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The career transition experiences of military Veterans: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning out of a military career can be difficult and stressful for Veterans. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and needs of career transitioning Veterans. Fifteen United States Veterans from a larger mixed methods research project completed a qualitative semi-structured interview regarding their career transition. Interview questions invited participants to define their transition experience, identify influential psychosocial factors, resources utilized or needed, what it meant to transition out of the military, role changes experienced, and how the participant had adapted to the transition. Emergent thematic analysis revealed 4 themes: 1) it is necessary to actively prepare for the transition; 2) a variety of factors impacted the military career transition process; 3) transitioning out of a military career equated to the loss of structure; and 4) the transition required Veterans to establish themselves outside of the military. Findings from this study identified barriers, desired assistance, and facilitators to the career transition process, which should be considered by those assisting transitioning Veterans and when developing transition-related resources. Continuing to expand on this knowledge will positively impact service members as they exit their military career.

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KEYWORDS

Interviews; career exit; service members; reentry; US Veterans; post-9/11



What is the public significance of this article?—The current study highlights the military career transition experiences of Veterans and their insight on what it means to exit the military. Findings from this study can inform the development of interventions and resources that are aimed to help military personnel transition out of the military and into life as a Veteran.

Introduction

When individuals enter the United States (US) military, they adopt military norms, values, language, and an identity through basic training (Hall, 2011; Olenick, Flowers, & Diaz, 2015). The military provides personnel with structure, a sense of mission and purpose, and close social bonds; yet, it also forces detachment from previously established social support systems, sense of self, and life as a civilian (Ahern et al., 2015). When personnel are transitioning out of their military career and reintegrating into their communities, they are not provided the same

level of assistance as they received in basic training to re-acclimate to civilian life (Koenig, Maguen, Monroy, Mayott, & Seal, 2014; Westwood, Black, & McLean, 2002). As such, Veterans might experience difficulties establishing meaning or purpose, feel disoriented by civilian culture, and feel disconnected from family, friends, and the community (Ahern et al., 2015).

Previous research has demonstrated the difficulties associated with military career transitions and negative impact on US Veterans' well-being (Kline, Ciccone, Falca-Dodson, Black, & Losonczy, 2011; Morin, 2011; Orazem et al., 2017), including employment and financial issues, marital problems, and educational barriers (Ahern et al., 2015; Kline et al., 2011). These challenges associated with a military career transition can also increase the likelihood of Veterans engaging in harmful behaviors, such as suicide (Rogers, Kelliher-Rabon, Hagan, Hirsch, & Joiner, 2017), even years after exiting military service (Ravindran, Morley, Stephens, Stanley, & Reger, 2020). As such, it is important to provide adequate support at the onset of an

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individual's military career transition to address any issues before they become debilitating. In addition, considering US military Veterans frequently report difficulties associated with military career transitions and the reintegration into civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015; Danish & Antonides, 2013; Elnitsky, Blevins, Fisher, & Magruder, 2017; Orazem et al., 2017), it is necessary to better understand challenges and barriers that impact this process.

Theoretical perspectives of career transition

Two theoretical perspectives that can inform consideration of military career transition and facilitate a more in-depth examination of this experience are the 1) 4-S Transition Model and 2) the process model of role exit. The 4-S Transition Model (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) includes four key factors believed to influence an individual's ability to cope during a transition: 1) the situation, 2) the self, 3) the support, and 4) the strategies. The situation encompasses consideration around factors impacting the transition (e.g., the timing, whether an individual has had a similar experience, a role change). The self considers personal and demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender) and psychological resources that might influence how an individual perceives life. The construct of supports includes relationships with family, friends, and communities. Finally, strategies are ways in which an individual is managing or coping with the transition.

Related to the 4-S Transition Model (specifically the factor of 'situation') is the concept of role change, which is integral to how some researchers view and define career transitions (Ashforth, 2000; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Ebaugh (1988) developed a process model consisting of four stages to explain voluntary forms of role exit: 1) first doubts (i.e., questioning commitment to a role), 2) seeking alternatives, 3) the turning point (i.e., deciding whether or not to exit a role), and 4) creating the ex-role (i.e., recognizing the former role as being in the past). The 4-S Transition Model and the process of role exit have been used in previous studies with transitioning military Veterans (Greer, 2017; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Robertson & Brott, 2013).

