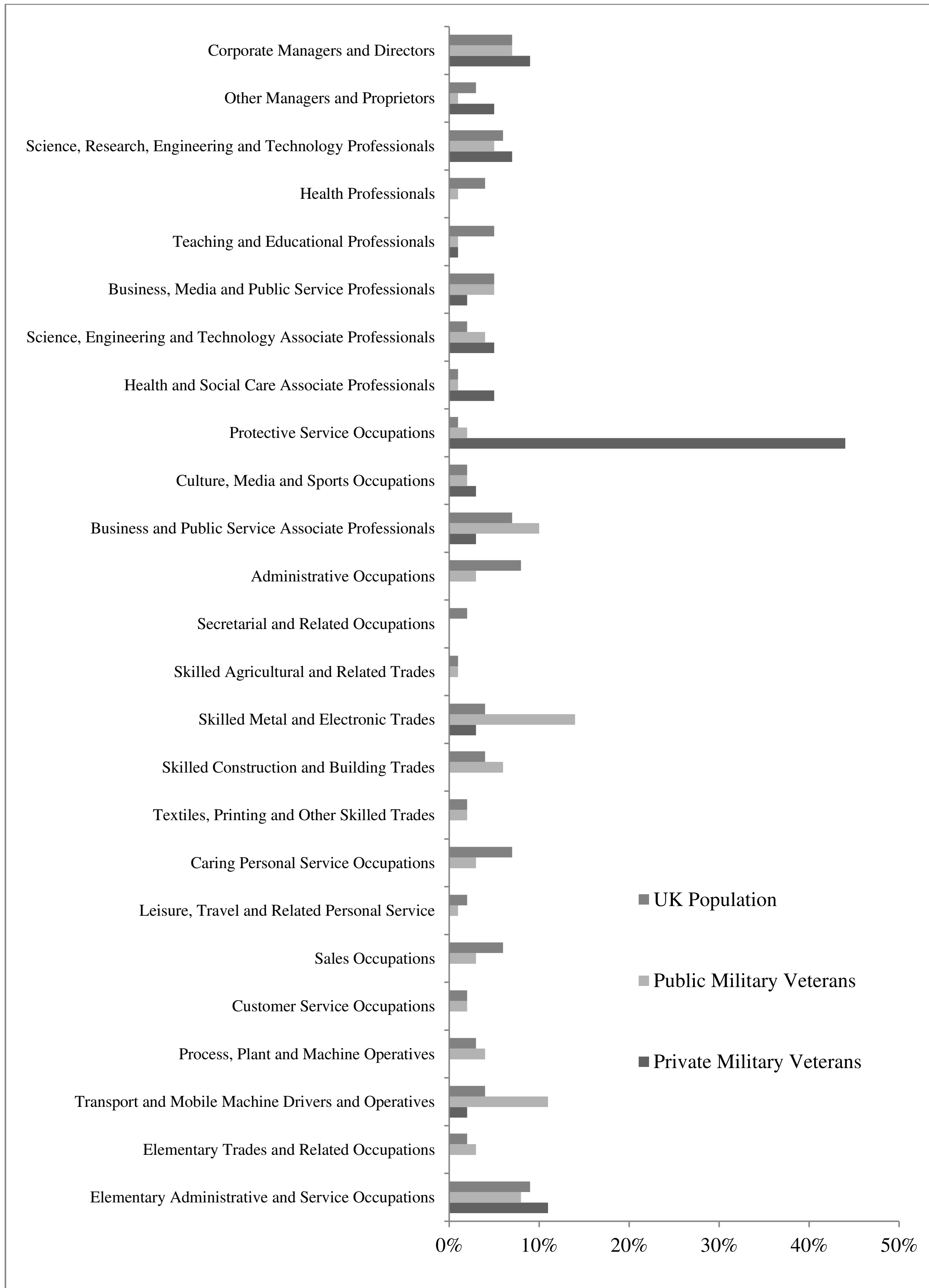
Of those who had returned to the UK, 111 were in employment, 12 were unemployed, one was a student, one was retired and 12 declined to specify their exact employment status. Table 1 and Figure 1 compare the occupational profiles of those 111 UK private military veterans in employment with the occupational profiles of UK public military veterans and the UK general population at the 'sub-major group' level of the SOC 2010 during the same period of time. As Figure 1 depicts, one distinctive trend immediately stands out. In the 'protective service occupations' category – which at the more granular 'unit group' level includes 'NCOs and other ranks', 'police officers (sergeant and below)', 'fire service officers (watch manager and below)', 'prison service officers (below principal officer)', 'police community support officers' and 'protective service associate professionals' – UK private military veterans are greatly overrepresented (44%) compared to UK public military veterans (2%) and the UK general population (1%). Furthermore, when the data in this category are broken down to the 'unit group' level, it transpires that virtually all private military veterans in the 'protective service occupations' (46 out of 49) were employed as 'protective service associate professionals'– or, more specifically, managers in the private security industry. Reinforcing this trend, it is also worth acknowledging that when the data in the 'Elementary Administrative and Service Occupations' 'sub-major group' are broken down to the 'unit group' level, all 12 private military veterans in question were employed as 'security guards and related occupations' – or, more precisely, street-level operatives in the private security industry. For this cohort of private military veterans, then, the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector does seem to represent a notable 'turning point' in their socioeconomic trajectories, for it has greatly increased the likelihood that they will end up working in the private security industry when they return home.

