

Running Heading: MILITARY TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

The transition experiences of British military veterans.

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Abstract

The aim of the current research was to investigate the transition experiences of British military veterans upon exiting the military and re-joining civilian society, asking the specific research question: what effect does the transition from military to civilian life have on the individual's identity? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed and seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with ex-military personnel. Analysis of the data revealed three superordinate themes: i) Several Selves: Identity; ii) Soldier and Society: Separation, iii) Transition Time: Personal Perspective. Current findings suggest that transition from the military back to civilian life is often problematic, with identity complications, feelings of loss, and disconnection both from the military and from society in general. Individuals with a more salient military identity had more difficult transition experiences. Findings are discussed with reference to theories of identity formation, maintenance, and salience, and recommendations for future research are made.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Military, Armed Forces, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Veterans, Service-Leaver Transition.

The transition experience of British military veterans.

Introduction

Membership of the Armed Forces can have a lasting effect upon an individuals' identity, altering worldviews and affecting concepts of self (Oakes, 2011), reinforcing conformity of actions and attitudes (Jeswal, 2011) and distancing individuals from civilian life (Akerlof, 1997; Read, Vanman & Miller, 1997). The tight and solid units promoted in the Armed Forces lead to social identities which conform to group norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006) and which serve to reinforce identification with the military. This distance and separation can create a societal difference best described as an 'us' and 'them' culture (Clarke, 2008) enforced through different societal norms (Foucault, 1995). On transitioning back to civilian life, the individual has often been indoctrinated to a way of life different from that of the civilian and this can cause conflict to the individuals' sense of self and social stability during and after their life in the Armed Forces (Dandeker, Wessely, Iversen & Ross, 2003). Although research suggests that the majority of service leavers cope well with the transition from military to civilian life (Iversen & Greenberg, 2009), there is a significant minority who experience transition difficulties (Iversen et al., 2005). The aim of the current research is to investigate the identity challenges of transition and reintegration to civilian life upon exiting the British military.

Although incorporating unique characteristics and private relationships of the personal self (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002), the sense of self incorporates many identities and is formed as a result of the social context, social roles, and social interactions of the individual (Baumeister, 1998). Thus, the personal self is socially developed from the appraisal of others and the need to belong to a social group (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1972a; Tajfal & Turner, 1979) suggests that any social category to which an individual belongs will provide that individual with a definition of

themselves based on the defining characteristics of their chosen category and when a particular social identity becomes salient, all members behave in a way that becomes stereotypical of that in-group, leading to stereotypical out-group perceptions which have the potential to lead to competitive and discriminatory qualities.

Although there is extensive research examining institutionalisation and identity, and a wealth of research detailing the experiences and stories of military veterans in the USA, the same cannot be said for members of the UK military (Iversen et al., 2005). While there is a recognition of the difficulties facing those who leave the Armed Forces in the UK (e.g. Walker, 2013) and community initiatives exist which can support veterans in terms of job-seeking, obtaining housing and healthcare, and offering familial and relationship support (e.g. Kirklees Life Force) there is also an awareness that the can-do attitude championed and respected by the military may also serve as a barrier to help-seeking upon discharge.

Military identity salience (Wagner, Stellmacher, Christ & Tissington, 2005) and issues of institutionalisation (Johansen, 2013) have the potential to impact transition experiences with Bergman et al. (2014) suggesting a complex and dynamic situation where a thorough understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms which bolster the transition process remain tenuous, and where the transition impact of the clinical correlates of military service become increasingly unclear for those personnel who have never engaged in active combat (see also Walker, 2013; Buckman et al., 2013). Further, early service leavers – identified by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) as those who have served less than 4 years and who are, therefore, not eligible for full resettlement support – are the cohort known to have the poorest mental health outcomes (Buckman et al., 2013) and the biggest problems upon exiting the Armed Forces (Bergman et al., 2014) .

However, although risks of poor outcomes are elevated for some subgroups of service leavers and for those with histories of poor mental health (Iversen et al., 2005), other studies

have provided a more positive, if more complex, projection with a recent MoD (2014) report showing a year-on-year decrease in the number of in-service suicides but an increase in the number of in-service personnel presenting for initial assessments of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), although this may point to improved PTSD identification rather than an increase in the number of affected individuals.

Although the UK was slower than the USA to develop the impetus for veteran care (Macmanus & Wessely, 2013), much research draws attention to the positive and beneficial nature of military service for the majority of Armed Forces personnel (e.g. Macmanus & Wessely, 2013; Iversen et al., 2011), and the consistent correlations seen between Armed Forces deployment and poor mental health for US personnel are less clear for UK individuals (Sundin et al., 2014).