With the growing number of post-9/11 Veterans anticipated over the next several years (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018) and known issues associated with the transition out of the military, effective strategies and resources are needed to assist this Veteran cohort. To effectively assist career transitioning military Veterans, it is necessary to better understand the transition experiences from the perspectives of these individuals and use

this insight to develop appropriate resources and interventions. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the career transition experience of recent military Veterans through qualitative interviews. Specifically, interviews were developed to assess what are the career transition challenges and needs of recent US military Veterans? The knowledge and insight elicited from these interviews will identify potential components of transition assistance resources and interventions and can positively impact efforts aimed to assist transitioning Veterans.

Methods

Larger study

The current study was part of a larger mixed methods research project that was granted exemption by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board. The overarching purpose of the larger study was to compare the career transition experiences of United States (US) military Veterans ($n = 64$) and former collegiate athletes ($n = 42$). The purpose of this larger study was to identify similarities and unique experiences between military athletes and Veterans to inform the use of sport and exercise psychology within military career transition support. Participants completed self-report measures that collected information regarding perceived satisfaction with life, quality of life, transition barriers and resources, and mental health. After completing these measures, participants were invited to engage in a one-on-one interview to share a more in-depth perspective of their career transition experience.

Sample

Veteran participants for the current study were recruited from those who participated in the larger study and indicated willingness to complete a qualitative interview regarding their career transition. Veterans were recruited for the larger study from Veteran organizations, university Veteran service departments, word-of-mouth, and snowballing. Eligibility criteria from the larger study required that Veterans be 1) 18 years or older and 2) within two years (i.e., less than 24 months) of transitioning out of their military career. These same eligibility requirements applied to qualitative interview participants. Maximum variation sampling took place from those interested with the intent to obtain the broadest range of information and perspectives (Kuzel, 1992). Sampling efforts considered factors such as branch of military, gender, and time since career exit. Participant sampling continued until thematic saturation had been reached (i.e., no new themes or properties of themes emerged with continued sampling) (Patton, 2014).

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 15).

	N
Age¹	
18–24	4
25–34	8
35–44	1
45–54	1
Gender	
Male	11
Female	4
Region	
Northeast	4
Midwest	3
South	7
West	1
Ethnicity²	
White	14
Hispanic or Latino	1
Black or African American	1
Education	
High school graduate, diploma, or equivalent	2
Some college credit	4
Associate degree	4
Bachelor's degree	4
Master's degree	1
Employment	
Employed	8
Out of work and looking	2
Out of work but not currently looking	4
Retired	1
Marital Status	
Single (never married)	5
Married	7
Divorced	3
Branch of Service	
Air Force	3
Army	5
Coast Guard	1
Marine Corps	3
Navy	3
Component	
Active Duty	14
Both Actives and Reserves	1
Military operations²	
Operation Desert Storm	1
Operation Enduring Freedom	8
Operation Iraqi Freedom	5
Operation New Dawn	2
Operation Inherent Resolve	2
Classified	1
Other	2
None	4

¹Missing data (n = 1).

²Participant(s) indicated more than one selection.

Fifteen US Veterans engaged in a qualitative interview. Most participants were between the ages of 25–34 (80%), served for an average of 9.4 years (SD = 8.1), and had been out of their military career for an average of 8.3 months (SD = 6.4). Eleven of these participants had been deployed (73.3%). A complete overview of participant characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Description of the interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to facilitate discussion of the Veterans' transition experiences. Aligned with the 4-S Model (Goodman et al., 2006) and

the process model of role exit (Ebaugh, 1988), the interview questions invited participants to define their transition situation (i.e., circumstances surrounding career exit, comparable experiences), psychosocial factors that were influential during the transition, resources that were utilized or needed, what it meant to transition out of a military career, role changes the participant experienced, and what strategies had been used to adapt to the transition. The interview guide underwent a piloting with peer contacts. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2016), this process facilitated refinement of the interview questions and procedures and ensured interview questions addressed the challenges and barriers of the military career transition experience. Piloting also ensured the time required to complete the interview was reasonable and that participants were able to easily understand the questions. Any issues identified in the piloting process (e.g., difficult to understand or redundant questions) were corrected prior to data collection.

