Examining the Veteran Experience Following Separation from Service: A Review of Literature

Seth Cobb
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Examining the Veteran Experience Following Separation from Service: A Review of Literature

Seth Cobb

University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions Honors College

Dr. Peggy Lee

April 1, 2022

Abstract

Transitioning from servicemember to civilian is a complex process that many Americans undergo each year. This manuscript examines the psychosocial challenges that servicemembers encounter in their transition to civilian life. In contemporary data, there are numerous explorations of the barrier's veterans face. However, there are far fewer analyses of why these barriers manifest and how to treat and prevent them. This review seeks to unveil a greater understanding of these barriers, resulting in more transparent exploration of their origins, meaning, and resolution.

Introduction

200,000 servicemembers separate from the United States Armed Forces each year (Transition Assistance Program, 2021). The circumstances of servicemembers' departure from service are varied. Service departure circumstances may include such issues as post-contract separation, retirement, or other means of separation. However, servicemembers are expected to complete a transition program to prepare them for civilian life during the last weeks of their contracts. The intention of these programs is for servicemembers to have the skills they need to effectively re-integrate into civilian society following completion of the Transition Assistance Program.

The Transition Assistance Program provides resources to separating servicemembers to facilitate successful societal conversion. This program is required for all servicemembers and must be completed prior to discharge. Veterans are provided multiple paths in the program to follow in their pursuit of purpose after service. Despite this, the literature confirms that servicepeople report immense difficulty with assimilation with civilian life following the transition experience.

This literature review will explore the breadth of published studies examining the psychosocial hurdles servicemembers face during reintegration into civilian society following discharge. The purpose of this literature review is to investigate and highlight the challenges veterans face when navigating the transition process. Identifying gaps in literature will allow future studies to better address deficits in this sector of veterancy. By acknowledging areas of study that lack sufficient exploration, more precisely targeted resource allocation strategies for transitioning veterans may be discovered. This discovery should provide service members modes to achieve successful transitions to civilian life.

PICOT Question

For veterans immediately following discharge from the armed services, what factors can increase the likelihood of effective/successful transition in their first year of civilian life?

Methods

Further Exploration of Research Question

What do veterans report as their largest concerns following separation? Existing literature reflects that servicemembers experience issues with belongingness, isolation, and anomie upon reintegrating into civilian society.

Sources

Information included in this article was extracted from academic literature through the usage of database searches. The databases utilized for this review are as follows: CINAHL Complete, MEDLINE Complete, PubMed, and APA PsychINFO. Standalone studies with qualitative data were prioritized for this review. Studies focusing on the transition experience of the veteran population were selected regardless of country of origin. Primary documents were also prioritized, but exclusion of secondary documents was not applied.

Search methods

This literature review was conducted through the utilization of APA psychology information database through EBSCO for combined searching of CINAHL and Medline, Boolean phrases were entered. The first section included veterans or military or soldiers or servicemen and belongingness or connectedness or belonging. (1082 results) The second search included: veterans or military or soldiers or servicemen and military to civilian transition (16 results).

Inclusion/Exclusion parameters

Upon searching APA PsycINFO, CINAHL, Medline, and PubMed databases for articles which matched desired criteria, inclusion and exclusion methods were implemented to select appropriate data for extraction. For example, articles without full-text access were excluded. Literature reviews were preferred, as their essence helped establish credibility in the research topic.

Data extraction

Utilizing the synthesis table, formation was driven by pertinent identifying data from the studies to include veterans who had completed the transition process or who were in the transition process. It was imperative to include veterans who had transitioned out of service, due to limitations of published literature, to include data from articles in which active duty servicemembers were returning home from combat deployments. This population typically

encountered identical psychosocial barriers to reintegration although they were not participating in the typically described military to civilian transition. This review analyzed the different variables, methods, and results through critical appraisal, synthesis, and outcomes tables to promote efficient and pertinent collection of data. Through these methods, limitations were identified and further explored. From this process, gaps in the research were identified which identified areas for further study.

Results

Military cultural structure versus civilian cultural structure

The first theme that this study will explore the difference between the culture of the military and the culture of civilians. This is important in understanding the reasons why so many servicemembers report difficulty returning to civilian culture following military separation. The characteristics of military culture which separates it from civilian culture in the United States include its basis in "collectivist social norms reinforcing routinized behavior, deference to authority, and performance" (B. Dosono et al., 2017 p. 2). Furthermore, military culture strikes a balance between being too "civilianized" to handle combat and being too "fixated on norms and traditions" which may cause it (military culture) to lose site of the values it swears to protect and uphold (Collins, 1998). What this means is that the culture of the military foundationally differs from civilian culture to the point of avoiding civilianization. Military culture is a culture of readiness, vigilance, and high tempo that has elevat ed expectations and demands from its participants. For enlistees to succeed, cultural adaptation is expected to be expeditious. To

perform as functioning units of this culture, hopeful servicemembers must immediately adopt military culture upon arrival.