Adaptation to civilian life upon leaving the Armed Forces demands the need for dramatic change in lifestyle, re-location, and employment (The Howard League, 2011), with researchers suggesting that this regeneration can result in the individual becoming lost between the worlds of soldier and civilian (Demers, 2011). Smith and True (2014) examined this identity crisis in relation to mental health issues and found that the transition caused identity conflict and mental distress, while Yosick, Bates, Moore, Crowe, Phillips and Davison (2012) address reintegration difficulties in relation to family, friends, and employment. Higate (2008) further suggests that identity conflicts arise in this group of individuals as a result of the pressure they experience when seeking continuity between their military and civilian lives.

In 2012, Ashcroft conducted a study with British servicemen, American servicemen serving in the U.K., and the U.K. and U.S. general publics with regards to the Armed Forces and found significant portions of the Armed Forces population concerned about employment upon discharge (81%), finance (45%), housing (35%), dealing with non-military life (24%),

and a lack of community (21%). A third of discharged servicemen stated they had been refused a mortgage, loan, or credit card, and that they miss the ethos and camaraderie of service life, and a belief that employers would not consider them for work because they were institutionalised and difficult to work with, a finding echoed by Bergman, Burdette and Greenberg (2014).

Further, Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, Ozer and Moos (2015) report feeling of alienation in ex-Armed Forces personnel due to a combination of individual changes and changes at home, feelings of disconnection from civilians who had not shared their military experience, and a lack of i) deserved recognition, ii) appropriate management of mental health problems, iii) transferability of roles from the Armed Forces to civilian life, iv) civilian structure, and v) purpose connected to feelings of no longer contributing to a significant communal effort.

The aim of the current research was to investigate the transition experiences of British military veterans upon re-joining civilian society, asking the specific research question: what effect does the transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life have on the individual's identity?

Methodology

Overview

In order to understand the subjective transition experiences of the respondents we took an interpretivistic stance, acknowledging that individual realities exist through the conceptualisation of lived experiences (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data was carried out. This idiographic approach examines the participants' accounts of their personal and social world in rich detail, exploring lived experiences and individual interpretations of these (Smith &

Osborn, 2008). The researcher plays an active part in the research process, striving to achieve an ‘insider’s perspective’ (Condar, 1987). This double hermeneutic approach is anchored to theoretical approaches to interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

In line with phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches within psychology, the aim of the current research is not to provide a widely generalisable account (e.g. Mays & Pope, 1995), rather it is to garner a ‘thick description’ (e.g. Ryle, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006) of the transition experiences of Armed Forces veterans. Schwandt (2001) draws further attention to the interpretative characteristics of thick data, suggesting that the ‘thickness’ is a direct result of the interpretative engagement rather than the description itself.

Participants

IPA is recommended for use with small, homogenous samples to allow an examination of individual experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Based on these recommendations, respondents were 7 British military veterans aged between 38-58 years who had served between 3 and 24 years in the British Army or the Royal Navy. One respondent was female and all were recruited using purposive or snowball sampling. All respondents had served actively in the Army or Navy and were discharged or released from their duties under conditions that were not dishonourable. For further details of participants, see Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the aim of allowing the respondent to give an account of their transition from military to civilian life in their own terms, and to

allow a flexible and dynamic account (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Issues discussed during the interview process included, but were not limited to, reasons for joining the Armed Forces, adjustment to life within the Armed Forces, issues of changes in identity whilst in the Armed Forces, resettlement support and availability, adjustment issues upon discharge from the Armed Forces, and identity issues in post-Armed Forces life. Interviews lasted between 35 and 100 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysis was carried out in accordance with Smith and Osborn's (2007) guidelines for IPA.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interviews yielded three superordinate themes, these were i) Several Selves: Identity; ii) Soldier and Society: Separation, and iii) Transition Time: Personal Perspective.

Several Selves: Identity

This theme addresses the disparity between the respondents' personal and social identities. A number of respondents acknowledged that their military identity became their primary and dominant identity; for some of the respondents this happened immediately while for others this happened incrementally:

“Yeah, definitely would say I'm a soldier, yeah” (John)

“Once we'd passed out we went straight to Ireland... That was more of a bond. Once I'd passed out it was more like, “right, now I'm actually in the Army” (Chris)

Supportive evidence suggests that membership of the Armed Forces is a unique experience that can alter the individuals worldview and have a lasting effect upon their self-concept (Oakes, 2011). Although the self has personal and private characteristics (Ellemers et al., 2002) the formation of one's self-concept is as much a response to social context, role, and

interactions (Baumeister, 1998). It is clear from some of the responses of the participants that the military became the driving force in the development of the self-concept:

“I’m proud to say I’ve been a soldier. I’m proud of what I’ve done; I would never hide behind it, it’s been a big part of my life since I was sixteen” (Fred)

“I can’t imagine what I’d be doing if I didn’t join the Forces. It’s a massive, massive part of my life that put me on a really good path. I wouldn’t be the person that I am now without it, guaranteed” (Peter)