Procedures

Interested participants were contacted via e-mail to schedule an interview time. Verbal consent was requested and provided prior to the interview, and during this process participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any questions they did not want to discuss. The semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded on a password-protected device. Interview durations ranged from 22–60 minutes and averaged 33 minutes. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. These identifiers were stored in a single encrypted electronic document that was password protected. Participants received a \$15 electronic Amazon gift card for their efforts.

Analysis

MAXQDA (Version 11), a qualitative software package, was used for data organization and coding. Analysis began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain awareness and a general understanding of each participant's perception of their transition experience. The next step was to conduct open coding, which involves labeling concepts and defining and developing categories from the data (Patton, 2014). Each line of data in the first several transcripts was labeled to reflect meaning from the text. This formed a preliminary set of codes used to establish broad clusters of meaning. As transcript review continued, this preliminary set of codes was applied to transcript

text to determine whether edits, such as adding, combining, or eliminating codes were needed – a process known as the constant comparative method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glaser, 1965). When new codes were needed to capture data in later interviews, these were applied to previous transcripts to determine relevancy and provide consistency throughout the analysis. Once codes were stable and consistent, segments were grouped to form larger dimensions or perspectives, which resulted in the emergent themes. The themes were developed to broadly capture a shared perspective among all participants.

Member reflections

Once themes were developed, participants were invited to engage in member reflections, which is a “practical opportunity to acknowledge and/or explore with participants the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing” (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Tracy (2010) explains that member reflections are less a test of research findings as they are an opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration. Member reflection feedback was reviewed to determine if adjustments to the themes were necessary.

Eleven of the 15 participants (73.3%) responded to an invitation to complete the member reflection survey. Overall, there was seemingly strong agreement with the developed themes; average agreement for all themes remained above 70%. Based on participants’ high agreement with the themes, no edits were necessary.

Results

Data analysis revealed 4 themes regarding the transition experiences of these military Veterans: 1) the necessity of preparation for the transition process, 2) factors impacting the career transition process, 3) transitioning resulted in the loss of structure, and 4) establishing oneself outside of the military. These themes and the connection to the theoretical constructs of the 4-S Transition Model are summarized in Table 2.

Theme 1: It is necessary to actively prepare for the transition

Veterans asserted the importance of recognizing the inevitability of military exit and that personnel should always be prepared for all possible circumstances related to the next stage. Even though an Army participant indicated a successful transition out of the military, he discussed how regardless of “*whether it’s successful or*

not . . . you’re going to be stressed and there’s going to be some stuff that you’re going to have to deal with.”

Previous experience

Many participants struggled to compare the transition out of the military to anything else. One participant (Marine, male) expressed feeling “*ignorant*” of the process of transitioning out of a career and what it entailed. Participants with comparable experiences or who had held a previous civilian position had a better understanding of how to prepare because they knew what to expect as a civilian employee.

Preparation efforts

Nearly every participant discussed attending their branch’s transition assistance program. While each mentioned how the program helped in some ways, many indicated the program struggled “*to really tailor it down to each person’s needs*” and that the military can “*only do a broad spectrum [approach] and hope that works*” (Navy, male). Several participants discussed how transitioning service members should receive individualized assistance to help make transitioning Veterans aware of resources related to their specific career goals once outside of the military.

A more robust effort of getting people plugged into those prior to transitioning out would be helpful. There is a wealth of resources out there through Veteran service organizations . . . and unless you get plugged into those again you just don’t know what you don’t know. – Marine, male

Participants recognized starting the transition preparation early was important considering there are many resources that remain “*heavily underutilized*” (Marine, male) due to lack of awareness. Some even felt as though the military had not adequately presented all available transition-related resources.

Psychological impact

Participants insisted that preparing to transition out of the military’s structured and regimented environment involved acknowledging the potential for negative impact on one’s psyche.

[The military is] designed to break people down and make them into whatever they need for that time and sometimes it’s not a good . . . it’s not normal. It’s not a normal way of thinking. It’s very animalistic. It can really do some damage to people that are not prepared. . . . I think you should always be prepared to transition because you don’t know what’s going to happen. – Army, male

Table 2. Description of themes.

