

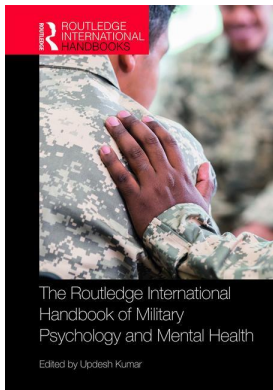
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TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Harprit Kaur and Swati

Transition is part and parcel of military life; it might be in terms of a new duty station, an overseas deployment, a field posting or a change of command. An important transition which veterans have to go through is returning to civilian life. Transitions that take place within the military setup are managed by providing assistance through various programmes or courses; however, veterans remain emotionally underprepared to manage transition to civilian employment (Baruch & Quick, 2007).

Transition from military to civilian life is a challenging task and proves quite difficult for some veterans (Rogers, 1944; Blackburn, 2016). In a survey conducted on Canadian armed forces veterans pertaining to life after service, 27% of veterans reported it to be difficult to very difficult, 17% rated it as neither easy nor difficult and 56% said it was easy (Thompson, Vantil, Zamorski, Garber, Dursun, Fikeretoglu & Pedlar, 2016). There has been an agreement on the negative effect of transition on the well-being of retired military personnel and their families (Rogers, 1944; Adler, Zamorski & Britt, 2011; Demers, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). Even after years of research, the process of military to civilian transition is not clear; researchers have only been able to unpack issues pertaining to it (Cooper, Caddick, Godier, Cooper & Fossey, 2018). McNeil, Lecca and Wright (1983) asserted that using the term **'retirement' is not appropriate for veterans**; it would be more accurate to describe it as a change of career. Military personnel who retire after 20 years of service still have 15 career-oriented years with them.

While going through this midlife career transition from military to civilian life, veterans face various adjustment issues along with anxieties. A core aspect of these anxieties is a veteran's **inseparable identification with the military**. Researchers have advocated that with passage of time, the military is becoming more civilianized because of convergence with non-military jobs (Biderman & Sharp 1968; Biderman 1964; Moskos, 1977), thus making it easy for veterans to adjust; however, the military is an institution. Moskos (1988) reported that members of an institution consider or perceive themselves as different from the rest of society. Biderman and Sharp (1968) referred to the military as a totally isolated institution where work, sleeping, play, worship, eating, nursing, burial and education all take place within the institution along with colleagues. This arrangement of interactions actually leads to **isolation from the rest of society**. Standford (1971) has called midlife military to civilian transition as re-socialization into civilian society by concluding one career and initiating another. The military has always been viewed as the epitome of security (Kilpatrick & Kilpatrick, 1979), providing a secure social

environment. Leaving **the secure environment of the military** where one has been socialized, getting into civilian life and going through re-socialization is stressful and at times labelled a crisis (Giffen & McNeil, 1967; Ogburn, Bellino, Williams and Gordon, 1969; Doherty, 1983).

Losing a job after investing years of your life can be traumatic, and when such a loss occurs at a particular age (mid-life), it can be catastrophic (Parnes & King, 1977). McDonald (1977) compared military retirement to the cutting of an umbilical cord. To explain the transition, a corollary from the process of change can be brought in where first an individual encounters the inevitable change, breaks up with the old life and finally commits to a new life.

Human adaptation to transition

Schlossberg (1981) gave a transition theory to explain the transition process in adults. It provides an insight into the help required during transition. Schlossberg's theory assimilated the transition process into 4Ss—self, situation, support and strategies. In the **self** part, each individual has their own set of psychological resources that determine how they will react to transition and the adjustment it calls for. Along with this, an individual's perception also affects their assets. The second aspect, **situation**, pertains to what led to transition, its trigger, the time of transition and so on. The third aspect is **support** which refers to what actually helps one deal with the stress related to transition and can include friends, family, colleagues and so on. Fourth is **strategies**; Schlossberg talks about a response that leads to modification of the situation, by and large here Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping modes were used, i.e., taking direct action, inhibiting action and seeking more information regarding the problem.