Table 1: Comparison of occupational profiles across UK population, UK public military veterans and UK private military veterans, 2015

Occupation	UK Population (%)[vii]	UK Public Military Veterans (%)[viii]	UK Private Military Veterans (%)[ix]
Corporate Managers & Directors	7	7	9
Other Managers & Proprietors	3	1	5
Science, Research, Engineering & Technology Professionals	6	5	7
Health Professionals	4	1	0
Teaching & Educational Professionals	5	1	1
Business, Media & Public Service Professionals	5	2	2
Science, Engineering & Technology Associate Professionals	2	4	5
Health & Social Care Associate Professionals	1	1	5
Protective Service Occupations	1	2	44
Culture, Media & Sports Occupations	2	2	3
Business & Public Service Associate Professionals	7	10	3
Administrative Occupations	8	3	0
Secretarial & Related Occupations	2	0	0
Skilled Agricultural & Related Trades	1	1	0
Skilled Metal & Electronic Trades	4	14	3
Skilled Construction & Building Trades	4	6	0
Textiles, Printing & Other Skilled Trades	2	2	0
Caring Personal Service Occupations	7	3	0
Leisure, Travel & Related Personal Service	2	1	0
Sales Occupations	6	3	0
Customer Service Occupations	2	2	0
Process, Plant & Machine Operatives	3	4	0
Transport & Mobile Machine Drivers & Operatives	4	11	2
Elementary Trades & Related Occupations	2	3	0
Elementary Administrative & Service Occupations	9	8	11

Note: all percentages rounded to nearest integer.

Figure 1: Comparison of occupational profiles across UK population, UK pubic military veterans and UK private military veterans, 2015



Explanation

Why are UK private military veterans more likely to find employment in the UK private security industry compared to UK public military veterans and the UK general population? We should not seek out any kind of 'grand theory' in answer to this question. As Mayer (2009, p.423) points out, while the life course perspective has a 'relatively full conceptual tool kit' – incorporating, among other things, 'trajectories', 'transitions' and 'turning points' – it 'lacks a coherent body of theory'. Indeed, he continues, 'because there is not just one mechanism underlying the social structuring of human lives … one might contend that a simple, unified sociological theory of the life course is not possible' (Mayer, 2009, p.423). We should instead concentrate our attention on teasing out the more localized contextual factors at play in shaping any given life course trajectory. With this in mind, we hereafter offer up four contextual factors which go a long way towards explaining the distinctive socioeconomic trajectories of UK private military veterans in the civilian labor market: 'common factors', 'present factors', 'absent factors' and 'network factors'.

'Common factors' help to explain why both public military veterans and private military veterans are more likely to find employment in the private security industry compared to the general population. In the first instance, Higate (2001) and Cooper et al. (2016) suggest that UK public military veterans are more likely to be drawn towards this particular sector of the civilian labor market because it exhibits a comparable masculine occupational culture to the public military and also places a high economic and cultural value on public military skillsets (these factors are also prominent in the employment patterns of US public military veterans, see: Schulker et al., 2016). While there is of course no parallel analysis on the extent to which private military veterans also prioritize these factors in the civilian labor market, there is good reason to suspect they do. In making the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector, they have already demonstrated a

strong preference for seeking out continuities in both masculine occupational culture and military skillsets. It is reasonable to assume that in surveying the civilian labor market, they might continue to express this preference and thus walk the same path as their public sector counterparts. In other words, the private military sector can in effect be viewed as an additional step in the same employment pathway. As such, the presence of a masculine occupation culture and the valuation of military skills can be regarded as 'common factors' which help to explain why both public military veterans and private military veterans are more likely to find employment in the private security industry compared to the general population. But why are private military veterans more likely to follow this socioeconomic trajectory compared to public military veterans? This is where 'absent factors', 'present factors' and 'network factors' enter into frame.