Undergoing this lifestyle change in such a quick manner alters the cultural identity of military enlistees. (Brown et al. 2015), as cited in (Albertson, 2019), describes how military enlistees in training must replace their "civilian individualism with a focus on the collective". This shift takes hold and is reinforced through a sense of belonging and strong identity within the military. For example, in basic training, you must always have someone with you. The only exception to this rule is when you are sleeping. This partner is designated as a "battle buddy" and is essential to the basic training experience. This practice reinforces belongingness through the sheer volume of interaction and cooperative reliance upon your peers. Servicemembers are truly never alone in this environment and the resulting tribal atmosphere facilitates expeditious cultural molding.

Military existence and belonging becomes "all encompassing" (Siebold 2007, p 290) and creates an environment in which trainees "develop bonds, "that transcends all others, even the marriage and family bonds we forge in civilian life" (Tick 2005, p 141) in (Albertson 2019). Consequently, this way of life establishes a new identity for servicemembers. Being a part of this "brotherhood" and leaving it behind can be incredibly challenging. The immensely strong connections which are established between members of the military cause them to have difficulty adjusting to our more individualistic society when transitioning to civilian life after their service obligation has concluded. In 2019, McAndrew noted that student veterans "may experience cultural incongruity due to difficulties reconciling their military identity with a campus environment that is not always sensitive to their experiences" (p. 3).

Reported psychosocial barriers to successful military to civilian transition

The literature consistently reveals that when servicemembers return to civilian life, they encounter many barriers that prevent successful re-integration. One such barrier is a lack of a sense of community and cultural belonging. In (Rogers et al., 2017), Veterans who feel as though they are a burden to others and who experience thwarted belongingness are more prone to suicide than those who do not. Thwarted belongingness is credited as a factor that contributes to increased suicidal ideation risk (Short et al., 2019). Furthermore, research by Mcandrew et al. 2019, found that lack of belonging reported by student veterans on college campuses accounted for 46% of their negative adjustment to college. The literature consistently shows that servicemembers come home to find that they are unable to form meaningful relationships with those around them. This inability to effectively connect leads to feelings of isolation and despair. Words from a Marine that describes their difficulty coping with everyday life stateside, "I'd rather die in Iraq than fake it (normalcy) over here.". (Demers 2011 p. 12).

In addition to thwarted belongingness, anomie is consistently reported by veterans upon coming home. One veteran in Albertson (2019), "describes it as the following: "My identity! Like it was like [an] frigging, egg timer thing, the sand like that was my soul and my identity and it was just running out and just running out..." (p. 10). In Mitchell (2020)'s survey of veterans returning home from deployment, "Sixty-seven (27%) participants reported feeling a loss of meaning or purpose". These veterans struggled with establishing purpose and complained of identity disruption. Elaborating on this phenomenon, another veteran in the same study describes their experience in civilian life as not being able to measure up to their days in the military. "There is nothing in civilian life that will ever be as fulfilling or important as what I did in the military. I have never felt as proud or as special and I will never feel that way again" (Mitchell et al., 2020) (p. 8).

The importance of successful military to civilian transition

While investigating barriers to successful military-to-civilian transition, appropriate exploration of the literature concerning successful transition and examining the importance of achieving a successful transition is essential to review. Unsatisfactory transition experiences for veterans are numerous, especially following deployments to combat zones. For example, Rose (2019) shows through his research, "of the over 40,000 Canadian service-personnel returned from the war in Afghanistan, more than one third believe they did not make a successful transition."

In another literature review, Canadian veterans described their personal wishes for a successful transition. The most frequently reported goals were finding satisfying work (reported by 26.8% of respondents), stable mental health (20.0%) familial health (18.9%), and relationship with spouse (16.8%), (Rose et al., 2015). This literature review has well-defined data noting that belongingness and purpose are the most reported goals for successful transition for this population.

As discussed in the previous theme, thwarted belongingness and anomie have significant correlations with increased suicidality. This is evident in the disproportionate rates of suicide in United States veterans. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019, an average of 17.2 veterans committed suicide per day (VA Mental Health Services - Veterans Affairs 2019). The suicide rate for non-veteran U.S. adults in 2019 was 16.9 per 100,000. The suicide rate for veterans is 31.6 per 100,000. (VA Mental Health Services - Veterans Affairs, 2019).   Between the years 2005 and 2013, the Department of Veterans Affairs reported an increase of 63 percent +in veterans' administration healthcare participants.