Adults keep experiencing transition in their lives; reaction to this transition depends upon the kind of transition, an individual's perception regarding it, the background of transition and its effect on their lives. There is no end to the transition, rather, **transition is a process** with different phases, i.e., going in, assimilating, moving through and coming out (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012). The authors of the model have also emphasized that preparedness for the difficulties helps the individual to go through the process smoothly. Moving out of transition refers to the stage where the individual is done with one transition and is in search of something new.

Facing the inevitable change

Psychological adjustment

A service personnel's return to civilian life does not involve any basic training or a transition period. One day you are a part of the organization, and the next day you are no longer associated with it. Some veterans may encounter problems during their pre-retirement time, while others experience difficulties after retirement (Drier, 1995). Bellino (1970) explained retirement as a process and not merely a status; it is "a transition from one period of life to another, leading to new interpersonal and social adjustment" (pp 580–583). Various authors have described problems, anxieties, needs and stressors of veterans during the transition and adjustment process. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick (1979) described retirement from military as a psychological loss that leads to grief and mourning. According to them, reaction to this loss includes four stages, initially **protest**, then a feeling of **despair**, after which an individual **detaches** himself and finally **recovers**. All this needs to be dealt with like '**grief work**' so as to place it in a proper perspective. McNeil and Giffen (1967) provided the term '**retirement syndrome**' describing pre-retirement symptoms among military personnel. They found these symptoms centred on the gastrointestinal tract and cardiovascular system. Not all military officers retire at the same age or rank. Rank at the

time of retirement, reason for retirement and age at the time of retirement all play a significant role in post-retirement adjustment. Berkey (1972) found that those military officers who retire after failing to make it to the next rank consider themselves inadequate; whatever success they achieved previously does not lend sufficient self-pride to ameliorate the feeling of degradation of missing out on promotion. These results were found to be true for all rank officers who missed out on their promotion goal. Failing to achieve a rank in the military is one aspect; there are other individuals who take retirement as a second opportunity to achieve something big in life. Garber (1971) also noted that a civilian career post-retirement is another opportunity for advancement. Adjustment and satisfaction post-retirement are also determined if the retirement is **voluntary or involuntary** in nature. Knippa (1979) found that voluntarily retired military officer were significantly higher on life satisfaction than involuntarily retired military officer. A similar kind of study was conducted with a civilian population, and the results repeated. In addition, researchers found that early retirees, be it voluntary or involuntary, were less satisfied than on-time retirees (Price, Walker & Kimmel, 1979).

Stanford (1968) and McClure (1993) explained that voluntary retirement is not always voluntary; at times it is due to promotion pass over, not meeting fitness standards or undesirable transfers. Another way of looking at voluntary retirement as involuntary is that only a few higher ranks work until superannuation; others have to retire early. So the **circumstances** under which the individual retires make a lot of difference to his psychological well-being.

Loss of identity

Identity lies on a continuum of personal to social, where personal identity refers to how one describes oneself as a unique individual. It is our attitude, behaviour and interest that make us different from other individuals (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). Social identity is part of an individual's self-concept. It is an insight to an individual that he belongs to a particular group (Stets & Burke 2000). It assists an individual to keep his interest, behaviour and attitude in sync with the other members of the group he belongs to and demarcate himself from members of the outer groups (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). Identities are dynamic and keep evolving as per personal, cultural and social factors (Lawler, 2008). Erikson's (1959) model helps us to understand the process of identity formation; however, Para (2008) explained that in today's sociocultural environment, the identity formation process starts in late adolescence or early adulthood as people delay committing themselves to a specific set of values and beliefs. Late adolescence and early adulthood is a time when individuals join the military and form a **military identity** which is different from civilian identity.

Major transitions of life take place when an individual shifts from one social situation to another; this shift requires a shift in identity as well, for instance, from single to married, student to employed, adolescent to adult, military personnel to veteran. A transition is called successful when both old and new identities negotiate and integrate (Arel & Castro, 2018). The identity which has worked in one situation might not be suitable for a new situation, leading to discord in social situations. An individual can function well only after reshaping his identity (Kidwell & Dunham, 1995).