Theme	Description	Theoretical Constructs	Sample Quotes
<p>1. It is necessary to actively prepare for the transition. <i>Sub-Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous experience • Preparation efforts • Psychological Impact (Stigma) <p>2. A variety of factors impacted the military career transition. <i>Sub-Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support • Position in the military (Leadership) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitioning out is inevitable • Inability to compare experience • Individualized assistance • Benefits of having someone to talk to • Relationships with family, peers • Experience(s) within military career • Structure of military impacts civilian life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation • Strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Something that would be really helpful is once people get transitioned is a support community after the military." – Marine, male • "I think that it would help if the military prepared me better beforehand. You have to ask for all of that assistance, and you have to seek it out. I think the military should do a better job of preparing transition." – Army, male <p>"Being around other Veterans. That is really where I feel the most comfortable. You know because it feels like you're like your tribe, like your people who speak your language. They know your acronyms and you know they kind of have that military mind-set. So that's been helpful." – Army, female</p>
<p>3. Transitioning out of a military career equated to the loss of structure. <i>Sub-Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of choice • Difficulties with loss of structure <p>4. The transition required Veterans to establish themselves outside of the military. <i>Sub-Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding a new purpose • Career satisfaction • Identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure inherent in military • Some viewed as a positive aspect of transition • Struggle to establish structure independently • Importance of job satisfaction and influence • Sense of uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation • Strategies • Support • Self (role change) • Situation • Strategies • Situation • Strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "When you're in, everyone has a common mission, a common goal. But when you get out . . . everyone's in a different stage of life. Everyone's doing different things. It's really getting used to that." – Army, male • "There's no structure. And that's been a struggle to like you know I have to set daily goals for myself or else you know I just kinda of like walk around shaking my head like I don't know what to do." – Army, female • "I'm less stressed, but at the same time, I really miss that influence and that power. So I don't feel like I'm making as big an impact anymore." – Marine, male • "I went from being somewhat in a management position to starting completely over, and now I'm a student so it's different. For sure." – Army, female

He also defined a successful career transition by how well an individual maintains their psychological well-being throughout their service and into transition process.

I think [a successful transition] all hinges on that mental side of [stuff] because physical stuff is going to happen, but the mental side, that's where it all kind of starts to deteriorate and change the person that you are. So, if you can get out as close to the same person as you went in, I feel like that's a successful transition, but unfortunately that's probably the farthest thing from what actually happens the majority of the time. – Army, male

Participants discussed the importance of being able to talk to someone (e.g., a counselor) immediately after getting out of the service and the potential for this to aid the transition. This appears to be missing for Veterans, as several participants mentioned participation in this study was the first time they had talked in-depth about their transition experience.

Stigma. Even though it was deemed important to talk with someone throughout the transition, there was concern that fear of judgment would prevent some from seeking help and led them to think they would manage the transition without any assistance.

We're supposed to be tough like to say like you know okay you've got resiliency issue, or you know [seeking help] just carries that stigma I guess is what people are worried about. It carries a stigma of I'm going to be labeled mentally defective. Nobody wants to be labeled . . . And it's an ego thing, it's a pride thing . . . military don't do well with having any of those questioned. – Navy, male

Theme 2: A variety of factors impacted the military career transition

Participants indicated a variety of factors involved in the successes and challenges of their career transition processes.

Social support

Relationships were an important part of the transition and a positive support system was overwhelmingly the most impactful aspect of successfully navigating the transition process for many Veterans. Some indicated their family provided a level of unconditional support that was beneficial throughout the transition. Other Veterans discussed seeking support and advice from the Veteran community and Veteran peers, which provided a sense of connectedness that aided the transition.

I really didn't think that being a veteran was going to be a big part of my life, but it has been. It's been really helpful to have that sense of community back again that I didn't think I was going to be missing. – Air Force, female

Position in the military

Participants considered their experiences and position within their military career as a positive influence; the demand and responsibility of military roles helped prepare Veterans maintain a sense of dedication and structure, which helped them when they left the service.