'Absent factors' are absent for private military veterans but present for public military veterans and help to explain why private military veterans are likely to have a less diversified occupational profile compared to public military veterans. On leaving service, public military veterans benefit from a variety of state-sponsored employment programs in making the transition to the civilian labor market. The most prominent program is the aforementioned CTP which, among other things, offers vocational training and assistance in finding new jobs for up to two years post-service. Since its establishment in 1998, it has helped over 180,000 public military veterans to broaden their skillsets and seek out new work opportunities.[x] The effect of this program – and others like it – is to facilitate the transition of public military veterans into almost every sector of the UK economy, as Table 1 and Figure 1 clearly demonstrate. Importantly, there is no equivalent program for recently demobilized private military veterans (though in theory a private military veteran who had left service less than two years beforehand may still be able to access CTP assistance to some degree). While they can of course still enrol in alternative training and assistance programs open to all UK

citizens regardless of their veteran status, this is unlikely to have the same diversifying effect as the CTP. This ‘absent factor’ may thus explain why private military veterans are likely to have a less diversified occupational profile compared to public military veterans.

‘Present factors’ are present for private military veterans but absent for public military veterans and help to explain why private military veterans are more likely to be drawn into the private security industry compared to public military veterans. The most important component in this category is the Security Industry Authority (SIA) licence. The SIA is a public body accountable to the Home Office and tasked with licensing individual contractors in the UK private security industry. Even though the SIA has no jurisdiction beyond UK borders, the licence it issues has found wide circulation among UK private military contractors over recent years because private military companies higher up the supply chain appreciate the reputational benefits (government approval) and human resource functions (criminal records and identity check) it brings (White, forthcoming). As one solder-turned-contractor reminisces in his autobiography:

> The SIA has nothing to do with hostile environments, but that hasn’t stopped CSCs [commercial security companies] from using the organization as a marketing tool to win contracts in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Many CSCs boast to potential clients that its employees are SIA accredited (Shepherd 2008, p.256).

One (unintended) consequence of this process is that licence holders are eligible to work in the UK private security industry with immediate effect, thereby removing a sizeable barrier to entry into this particular sector of the civilian labor market (White, forthcoming). Because public military veterans were not required to obtain this licence during their time in service, they do not enjoy this privileged employment pathway. This ‘present factor’ may therefore explain why private military veterans are more likely to be drawn into the private security industry compared to public military veterans.

‘Network factors’ accentuate the differences between the occupational profiles of private military veterans and public military veterans brought into effect by the preceding two factors. To elucidate this process, it is instructive to reflect on Hawks’ (2014) study of UK and US soldiers making the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector. She observes how the deep social bonds forged by soldiers during their time in service has a ‘multiplier effect’ during the course of this transition: ‘if one soldier leaving the military knows just one person who has gone into, or is going into, security [private military] contracting, they are themselves more likely to do so’ (Hawks, 2014, p.82). As a group, in other words, private military contractors exhibit a kind of herd behavior in their post-service employment patterns. It is reasonable to assume that they would continue to exhibit this behavior – at least to a degree – in their subsequent transition into the civilian labor market. Working this assumption forwards, this means that if – through the foregoing ‘absent factors’ and ‘present factors’ – private military veterans begin to establish a foothold in the private security industry, this ‘multiplier effect’ may serve to further accentuate this foothold over time. This ‘network factor’ may therefore explain why private military veterans are likely to establish a disproportionately strong presence in the private security industry compared to public military veterans.