According to the findings of Fisher et al. (2015), "belonging is directly related to depression and hopelessness while indirectly related to suicidal ideation." According to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2021, 30 percent of active duty and reserve military personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have a mental health condition that required treatment. The very public spread of this information has increased awareness of Veteran's mental health disparities and highlights the importance of treatment resources and protective factor reinforcement. This data is relevant to this literature review since satisfactory and fulfilling return to civilian society in the form of belonging in civilian transition has been researched as a protective factor for suicide and mental health disorder exacerbation. (Short et al., 2019)

Discussion

The results of this literature review indicate that there are assorted complex interpersonal challenges faced when servicemembers return to the civilian sector. Many publications examine these individual barriers, their origins, and the impact on veterans. Improving the outcomes of veteran re-integration has been an item of frequent contemporary discussion and through further research and quality improvement, realistic interventions can be identified and implemented.

The first theme that warrants discussion is the following: psychosocial barriers to military-to-civilian transition. There are plentiful examples of qualitative research studies that examined data collected from numerous veterans and servicemembers. This segment of published literature is vast and was the most productive when research was conducted. Often, veterans participating in research reported the following after their return to the civilian sector: feeling a lack of belongingness (Rogers et al. 2017), anomie (Albertson et. al 2019), and a loss of

meaning or purpose. These veterans returned home to a world they did not feel that they could successfully operate within.

The feelings that these veterans encounter upon returning home warranted further investigation, why is it that coming home awakens feelings of anomie, thwarted belongingness, and purposelessness? Other studies examined this and found that inconsistencies between cultures had some involvement in the manifestation of these experiences. Cultural shifting begins when individuals enlist in the military and leave their homes to become service members. When enlistees embark upon their service journey, a large aspect of their experience in the beginning involves cultural molding. Enlistees are expected to leave the identity established at home to forge a new identity in the flames of basic training. This rapid cultural conformation alters enlistees' behavioral norms and customs. (Brown as noted in Albertson, 2019 describes this process: military enlistees in training must replace their "civilian individualism with a focus on the collective." Once you adopt this culture, it becomes "all encompassing." (Brown et al, 2015) (p. 9) This adoption is expected to occur rapidly and completed by the end of basic training. The longest basic training period is 12 weeks. So, at most, veterans will have 12 weeks to completely adopt the culture of the military and conform effectively enough to serve as a functioning unit.

During those months of training, which vary by service, enlistees "develop bonds, "that transcends all others" (Tick 2005 p 141) in (Albertson 2019, p 9). Enlistees are together on this journey and are united with a common goal. This consistent bonding and familial structure only increases in intensity as service members progress through their careers. This leads to extreme difficulty when returning home to a societal/cultural structure that is much more individualized and far less connected. In (McAndrew 2019), "student veterans may experience cultural incongruity due to difficulties reconciling their military identity with a campus environment."

This process of soldiers coming home to unforeseen adjustment is described as "reverse culture shock" (Westwood et al. 2002 pp. 1-2) This is where the origin of the symptoms of veteran cultural incongruity is displayed.

While a careful analysis of the factors that cause veteran difficulties in transitioning is important, it is equally imperative that we discuss the significance of their effects on the long-term health of veterans. Veteran transition associated psychosocial barriers discussed in this review have been shown to increase suicidality. Suicide rates for veterans in the United States are nearly double their non-veteran peers. (VA Mental Health Services – Veterans Affairs, 2019) Inversely, those veterans who had a secure sense of belonging were less likely to report depression or suicidal thoughts. (Fisher et al. 2015) In another study, veterans who reported satisfaction with their civilian transition were found to be at less risk for mental health disorder exacerbation and suicide (Short et al. 2019). Given that those veterans who are satisfied with their transitions to civilian life have better health outcomes, it is essential that we ensure appropriate resources are allocated to transitional support programs within the military. We Further exploration should address investigation of proactive veteran support programs following separation from military service to facilitate more effective transitions where belonging, community, and identity/purpose are established.

References

2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. mentalhhealth.va.gov. (2021).
    Retrieved December 2, 2021, from https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-
    sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-
    21.pdf.