Being in the role I was in the military, you had to act on your own. You also had to be proactive, to read things and double check things. I think that really helped when I got out. I was able to adapt quickly to getting back out and getting used to it, which I do think in a lot of ways the military did prepare me for. – Navy, male

Leadership. A few participants discussed how supportive leadership allowed service members to prepare for post-military life. Some Veterans felt their leaders and unit had been considerate and allowed time for transition preparations; however, most participants discussed a lack of support from leaders that hindered preparing for the transition process. A Marine participant (male) indicated, “*some leadership have adverse reactions to [the transition out] like oh you know you're a quitter kind of thing.*” Another Marine veteran shared this same negative perspective of some military leaders.

You know if someone is trying to better themselves or trying to explore their options, as a leader you shouldn't make them think twice about that or make them feel bad because if you're being a true leader, you want the best for your subordinates. No matter what. Even if it's at possible cost to you. – Marine, male

One participant viewed transition as “*[being] by yourself because they kind of feel like you are abandoning them*” (Army, male). Other participants viewed their leaders as not having their best interest in mind and even prevented personnel from properly planning for the transition (e.g., not allowing time to review potential jobs). However, a Marine participant (male) also discussed how leadership support was not consistent across units:

Some commands do a better job of saying, ‘hey, okay we want you to focus on your transition’ and others, you know still have a mission to complete and they need resources. . . . there are some units where the leadership just doesn't let them go and then there are others where they go above and beyond. So, it varies a lot.

Theme 3: Transitioning out of a military career equated to the loss of structure

Structure was viewed as an inherent part of a military career. Participants indicated being regimented in nearly every aspect while they are serving, from what to wear and where to be.

Freedom of choice

For many, the loss of structure meant being able to freely make decisions. Those exiting the military became exposed to the freedom of choice and “*personal expression*” (Marine, male), which is not a concept prevalent within the military. Separating from a structured career also meant being afforded the opportunity to pursue personal interests because they were no longer part of a strictly regimented group.

It’s definitely different. I’ve got responsibilities to myself now instead of my boss. The pressure of me to do well in school is my own really as opposed to pressure from my boss to get a report done or get a test done or something like that. I know I’m a lot more relaxed now. A lot calmer now. – Air Force, male

A Marine Veteran discussed how transitioning out of the military meant freedom from the responsibility of his career.

It was a very long time of . . . endless rigidity and structure. [Now] I don’t have to answer to anybody. Nobody has to answer to me . . . and that’s nice. It’s nice being free of that dual responsibility of both being beholden and having people beholden to you. – Marine, male

For an Air Force Veteran, the freedom from her military career allowed her to relax and not worry as much when she might make errors in her civilian job.

It’s really just that I would fail. No one’s going to die. I’d still have a job. I don’t get court-martialed. There was just so low-risk feeling. I had my own time and I could leave when I wanted to. I thought it was just so relaxing. My blood pressure got better. It was all good things. – Air Force, female

Difficulties with loss of structure

Even though some viewed freedom from structure as a positive aspect of exiting a career and saw it as an opportunity to explore new areas of interest, others found it difficult. A Marine participant discussed how he had become “*institutionalized*” and stated, “*there have been times when it’s pretty nerve-wracking*” to not have that structure anymore. Free time also allowed the mind to wander, which forced some participants to relive events and feelings they had not previously addressed.

I also got out 100% disabled, service-connected disability. Multiple physical issues. And mental issues. And back when I was in the military it was you know just shut up, drink water, and continue the mission. It’s about the mission. You just suck it up. Now I have free time on my hands and I actually have to face these issues that I have. – Army, male

An Army participant (female) expressed a sense of loss regarding the “safety net” of the military.

You know it’s very safe. I mean it’s sort of ironic to think of the military as being safe, right, because your whole mission is to protect and defend the country and put your life on the line if necessary. But within that group of people on your life and you feel very safe and protected like you know who you can count on.

Physical activity. Some participants expressed the importance of maintaining and balancing mental and physical happiness. Physical activity is an inherent aspect of a military career and some participants found it difficult to maintain an active regimen once it was no longer structured for them. Some participants indicated struggling to establish a physical activity routine considering it was often viewed as a forced activity.