SIT (Tajfel, 1972a) would suggest that membership of a new in-group would result in in-group favouritism and self-enhancement as a way of strengthening social identity and signalling suitability for group membership. This process serves to enhance individual self-concept and reinforces social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which in-turn can lead to in-group out-group segregation. For example:

“You develop a certain kind of arrogance I suppose, you believe yourself to be pretty invincible, better than anybody in civilian life. A common phrase back then was, “we ain’t fuckin’ civvies”. That was the way soldiers were; we’d only respect for other soldiers and no respect for people in civilian life” (Chris)

“I felt like I could take on the world, which is part of a soldier’s make-up, it’s what they can do, and I did” (Peter)

Social identity salience would go some way towards explaining the levels of group cohesion evident in the Armed Forces, the social, emotional, physical, and cultural attributes that are shared among the troops through common goals serve to increase similarities and agreements between the in-group members (Brewer, 1999). However, where military personnel view themselves as the in-group, engaging in in-group typical behaviours, there is also a feeling that they are cast as the out-group by society:

“[Society] categorise you into some sort of a right-wing nationalist because you are by virtue, so sometimes the uniform can be misperceived without knowing the individual... judge the uniform and not the person, which does happen. Society don’t particularly want your experiences so there’s a rejection as well of elements of what you’ve done in the Army because some people don’t like what you’ve stood for or what they perceive you’ve stood for.” (Sam)

“I felt like when I was ever in a military garrison I would take my uniform off, because in military garrisons the troops are renowned for causing trouble” (David)

To deal with this societal perception, social identity and related theories suggest that the group would engage in increased levels of self-enhancement, participating in enhanced social creativity and employing more favourable comparison dynamics including positioning one's own group as superior to others in order to establish positivity, thereby facilitating positive identity and esteem and ensuring the longevity of the group. For example:

“You felt as you started to get that team unity and that you were proud... I've never hidden it and obviously a lot of people could go, he either is a soldier or was a soldier because of the way I walk and the way I hold myself” (Fred)

“The Kings Road Chelsea was just full of these guys with safety pins in who we regarded as the lowest possible form of human life... I remember we were totally appalled by these people, but if you had short hair and a moustache and there were four lads walking down the street, they were all soldiers... People knew you as being soldiers, you were recognised as being soldiers, and partly as er, a lot of girls used to tell us, you can tell the way somebody walks into a bar, you can... That identity starts to push out” (Chris)

Another reinforcing factor for the military group is the uniform. It has been noted that individual identity develops in part from the meanings and norms of the salient roles that people hold (Thoits, 2003), and that the military uniform reinforces this identity via a process of materialisation which ensures that the individual conforms to their salient role (Hennessy, 1995). Respondents had varying attitudes toward their uniform, and toward how they felt while wearing it:

“I know when I go to work in my uniform I'm a soldier... although when I get home and take that uniform off I'm a husband and father” (Fred)

“It [wearing the uniform] just makes you feel great, everything about it, it's a fantastic achievement. You were part of a big unit” (Chris)

The sense of achievement gained from wearing the uniform is likely linked to the incremental manner in which the new recruit receives their kit and the sense of 'being good enough' that is communicated by the Armed Forces. For example,

“When you first start you’re not allowed to wear the uniform because you’re not good enough to wear that uniform... The first couple of weeks you were in tracksuit and trainers, everywhere you go... Week 3 you get the uniform but no beret... Week 4 or 5 you’d be able to put your beret on, they’d show you how to mould it and sculpt it to your head” (Peter)

“I felt proud. I think I felt that I’d achieved something” (Sarah)

However, there were comments made by respondents that were at odds with these sentiments.

Hogg and Terry (2000) would suggest that as social identification occurs, the individual should engage in normative behaviour which serves to strengthen the feelings of group identity. However, for a number of the respondents in this study, this was not the case:

“There’s a real culture in the Armed Forces of using particular language and I never got involved with any of that” (Sarah)

“It was just a job to me: Put the uniform on and at the end of the day you’d take it off” (David)

“I never felt like a soldier. I almost felt like I was doing a job, I didn’t feel like I was a soldier, I felt like I was doing a role, a job” (Peter)

The respondents who expressed this view were the ones who had joined the military and quickly made the decision to pursue an occupation rather than serve in the infantry. These were the same individuals who described their time in the Armed Forces as a job, and who felt that their time in the Forces had not changed who they were. This distinction resonates with research assessing the institutional / occupational model of Armed Forces (Moskos, 1977) and with research by Burland and Lundquist (2011) which suggests a distinct difference between the experiences of soldiers and support personnel and that the route followed by Armed Forces recruits impacts on military identity formation, internalisation of social / group norms, and transition experiences. A number of the respondents offered explanations for this difference in attitude and identity between those who served in the infantry and those who pursued a trade:

“I’d say very few people go in, go through it and come out the same person. I don’t think you can actually do that. Maybe lads who’ve gone in and they’re in a trade, where they call the Sergeant ‘Pete’ or whatever, maybe they can. Maybe they see it as a civilian job with a uniform, but certainly the infantry, you’re never the same person. You’re a different person” (Chris)

“I still felt like I was Peter. One thing that they try and do is almost break you down to build you up and I don’t think they ever did that with me. I kind of saw it as a game” (Peter)

“If I would have done twenty two years in the infantry it would probably have been a culture shock, but going to work in NHS hospitals... It was always just a job” (David)

“It was always just a job for me and I think that was the problem, why I didn’t really fit in and I didn’t really enjoy it” (Sarah)

Those individuals who felt that their role in the Armed Forces was ‘just a job’ all commented on the friendships that they maintained from their civilian life, and the lack of contact that they have maintained with their comrades since leaving the Forces:

“I always had more civilian friends, I always tended to not particularly get involved with the social side of things. I’m not really in touch with anyone from the Forces... Just on Facebook, and very few” (Sarah)

“You have two sets of people: you have people who have lots of friends back home, like I did, and kept those as number one friends, and you had people who joined the Forces who almost needed to create, needed to make friends” (Peter)

However, in line with Chris’ comments about the bond that occurs in the infantry, David stated:

“Mostly, funnily enough, I’m in touch with people from when I was in the infantry. I’ve kept more contact with them... I think there was more of a bond... We would always move around together. When I moved over to nursing it was more just a job” (David)

Those individuals who served predominantly in the infantry – rather than taking on a civilian-style role – maintained more close friendships and have more frequent contact with their ex-comrades:

“Yeah... we remain really close, certainly in the first ten or fifteen years [after leaving] if any of the lads had [telephoned] and said “er, I need your help”, there’d be a car load of lads going to wherever it was to help in whatever way” (Chris)

This difference in perspective can be explained by the extent to which the individuals engaged with their military identity when they were serving. Herman (1997) and Norris, Friedman, Watson, Byrne, Diaz and Kaniasty (2002) suggest that it is the common interpretation of an event that bonds people rather than the common event itself, and for those who served in the infantry, with common goals and objectives, the data suggests that these experiences and the perception of the experiences was more similar and afforded a stronger bond which was maintained across a lifetime. For those individuals who took on roles similar to those that they could have secured outside of the Armed Forces, often working alongside members of the civilian population, these bonds appear weaker and more short-lived.

These differences in the internalisation of the military identity and the extent to which the respondents’ social identities overtook their personal identity had repercussions on their experience of transitioning back to civilian life after leaving the Armed Forces. For those who felt that they were performing a ‘job’ within the Forces and had not developed the strong sense of group identity, the transition appeared to be more smooth and enjoyable:

“It was a relief, I was quite excited and really looking forward to it!” (David)

“I was excited, yeah, I couldn’t wait” (Sarah)

“It felt great... I knew that I’d done the right thing. Knowing you’re never going back again, it’s a great feeling” (Peter)

However, for those respondents who fully assumed the group identity and who established solid and lasting bonds with their comrades, the transition was more difficult:

“I don’t think you ever leave... I don’t think it ever leaves you” (Fred)

“You count it down and then, er, you walk out, er, and... it, it kind of hits you... And it wasn’t the best feeling in the world at all. Quite... quite emotional” (Chris)

“I know one person... he’s with the TA [Territorial Army]... this one individual just goes on a Tuesday night and that’s his life... he found it very hard to, to change. I remember at a reunion a guy, you know, who had left the Forces saying to me and another bloke, ‘enjoy your life in the Army because when you are out your life ends’, and me and me mate were shocked... I see him at every local reunion and he’s always the same; people just take it differently” (John)

“One of my friends... works in an office and he had an ex-RSM from the Royal Marines come in as an office manager and he was saying, when some bloke back-chatted him, ‘oh, you can’t speak to me like that, I’m an ex-Royal Marine’ and they were like, ‘well, it means nothing here’” (David)

Demers (2011) argues that the transition period can cause a loss of identity as the individual struggles to distinguish between their military and civilian identities, as is evident with John, Fred, and Chris. In Chris’ case, the strong sense of Armed Forces identity coupled with his disdain for civilians while he was in the Army likely resulted in considerable cognitive dissonance which he tried hard to counter by applying Army-like precision and regimentation to his civilian activities:

“everything had to be perfectly clean, we bought a brand new house and it was only when we had some of the neighbours in, one of the neighbours said “your lino floor has no pattern on it” and it’s because, it’s bizarre, I used to clean it with bleach. And I used to be on my hands and knees with a scrubbing brush and then mopping it with a towel and I’d do that at least once a week... The psychologist got me to see that, like, the pressures of doing things, like, mustn’t... I-I-I was just pressurising myself in different ways” (Chris)

Higate (2008) suggests that some personnel pursue a continuation of their military identity once they have transitioned to civilian life by seeking employment with similar organisations, by accepting civilian roles, or by refusing to release their military past:

“Yeah, ironically I’ve just got a recent job where I have, I am, erm, reemployed by the MOD [Ministry of Defence] absolutely loving the job... I’ve moved back to that environment having been away from it for ten years as if I’ve been away for ten minutes and I’ve just been accepted overnight” (Sam)

“About 18 months after I came out the Falkland’s kicked off. I remember phoning round the lads going, ‘right, who’s going? We need to find out what regiments are going’ and we knew the Guards would be involved, and I remember ringing the

Grenadiers and saying, ‘if they’re going, we’ll come back. We’ll jump on it and we’ll go back’. And there was so many of us” (Chris)

For these individuals it is clear that transitioning back to civilian life resulted in an identity conflict and, for some of the respondents, this conflict took years to resolve.

Soldier and Society: Separation

The importance of this theme was evident throughout the interviews and it was clear that there was separation between the lives that the respondents had in the Armed Forces and their civilian lives:

“You can’t have one eye elsewhere otherwise you wouldn’t get through the career progressive, it’s too intense a job, it demands too much from you personally. You can’t afford to be indifferent... it does engross you and it does take over your life, your train of thought, everything” (Sam)

“Again, people talk about ‘oh, there must be a lot of camaraderie in the Fire Service’, yeah, there is, but it’s not an iota of what the Army is. It can’t be measured. You live more in an hour in Northern Ireland in them situations than you’re ever gonna live again, really. Nothing comes close to it” (Chris)

These feelings support Ashcroft’s (2012) research which reported that servicemen / women were concerned about the lack of camaraderie in post-service life. Respondents also expressed some of the differences between the Armed Forces and civilian life, and although there were positive comments made in relation to these differences, the respondents also drew attention to the levels of segregation and differences from civilian life, friends and family demanded by the military:

“The Army does lots of things for you but it does take away some elements of choice that aren’t, you know, that go against the grain of the family and I do everything for my family, so... when I reflect on that scenario when there was times where, erm, I was drove to despair because of separation which isn’t nice, it’s not a nice experience” (Sam)

“There’s no break from it, and there’s always someone to answer to for everything that you do and you don’t really have much say in your life... At the end of the day when you’ve been at work all day you just want your own life” (Sarah)

One of the respondents highlighted that the segregation was, in part, created by his senior officers in the Armed Forces:

“One of the things that gets drilled into you is, ‘don’t leave the Army because there’s nothing out there for you’. And it’s that, psychologically, that gets drilled into you all the time. That, ‘what you leaving the Army for? You’re not going to get a job. You’ll be back in here in no time, crying for your job back again’. And it was almost daily” (Peter)

It is clear that military and civilian lives are separate and this serves to reinforce the identity conflict that has been identified, as Armed Forces personnel struggle to distinguish between their two identities (Demers, 2011) which is demonstrated when the respondents spoke about how military and civilian personalities differ:

“from the age of 16 up to 40, so 24 years, I’d been around people who... had been indoctrinated into the same way of life as myself and there’s a black humour... and sometimes the civilian workforce doesn’t pick up on it, they see... ‘oh, that was a bit nasty’ when you still see it as being fun... you are making light of something but in a way they don’t seem to understand” (Fred)

It became clear that this feeling of separation and segregation was not only evident whilst the respondents were serving in the Armed Forces, but also once they transitioned back to civilian life. This conflict was referred to not only in terms of reintegrating back into society but also learning to live with one’s family full-time after leaving for Forces:

“the missus is quite a strong character so she made sure I went and followed her routine, because she had been living at home for six years, because of the family, so she wouldn’t allow me to come in and disrupt the routine she had created here” (Fred)

“I didn’t think I did [find the transition difficult] but now I realise it was quite... I ended up having to see a psychologist... My marriage broke down... Everything had to be perfectly clean... I remember being really annoyed when [conifer trees in the garden] started growing at different speeds, ‘cause they weren’t regimented” (Chris)

Anderson and Goodman (2014) attest that the transition experience is fluid and dynamic, requiring continuous appraisal, the constructivist experience of transition relies on the individual’s meaning-making ability, which develops over time (Robertson & Brott, 2013),

while homecoming theory (Schuetz, 1945) focuses on the separation between the military service member and their home which can lead to a lack of familiarity, understanding, and knowing. Upon exiting the Armed Forces, the realisation that both the military member and their family and friends have had unique experiences, and that both home and the people have changed, can result in a chasm between expectation and reality for both the returning veteran and their family and friends which can result in shock, destabilisation, and confusion on both sides (Ahern et al., 2015).