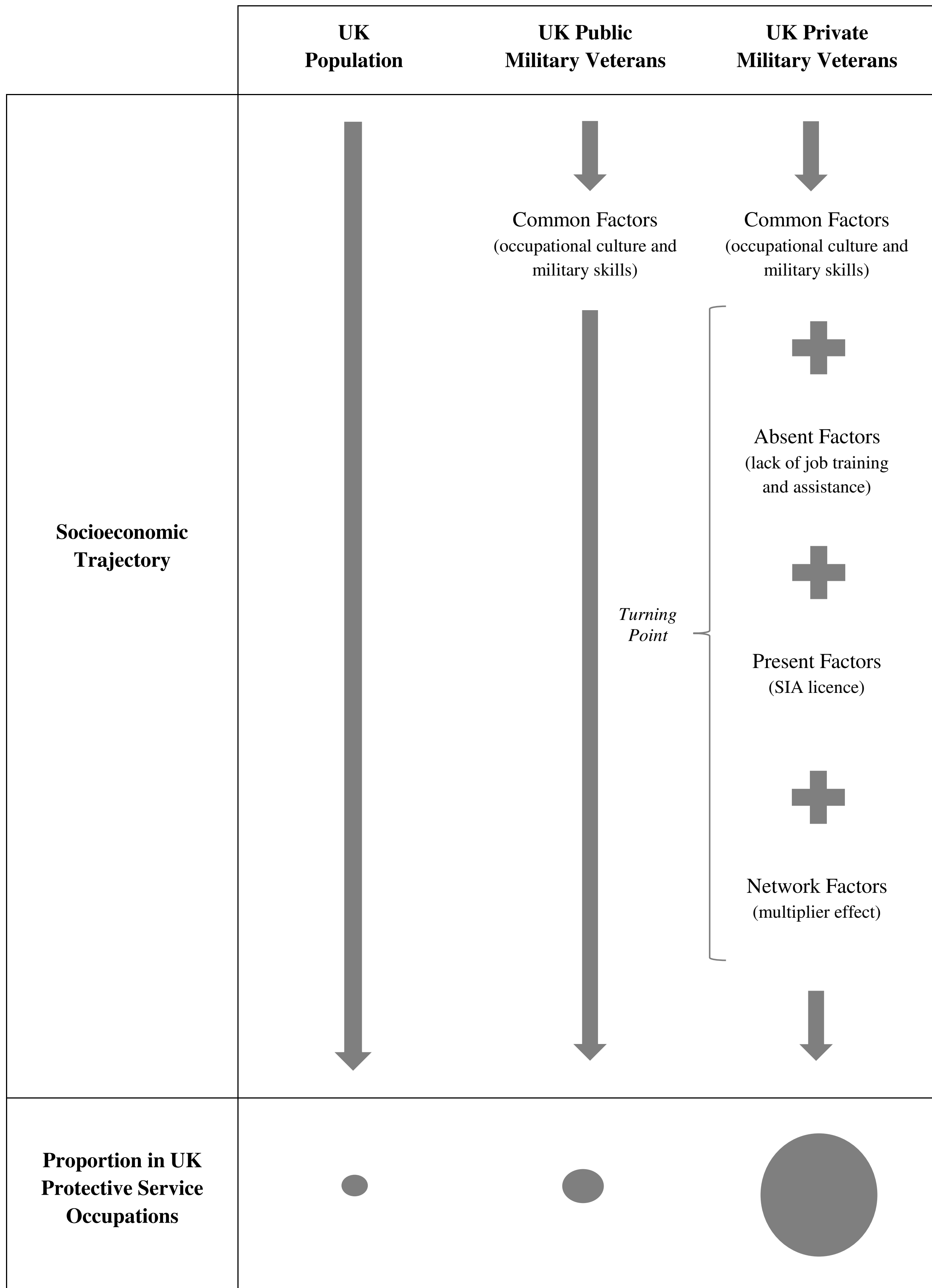
When all four factors are considered together, then, we have the beginnings of a model for explaining why UK private military veterans are significantly overrepresented in the UK private security industry when compared to UK public military veterans and the UK general population. We also have a better understanding of why the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector appears to represent a notable turning point in the socioeconomic trajectories of private military veterans. As Figure 2 illustrates, it is a consequence of the ‘absent factors’, ‘present factors’ and ‘network factors’ which differentiate the socioeconomic trajectories of private military veterans from those of public

military veterans (see Figure 2). However, it is important to emphasize that, in accordance with the article's inductive line of enquiry, this explanatory framework is preliminary in nature. Its explanatory power is something to be empirically tested in future studies on private military veterans.