One of the biggest challenges [of the career transition] is the physical transitioning and keeping your body, mind, and soul engaged in moving forward. – Navy, male

Financial concerns. Many were concerned with the loss of their structured pay schedule and guaranteed income and considered finances to be the greatest burden of the transition process. Participants revealed they were not expecting certain financial challenges associated with the transition process and felt ill-prepared for the monetary burden of these events. One participant recognized financial stability is why most people choose to stay in the military.

A lot of people have a hard time making that decision of getting out because they know they have a steady income. And they know job security is pretty darn good in the military. – Navy, male

This was true for an Army participant who considered staying in due to the lack of steady income, security, and the uncertainty of how she was going to help support her family.

Loss of likeminded support system. Participants expressed struggling with the loss of the support system within the military. Participants described how being part of a structured organization created a “*guaranteed support system*” (Marine, male) and a “*structured family*” (Air Force, female) that was difficult to replicate in the

civilian world. As such, participants recognized leaving their career meant it was necessary to form new friendships but found it difficult to connect with people who did not understand the influence of a highly structured career and what they had been through.

And I think there's a frustration in how the civilian world doesn't quite understand the military, and the military the civilian world. And that's real frustrating when you're getting out. . . . You kind of felt different from everybody else, I guess. – Marine, male

Participants also discussed the role this played in their professional lives; they are entering a workforce with employers and peers who may not fully understand what they had been through or how their skills could be applicable outside of the military.

Theme 4: The transition required Veterans to establish themselves outside of the military

Participants who aligned their definition of self with their military career indicated a continuing struggle to redefine who they are outside of the military.

Finding a new purpose

For many, part of navigating the transition was establishing a new sense of purpose and being satisfied outside of a military career.

I mean it's almost purely psychological getting out to be honest with you. If you're not ready you have to, you have to find a purpose. You have to find happiness. Having a sense of purpose. In the military . . . soldiers always had to have purpose that's what the overarching job was . . . honestly yeah it's going to college, having a sense of purpose. Doing good for my children's sake. That's really my driving factor. – Army, male

Some participants explained how happiness coincided with finding a new purpose during the transition process. An Army participant (male) stated:

You have to find purpose. You have to find happiness. Happiness in yourself you know. Honestly, I just say like whatever as long as you're happy and you're positive and you're optimistic and I mean you're not hurting anybody or yourself, like that to me is a successful transition. In the most basic sense I mean it seems like a real simple answer, right? Like it's just being happy. Maintain that sense of purpose . . . be happy.

Career satisfaction. Participants discussed difficulty finding a comparable level of career satisfaction and sense of importance outside of the military.

It's hard if you've been in the field or you've had a job where you can see results from and you are really good

at it. And you know your impact that you're making is worthwhile. Even if the rest of the world doesn't see it. You know your job matters. But I feel like that same level of job satisfaction outside of the military. . . . but I do miss that job satisfaction and stuff like that. – Navy, male

Participants also felt as though transitioning out of the military meant “*being a nobody*” and being “*at the bottom of the pole again*” (Air Force, female).

So I think that when I joined it was an entirely different lifestyle you know it wasn't even a job, it changes I guess who you are in your life. And you know I got to that point where I was I guess somebody of importance and then coming out I'm just you know another face behind the desk in school. – Army, male

An Army participant discussed the realization that someone was going to be replacing her immediately and this motivated her to remain proactive in her transition process.

I learned in the last year before I retired was I'm not that important. So, we can keep telling yourselves right up to the last day that you know they just couldn't live without me, they just couldn't without me, but it's not true. You know the next day somebody's butt was in my seat and the mission goes on. You know, someone's coming right behind me to fill the slot that I'm leaving and so really I owe it to myself to take my time and do those things that I need to do to be successful in the future because you know nobody is going to do it for me.

Participants who had become accustomed to their role in the military expressed a sense of uncertainty (i.e., giving up something familiar and meaningful) associated with the transition.

. . . just the general sense of identity for me. I mean I went into the Army right out of college and spent 30 years you know doing a job that I really like and so now what? You know, what's my identity? I'm no longer an Army officer, so what kind of identity do I have? So those are some of the things that I've kind of struggled with. – Army, female

Identity

Establishing a new identity outside of the military was a difficulty shared by many participants. An Army participant discussed how the military gave him an identity and there was never a need to self-identify. As such, he found it challenging to establish who he was without the military. Another participant (Air Force) echoed agreement on how difficult it was for her to now identify who she was outside of the military.