Throughout the interviews, respondents seemed conflicted about whether this separation from civilian life stemmed from the attitudes of those in the Armed Forces, or whether it stemmed from the attitudes held by society towards those in the Armed Forces. Stets and Burke (2000) suggest that this separation occurs because individuals categorise themselves in terms of their own social group, enhancing their self-image through their group identity. Social identity theory would suggest that as this separation increases, both groups engage in increased in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and this continues for the ex-Forces personnel once they have exited the military:

“There are some people... calling me a murderer to my face, although I’ve never murdered anybody, but people don’t look at you as an individual, they just see that big green machine, and as far as they’re concerned or aware, we’re murderers” (Fred)

“I know lads who came back from the Falkland’s and it messed them up and, alright, they were treated as heroes for ten minutes and then they became the guy who nobody talked to because he could flip at any given time and people didn’t realise the root cause of that was what he’d done and what he’d seen and you can’t just be the all-action hero and then just turn it off and go back to being Mr Nice, mild-mannered, easy-going guy” (Chris)

As the respondents discussed this issue, they made comments and suggestions related to their understanding of the social distance between members of the military and civilians:

“That’s why I always say I’m... When people find out I’m a nurse they can relate more to that ‘cause they’ve had contact with nurses rather than some people that don’t have any contact with any military” (David)

Here David points to the lack of intergroup contact as a key factor in the levels of misunderstanding and misinterpretation between the groups. Early contact hypothesis research (Allport, 1954) suggests that meaningful contact reduces negativity between groups, supporting the suggestion that, for those respondents that worked in civilian settings whilst they were in the Armed Forces, the transition back to civilian life was littered with fewer negative personal and societal reactions because they had been working in a civilian setting. This promotes integration into society before leaving the Forces, and promotes civilian exposure to these military individuals in a setting that facilitates common goals.

However, it is not fair to say that all respondents had a difficult transition. Even those who experienced initial difficulties reported that they had, generally, had a positive response from society:

“I think they look up to you, most people look up and respect you, you know, when you say... not talking about it but when you say you’ve done twenty two years I think that’s quite an achievement” (John)

“being an ex-Army nurse will be a positive thing and that employers will like that and the fact that I’ve been to Afghanistan and stuff” (Sarah)

It is possible, then, that the negativity felt by some veterans may be due to their continued professional association with the military, and it could be argued that in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination are still prevalent in these individuals. This is highlighted in the response of some respondents to the question of how they identified themselves now that they no longer serve in the Armed Forces:

“I define myself... I can’t get away from the fact that I define myself as an ex-Warrant Officer, as a career in the Armed Forces” (Sam)

“I don’t think you ever leave” (Fred)

This, compared with the comments made by other respondents who choose not to draw attention to their military service:

“I don’t but the wife does all the time... Like I say, I don’t unless it comes up in the conversation” (John)

“if they ask more questions about where you did your training or where did I work previously then I’d tell them, but I don’t come straight out with it, no” (David)

However, this perception of some respondents that reintegration will be easier if they do not draw attention to their military past is difficult and unfair. Distancing oneself from aspects of life that are fundamental in creating our identity can lead to psychological turmoil, and although some of the respondents clearly felt that the onus is on the veteran to assimilate into society, other respondents clearly found difficulty with the societal response, and with the levels of misunderstanding that are sometimes encountered. Further, Bergman et al. (2014) reported fears of institutionalisation by members of the general public as a hindrance to reintegration and this is supported in the current study:

“if you just blend into society when you leave I think it’s easier for everyone” (David)

“I got told when I applied for a mortgage, he said, ‘I’d rather give a taxi driver a mortgage’... You were regarded as nothing” (Chris)

“my experience is that, you know... we like employing these ex-soldiers because they do the job and they are disciplined but, you know, we have to keep on telling them what to do because if they are not given orders and direction they get a bit lost with themselves” (Sam)

Whether it is the Armed Forces or society that is creating this separation and distance, it serves to reinforce the Armed Forces identity once the individual has transitioned back to civilian life. For example, in 2012, Ashcroft found that ex-Armed Forces personnel were concerned about the lack of community and about dealing with non-military life following discharge. Respondents in the current study bear this out:

“I think with a lot of soldiers it’s a 3 year deal: you do the Army and then you come out... if you stayed in too long you became, we said, cabbages, because you couldn’t think for yourself, so it was, ‘we don’t want to stay in too long’, you know, we knew lads who were doing 7 years and you’d go, ‘look at him, he’s a cabbage’ because you just think that maybe he couldn’t survive outside” (Chris)

Ashcroft also unearthed anxieties about employment due to the perception of employers believing that ex-military personnel are institutionalised and difficult to work with:

“there was people that we call... institutionalised, you know, and you see it now even once you leave the Forces, if you work with people that are ex-Forces some of ‘em do struggle, I think, you know, they’re still in that mindset... they find it more difficult to mix into society” (David)

Ashcroft’s finding, which is offered some support by the current study, shines a spotlight on the question of whether it is ex-Forces personnel who fail to accept society, or whether it is society that fails to accept them. The data gathered from respondents in the current study suggests that although strong social identities may hinder reintegration from the individual perspective, societal attitudes also prevent a smooth assimilation. Future research should seek to address this issue, examining the attitudes of wider society toward Forces and ex-Forces personnel and attempting to unravel the complexities of the relationships between the groups.