Conclusion

The article set out to discover whether or not private military veterans follow similar life course trajectories to public military veterans. In the case of the Matrix Association diaspora, it has now revealed they do not. For this cohort, the transition from the public military sector into the private military sector seems to represent a notable turning point in their socioeconomic trajectories, as they go on to develop highly distinctive occupational profiles as private military veterans in the UK civilian labor market. This is an important finding because it emphasizes that we really are in the dark when it comes to this emergent category of veteran. If we had found similarities, then moving forward we could have focused our attention on drawing inferences about private military veterans from the extensive life course research already conducted on public military veterans. But we now know this is not necessarily a wise option. Instead, we need to begin the process of constructing a new empirical and conceptual knowledge base if we are to comprehend the life course trajectories of private military veterans. This article represents a valuable first step in this process, but there is much more to be done.

Figure 2: Comparison of socioeconomic trajectories into the 'protective service occupations' across UK population, UK pubic military veterans and UK private military veterans



To begin with, we need more data across three categories: 'cohorts', 'variables' and 'types'. First, we need data relating to other cohorts of private military veterans who bring into view different skillsets, nationalities, contracts, companies, timeframes and so on. Not only would this provide insight into the diversity of experiences among private military veterans, but it would also enable us to test the generalizability of the Matrix Association case study, which is contextually rooted in UK civil-military relations. Second, we need data on how other variables shape the life course trajectories of private military veterans. While we have just issued a warning about drawing inferences from the life course research already conducted on public military veterans, this body of work does nevertheless serve as a valuable guide in identifying variables for future analysis. With this in mind, next on the list of variables to examine are the remaining socioeconomic indicators – education, earnings and mobility – followed by (in no particular order) various measures of family and community, health and wellbeing, race and nationality, governance and policy, crime and criminality. Third, we need different 'types' of data. Specifically, we need data which maps out the life course trajectories of private military veterans at the aggregate level – such as the Matrix Association case study – as well as data in which individual private military veterans reflect upon these trajectories, thus allowing us to compare 'objective' and 'subjective' accounts of the various transitions and turning points embedded within these trajectories.

New data across these categories would facilitate the construction of better explanatory models. While the model depicted in Figure 2 serves as a valuable starting point, it abstracts from just one cohort, one socioeconomic variable and one data type. Bringing into frame multiple cohorts, multiple variables and multiple data types would enable the development of more sophisticated models which articulate how a much wider range of contextual factors shape the life course trajectories of private military veterans (as they

always do when examined in sufficient detail). Furthermore, new data would also help us to formulate policies which address the more negative dimensions of these life course trajectories, such as unemployment, social and economic exclusion, poor physical and mental health and criminal behavior. Governments and charities have for a long time done this for public military veterans. Perhaps now time to consider whether or not they should do the same for private military veterans – though this course of action would likely prove to be controversial since it could be perceived as an official endorsement of the privatization of warfare.

To be sure, constructing a knowledge base along these lines would be time consuming and tricky. But the field of veterans studies has adapted to new challenges like this before and it can do so again. A decade ago, for instance, Camacho and Atwood (2007) criticized the field for its preoccupation with male veterans from the Global North. In the intervening years, however, the field has responded by exploring, among other things, the experiences of female veterans (Crowley and Sandhoff, 2016), veterans from Africa (Maringira, Gibson and Richters, 2015) and veterans from Asia (Maharajan and Krishnaveni, 2016). The underlying message of this article is that now is the moment to add another more category of veteran to this diversifying field of research: the private military veteran.

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End Notes

[i] In this article, the term 'socioeconomic status' is used in its basic form to mean the social standing of an individual or group measured in terms of education, employment, earnings and mobility.

[ii] It is important to note that the aforementioned US DoD data relating to the number of private military contractors on its payroll in Iraq and Afghanistan does not record where these contractors go once they leave these countries.

[iii] www.linkedin.com/about-us

[iv] www.aegisworld.com/who-we-are/

[v] These statistics were obtained through correspondence with a Director employed by Aegis when the data was being harvested.

[vi] www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc

[vii] UK population data is based on a sample of 30,950 individuals representing the period 1st April 2015 to 30th June 2015 and can be accessed at: www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/employmentbyoccupationemp04.

[viii] Public military veteran data is based on a sample of 4,254 individuals representing the period 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016 and can be accessed at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/career-transition-partnership-ex-service-personnel-employment-outcomes-financial-year-201516;

[ix] Private military veteran data is based on a sample of 111 individuals collected on 5th October 2015.

[x] www.ctp.org.uk/about-us/the-ctp