It was a lot simpler when I was in the military. It's part of your identity. Now it's a longer explanation and

people question a little bit more. It's more complicated and a weirder explanation now.

Discussion

To better serve Veterans as they transition out of the military and reintegrate into civilian life, it is important to first understand their challenges and needs during this process. This study utilized qualitative methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of what Veterans experienced as they exited the military. Qualitative approaches are lacking in this area, as much previous work focused on the recent cohort of Veterans (i.e., post-9/11 Veterans) has been correlational or comparative in nature (Wands, 2013). Qualitative methods utilized in the present study resulted in in-depth narratives regarding participants' transition experience' and provided a detailed understanding of the difficulties associated with the process. The four themes identified are further discussed below in relation to the theoretical foundations of this study: the 4-S Transition Model and the process of role change.

Situation

Circumstance

It is important to consider that most Veterans in this study indicated voluntarily exiting their military service (i.e., they were in control of initiating the transition). Previous research has found that when individuals perceive to be in control of their career transition, they are more likely to have a positive and adaptive career transition experience (Goodman et al., 2006; Robertson & Brott, 2013, 2014; Schlossberg, 1981). In contrast, military Veterans who do not voluntarily exit the service (i.e., non-routine service discharge) can present health issues that negatively impact their civilian reintegration (Brignone et al., 2017; Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019b). To mitigate risk of negative reintegration experiences, it is important to understand the context of Veterans' transition out of the military (Brignone et al., 2017). It would also be beneficial to help Veterans identify factors and aspects of the transition they can control and how to maximize these to aid the transition process (Robertson & Brott, 2014).

Previous experience

The 4-S Transition Model (Goodman et al., 2006) identifies previous experience with a transition of a similar nature as an aspect of the individual that can positively impact the transition experience. Most participants in

the current study failed to identify a previous experience comparable to the transition out of a military career and repeatedly emphasized the importance of preparation; participants seemingly recognized their own shortcomings with proper preparation and recommended future transitioning Veterans be more aware. The emphasis on planning and its association with a successful career transition was also strongly suggested by Veterans in a previous study (Robertson & Brott, 2013); however, proper planning and preparation can be hindered by the stigma associated with help seeking behaviors that participants in the current study and prior research have discussed (Greer, 2017; Hoge et al., 2004; Morgan et al., 2020; Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, & Southwick, 2009). This stigma is likely a deeply engrained aspect of military culture that needs to be addressed when planning for military career transition assistance.

Financial stress

Financial stress among Veterans is common (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Robertson, 2013; Robertson & Brott, 2013) and was an apparent concern among participants in the current study: many Veterans identified finances as their main concern associated with leaving a military career. Financial concerns can make a career transition more difficult and uncertain and can amplify the anxiety and anger that individuals may experience during this time period (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Eberwein, Krieschok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2004; Goodman et al., 2006). As such, financial planning and connecting with appropriate financial aid (e.g., housing; scholarships; GI Benefits) should be an important aspect of planning for transitioning out of a military career.

Self-identity

Participants whose identities were aligned with military service indicated difficulty defining themselves outside of the military, as well as finding new purpose or meaning. These challenges are consistent with previous studies that have found Veterans struggled to find the same sense of purpose and worth within their civilian roles as they had in their military ones (Ahern et al., 2015; Orazem et al., 2017; Robertson & Brott, 2013). If a service member develops an identity solely dependent upon military status and performance, as many in this study indicated, it can become difficult to establish purpose and worth outside of the military. Throughout their career in the military, personnel should be encouraged to engage in activities that can broaden their interests and skillsets, which will benefit them as they transition into a new career. After exiting the service, Veterans should be encouraged to evaluate

the skills they acquired in the military and explore how those skillsets would be valuable in a civilian role (Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

Role change

Related to identity struggles was the difficulty that Veterans experienced with adjusting to and finding meaning in a civilian role. The lack of satisfaction in a civilian role is a perspective shared with Veterans from previous studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Orazem et al., 2017; Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019a). Perceived loss of the military self and the roles, values, and sense of purpose associated with this lifestyle may cause Veterans to experience grief-like symptoms (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). As such, reintegration services and interventions should help Veterans prepare for changes in roles and establishing a sense of self that is independent from their military service.