That said, there was an acknowledgement from most respondents that things may be changing, and that recent years have seen an increase in the levels of public support shown to military personnel and veterans:

“I think it’s changed over the years... You get more respect now, you know... with ‘Help for Heroes’ and now they’ve got the status that they deserve” (Chris)

“People... like dealing with people who are ex-Forces, er, they always seem to praise them. I’ve never had any bad comments... [a colleague at work] was saying that within his department they’re looking to bring in ex-Forces... specifically to the area because they know that they’ve got the right attributes to fit into the team very well” (Peter)

Further exploration of the attitudes held by society in relation to service and ex-service personnel suggest a post-Cold War decline in public understanding of the military linked to

the end of military conscription and the related decrease in the number of ex-service personnel transitioning back into civilian society (Berndtsson, Dandeker & Ydén, 2015). However, work by Hines, Thoits, Wessely, Dandeker and Fear (2015) suggests that despite historical mission-specific public support for the Armed Forces, contemporary civilian support is directed at the personnel specifically. Comments made by respondents in the current study offer only partial support to these findings by Hines et al. (2015), with some indicating that they view the public as generally supportive and others suggesting that – despite societal support for veterans at a group level – individual support is lacking.

Explanations for this may be found in social distance theory (Parks, 1924), where it may be suggested that normatively the public maintain a high degree of support for groups that put themselves in harm's way for the national good, yet at an individual level affective social distance remains, with individual members of the public showing little support for individual members of the Armed Forces. Based on this suggestion, it would seem that there is a psychological disconnect between how society feels about the Armed Forces as a group, and how individual service personnel are treated by individual members of society. Cooper and Hurcombe (2009) offer support for this suggestion, stating that “the image of the soldier develops over time in tandem with the identity of a nation, with soldiers often portrayed as the epitome of national values, normative masculinity and heroism” (McGarry & Ferguson, 2012, p.124). However, with national identity changes being documented (Owen, 2013) it is perhaps unsurprising that the relationship between society and Armed Forces members and leavers represents a complex web of identity, social distance, and acceptance issues.

Transition Time: Personal Perspective

A key theme which emerged from the data was how different each respondent's military experience, transition period, and newly formed civilian life had been. A major influence on these issues was the degree of institutionalisation and engrossment in the Forces:

“[for] twenty four years I'd been around people who were, for a better phrase, had been indoctrinated into the same way of life as myself” (Fred)

It was clear from the interviews that many of the respondents felt that they had become a part of something bigger; that they were assuming the norms of the group as they adjusted to their military identity:

“It was just something you had to do... it's just instilled, that was the job and you did it, so I wouldn't say it was forced upon me, probably didn't have a lot of choice but you just accepted that that's what you did” (John)

“you had to adjust from day one... otherwise you wouldn't last. You had to conform, you had to adjust, erm, but it's very healthy as a young lad to, it's a very healthy relationship and it's a very healthy environment, it's very progressive, it's all about career so there's a stage career progression” (Sam)

“the military... it's a way of life, not a job, some people handle it better than others” (Fred)

One respondent spoke about how he valued and enjoyed feeling like part of a team:

“I ceased to be [me], I was then a Guardsman. I was a member of the Grenadier Guards... It was fantastic... You were part of a big unit” (Chris)

The social identity model of deindividuation argues that absorption into the group leads to feelings of anonymity which heighten feelings of depersonalisation which lead to heightened conformity to group norms and behaviours (Reicher, 1984). This further increases group-based stereotyping of the out-groups (Hogg, 1993) which, Clarke (2008) argues, leads to an ‘us’ and ‘them’ culture enforced by drawing attention to differing societal norms (Foucault, 1995). This was borne out in the current study:

“all these people going ‘you bloody murderers’ and all this and that but who are they going to call upon if they suddenly have the likes of – let's pick Russia – if they get a

massive force again under Putin and start rattling across Europe, everybody's going to want the Army there... So in times of crisis they'll call upon the Army and in other times it's like, 'oh, bugger off'" (Fred)

"The Falkland's War kind of, they were heroes again. But again after a short while, later on in the 90s, you know, they'd all fallen away, them squaddies were nothing. Until, of course, they needed them again in Iraq" (Chris)

These comments highlight the perception that these veterans have about society's attitude toward serving personnel: that when national security is compromised the Forces are respected but otherwise are somewhat disregarded. This resonates with Stern's (1995) suggestion that national identity threat results in increased in-group cohesion and positivity, where, in times of national identity threat, the Armed Forces are viewed as part of the societal in-group. It is, however, reasonable to assume that, according to Stern's theory, members of the Forces live with a heightened sense of national identity and find this difficult to quell once they are discharged.