Albertson, K. (2019). Relational legacies impacting on veteran transition from military to
    civilian life: Trajectories of acquisition, loss, and reformulation of a sense of belonging.
    Illness, Crisis & Loss, *27*(4), 255–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/1054137319834773

Collins, J. J. (1998). The complex context of American Military Culture: A practitioner's view.
    The Washington Quarterly, *21*(4), 213–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/01636609809550359

Compton, S. E., Houtsma, C., Boffa, J. W., Parkin, S. L., Carroll, M., Constans, J. I., Franklin, C.
    L., & Raines, A. M. (2021). Suicide risk among rural veterans: Application of the
    interpersonal theory of suicide. *Journal of Rural Mental Health*, *45*(4), 281–287.
    https://doi.org/10.1037/rmh0000189

Demers, A. (2011). When veterans return: The role of community in Reintegration. *Journal of
    Loss and Trauma*, *16*(2), 160–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2010.519281

Dosono, B., Rashidi, Y., Akter, T., Semaan, B., & Kapadia, A. (2017). Challenges in
    transitioning from civil to military culture. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer
    Interaction*, *1*(CSCW), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1145/3134676

Fisher, L. B., Overholser, J. C., Ridley, J., Braden, A., & Rosoff, C. (2015). From the outside
    looking in: Sense of belonging, depression, and suicide risk. *Psychiatry*, *78*(1), 29–41.
    https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.2015.1015867

Grace, B., Richardson, N., & Carroll, P. (2016). ". . . if you're not part of the institution you fall by the wayside": Service providers' perspectives on moving young men from disconnection and isolation to connection and belonging. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *12*(2), 252–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988316634088

Kinney, A. R., Schmid, A. A., Henry, K. L., Douglas Coatsworth, J., & Eakman, A. M. (2019). Combat exposure undermines student veterans' achievement of a meaningful life through its association with health-related symptoms: A longitudinal study. *Journal of American College Health*, *69*(2), 142–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1656637

McAndrew, L. M., Slotkin, S., Kimber, J., Maestro, K., Phillips, L. A., Martin, J. L., Credé, M., & Eklund, A. (2019). Cultural incongruity predicts adjustment to college for student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *66*(6), 678–689. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000363

Mitchell, L. L., Frazier, P. A., & Sayer, N. A. (2020). Identity disruption and its association with mental health among veterans with reintegration difficulty. *Developmental Psychology, 56(11),* 2152–2166. *https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001106*

O'Connor, S. S., Carney, E., Jennings, K. W., Johnson, L. L., Gutierrez, P. M., & Jobes, D. A. (2016). Relative impact of risk factors, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness on suicidal ideation in veteran service members. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *73*(10), 1360–1369. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22426

Pietrzak, R. H., Johnson, D. C., Goldstein, M. B., Malley, J. C., & Southwick, S. M. (2009). Psychological resilience and postdeployment social support protect against traumatic stress and depressive symptoms in soldiers returning from Operations Enduring Freedom and iraqi freedom. *Depression and Anxiety*, *26*(8), 745–751. https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20558

Rogers, M. L., Kelliher-Rabon, J., Hagan, C. R., Hirsch, J. K., & Joiner, T. E. (2017). Negative emotions in veterans relate to suicide risk through feelings of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *208*, 15–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.09.038

Rose, S. (2015). *Applying Durkheim's theory of suicide: A study of altruism and anomie among Canadian veterans of Afghanistan* (thesis). Queen's University, Kingston.

Short, N. A., Stentz, L., Raines, A. M., Boffa, J. W., & Schmidt, N. B. (2019). Intervening on thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness to reduce suicidality among veterans: Subanalyses from a randomized controlled trial. *Behavior Therapy*, *50*(5), 886–897. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2019.01.004

Thomas, V. J., & Bowie, S. L. (2016). Sense of community: Is it a protective factor for military veterans? *Journal of Social Service Research*, *42*(3), 313–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2015.1109575

Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP Online. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2021, from https://www.armytap.army.mil/.

VA Mental Health Services - Veterans Affairs. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2021, from https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/Mental_Health_Transparency_Report_11-24-14.pdf.

Lu, M., Xia, H., Ma, J., Lin, Y., Zhang, X., Shen, Y., & Hravnak, M. (2019). Relationship between adherence to secondary prevention and Health Literacy, self-efficacy and disease knowledge among patients with coronary artery disease in China. *European Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, *19*(3), 230–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474515119880059

Veterans. National Council for Mental Wellbeing. (2021, March 15). Retrieved December 2, 2021, from https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/topics/veterans/.

Westwood, M. J., Black, T. G., & McLean, H. B. (2002). A Re-Entry Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers: Promoting Personal and Career Transition. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, *36*(3), 221–232.