Supports

Support system

One of the more significant factors participants discussed as impacting the career transition process was the Veteran's support system. Social support is often regarded as an essential element to a successful transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981) and, similar to participants in previous studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Baruch & Quick, 2007; Elnitsky et al., 2017), Veterans in the current study indicated the importance of their family and friends. As previously suggested (Danish & Antonides, 2013), involving family and/or friends in transition-related counseling or support may help Veterans' reintegration and ability to reconnect with their civilian support system. However, it is important to consider personal preferences to the involvement of family, as some Veterans may not want to disclose certain information to their families (Shue, Brosmer, & Matthias, 2020)

Peer support

Veterans in the current study also struggled with a support system that no longer included others with shared experiences. Similar to findings in other studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Drebing et al., 2018), Veterans expressed that family and friends who had not served could not truly understand what they had been through, despite their best efforts to do so. As suggested and considered by previous research (Greden et al., 2010; Hourani et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007), helping Veterans connect with peers (i.e., remain connected to former peers; peer support groups in the community) could benefit the transition process. The use of peers to assist transitioning Veterans is supported by previous

research which suggests they can generate more immediate buy-in and trust among Veterans (Greden et al., 2010; Taylor, Hoggatt, & Kligler, 2019; Thomas & Taylor, 2015), increasing Veterans' willingness to access health care services and programs that may benefit their career transition experience.

Strategies

Establishing structure

While several strategies to adapting to the military career transition were discussed in previous sections (i.e., planning; finding purpose; relying on one's support system), one strategy that Veterans frequently discussed was working to establish structure within their civilian lives. For some, the loss of structure was viewed positively: Veterans discussed experiencing a sense of "freedom" now that they were separated from the military, which was similar to Veterans in a previous study who indicated that being a civilian afforded them the opportunity to make their own decisions (Robertson, 2013). No longer having the structure that the military enforced allowed participants in the current study to pursue personal interests and establish structure in more individualized ways (e.g., attending school; physical activity preferences). However, similar to Veterans in an earlier study (Ahern et al., 2015), some in the current study found it difficult to lose the structured environment of the military and were unclear as to how to do this as a civilian. As such, it is important to assess the personal preferences of Veterans to determine whether a goal of the transition process should center on how the individual can sustain a structured lifestyle outside of the military.

Limitations

To be eligible for participation in this study, Veterans had to be within 24 months of their career exit. This was done for memory recall purposes (Tourangeau, 1999). However, individuals outside this range may express different perspectives due to experiences encountered at certain time points of the transition process. Expanding the timeframe in which Veterans participate in the study would provide a better understanding of what occurs at each stage of their transition process. Additionally, retrospective self-report data, even within a 24-month timespan, are still at risk of faulty recall. Collecting data observationally and more closely to the time when events occur in the transition process assures fewer issues with memory recall and bias. The generalizability of these results may also be limited considering the Veterans in this study had indicated a willingness to

participate in an interview in addition to completing the survey and, as such, may be characteristically different than Veterans who were uninterested or unwilling to participate in a qualitative interview.

The use of phone interviews was another limitation of this study. Phone interviews can interfere with rapport development and the ability of the researcher to probe responses. Considering interviews were not face-to-face, the researcher was unable to detect and react to a participant's non-verbal behaviors. However, phone interviews allowed for recruitment across a wide geographical area. Future studies should consider face-to-face or virtual interviews to allow for rapport development, detection of nonverbal cues, and use of silence to probe.

Conclusions and future research

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the career transition experience of recent military Veterans. The Veterans in this study provided insightful perspectives of their individual career transition experiences. Even though a variety of difficulties and challenges were presented, all Veterans still indicated they perceived their transition out of the military as successfully completed. Future efforts to design appealing and effective resources for career transitioning Veterans may consider incorporating the findings from this study. In addition, the barriers and facilitators to the military career transition process that were discussed should be considered to increase Veterans' ability to successfully engage with career transition assistance. Future research should also continue to evaluate how the 4-S Transition Model and the process of role exit inform each other to enhance our understanding of Veterans' military career transition.

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