Some respondents in the current study explain how some ex-Forces personnel experience permanently altered worldviews and varying levels of institutionalisation as a result of serving in the Forces. Supportive evidence comes from Lea, Spears, and Groot (2001), who argue that deep levels of involvement with the group, and anonymity associated with depersonalisation, reduce processes of social comparison, self-awareness, and self-presentation. As a result, individual engagement, group cohesion, and group belongingness are reinforced (Festinger, 1957).

When discussing their discharge, respondents were vocal when asked if there was sufficient military and governmental support available to help them transition:

"no, absolutely not, no, it was absolutely diabolical... it was absolutely appalling the way I was treated. I do realise today that's changed... that situation has changed and that the support infrastructure is there now" (Sam)

"no, definitely not, no" (John)

“I think a lot of it is bullshit and bluster... take ‘Help for Heroes’, set up by the parents of an injured soldier, the government going ‘yes, we will- we will do this’ but it’s all being done by civilians” (Fred)

“No, there was none at all. Nothing... I wouldn’t have even known what you meant, no. You walked out and that were it, you were on your own... I think we [the Armed Forces] are looking at it now, and we’re [the Armed Forces] are trying to do something about it, and we [the Armed Forces] need to” (Chris)

“I don’t remember it, no. There wasn’t a team who could sit down with me and go through that with me. I don’t think that complete transition was there” (Peter)

However, despite the comments made by these respondents, who were discharged from the Armed Forces between 30 and 8 years ago, that things are better now, comments from the other respondents, who were discharged within the last 3 years, only partially bear out this improvement in transitional support:

“I don’t know who I would have... to be fair I wouldn’t have known where to go [for transition help from the military]” (David)

“You get support with job seeking... you get, erm, grants to spend on training” (Sarah)

In support of research by Johansen (2013), it is evident that those individuals who had a less internalised military identity had a much easier transition back to civilian life and felt more positively about leaving the Armed Forces. Those individuals, such as Chris and Fred, who identified with the Armed Forces at an organisational level (using ‘we’ to refer to the Armed Forces even though they are no longer members of those Forces) had a much more difficult transition (Wagner et al., 2005). In Chris’s case, however, this is coupled with his status as an early service leaver, a group which have the most difficult transition experiences, the poorest mental health outcomes, and are ineligible for full resettlement support (Buckman et al., 2013; Bergman et al., 2014).

To help with the transition back to civilian life the British Army (2013) produced a “welfare guide for the service leaver” entitled “Transition to Civilian Life”, issued to all ‘Regular Army Leavers’ at the time of application for discharge / retirement, offering

guidance on issues including resettlement, housing, pensions, benefits, health, and family, with additional transition documents addressing matters such as ‘the emotional pathway’, healthcare information, and managing personal finances. Additionally, the Forces in Mind Trust is committed to the provision of a catalogue of evidence aimed specifically at enabling successful transition, while the MoD have provided an extensive tri-service resettlement and employment support manual. The availability of such documents speaks to the efforts being made to improve transition experiences, and to the degree of importance that the Armed Forces place on this transition. However, as research by Buckman et al. (2013) and Bergman et al. (2014) has shown, early service leavers – although entitled to access the Future Horizons programme – are not entitled full resettlement support but are the cohort known to have the poorest mental health outcomes. Given the increased mental health risks in this population, and given the MoD (2013) admission that there are increased mental health and suicide risks for personnel under the age of 20, it would seem that support for this subgroup of military personnel requires attention. Future research should aim to assess the value and effectiveness of existing support materials to those who are currently leaving the military, and should seek to determine the support required by Early Service Leavers and young military personnel, with a view to improving the mental health forecast for these groups.

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the transition experiences of military veterans upon leaving the Forces and re-joining civilian society, and to assess the impact of this transition on the identity of the individual. Interpretative phenomenological analysis of seven interviews with British Armed Forces veterans suggests that although the transition may have been expected it was often far from smooth, with issues such as conflicts of personal and social identities, a sense of a loss of identity, and a feeling of disconnection from and,

occasionally, rejection by general society. Respondents in the current study acknowledged some difficult transition and post-transition experiences, and many of these were related to identity salience. Individuals with a strengthened and heightened sense of military identity, those who indicated that they assumed this identity quickly upon joining the Forces, and for whom this identity remained important following their discharge, had more difficult transition experiences. The suggestion, therefore, is that those who internalise military identity values are those that struggle the most upon discharge. The British military are seeking to address this and have made significant steps in supporting all service leavers in recent years, the task for future research is to a) determine whether, from the service-leaver's perspective, this support is sufficient and whether transition and post-transition experiences are improved as a result of these efforts, and b) to address, from both a military and general public perspective, the issue of whether reintegration is hindered, and separation from civilian life perpetuated as a result of the attitudes of those in the Armed Forces, or from the attitudes held by society towards those in the Armed Forces.

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