Military-to-civilian transition is one of the major life transitions. Identity issues during this phase have been considered of paramount importance to deal with adjustment challenges (Coll & Weiss, 2013; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Cooper et al., 2018; Orazem et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). This issue is most pertinent for those who are **forced to leave the military** because of health problems, joined the service early before even forming a civilian identity or are undergoing midlife aging crisis (Smith & True, 2014; Cooper et al., 2018).

Experts emphasize that the feelings a veteran experiences while undergoing the transition to civilian life, such as **fatigue, anger, sadness or irritability**, are due to identity challenges

and are quite normal (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). As the area of military civilian transition is being explored these days, there has been increasing consensus that identity-related disorders need not be pathologized, as distress is common in major life transitions (Cooper et al., 2018).

There are fewer **females in the military**; hence, there are limited studies on women veterans. Demers (2013) reported that women who joined the service gained confidence and became more capable and strong; however, when they went back to civilian life, their transition was quite challenging as their military identity was a mis-fit to the traditional civilian female identity and, as a result, they felt **lonely**.

McNeil and Giffen (1965) found that not only veterans but their wives and children also experienced **loss of prestige** after retirement. Bellino (1970) also confirmed that **families of military personnel** hold a social position per the military rank, and retirement makes them move into a different culture altogether. Frank (1993) reported that a few military wives experience grief over the loss of social status post-retirement.

A study conducted in 2017 by Prahars, Tear and Cruwys found that social identities work as psychological resources that help in the maintenance of well-being. This evidence came from a longitudinal study in which participants who experienced significant **life stressors** were protected from depression and reported significantly greater life satisfaction if they retained their membership of a group. It clearly indicates that even if an individual lacks social support before a stressful life event, if he becomes part of the group, this can prevent degradation of their psychological health.

Stereotypes

Fiske and Taylor (2013) explained stereotyping as '**casual bias**' common in day-to-day life. Every group has certain characteristics which ultimately evolve as group stereotypes. These stereotypes work as an **in-group/out-group boundary**. Stereotypes have both positive and negative implications; they can either facilitate or hinder transition to civilian life. A positive stereotype associated with veterans is that they are viewed as protectors. A negative stereotype associated with veterans, especially combat veterans, is that they suffer from PTSD. Stereotypes can cause prejudice and stigma (Allport, 1954). Stereotypes also lead to perceived discrimination and stigma, causing conflict between groups. Stereotyping lowers the physical and mental well-being of the person who faces the stereotype (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). For instance, veterans feel distressed if they feel they are unable to live up to the **heroic stereotype** (Smith & True, 2014).

Soldiers generally perceive civilians as a homogenous group, while 90% of the UK civilian public perceived veterans to be physically or mentally damaged (Ashcroft, 2016). Veterans who suffer from chronic physical or mental health issues are **stereotyped as disabled** (Gerber, 2003). Minority groups with common minority identities can utilize various techniques to tackle stereotype threats (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). One example of this is veterans with similar health impairment such as blindness or amputation; they bond together to enhance the veterans' benefits (Gerber, 2003). Dealing with stereotype threat is important, as veterans who develop a **stigmatized identity** face difficulty in their transition (Amiot, Sablonniere, Terry & Smith, 2007).

Breaking with old life

Revisiting past life

Military life involves many turning points and transitions. The experience of remembering these turning points and transitions is generally intense and vivid (Enz & Talarico, 2016). Remembering them at times leads to heightened emotional response, resulting in **watershed moments**.

More active members and veterans in service at times make efforts to **memorialize** their time spent at a particular posting by carrying some insignia of that place; their home itself is full of such insignias, revealing the story of their life or the kind of life they led during their service tenure. For those individuals who face grief after leaving the service up to a subclinical level, memorialization of this kind promotes their psychological health, as it helps in positive remembrance (Watkins, Cole & Weidemann, 2010).

Revisiting memories at time when a person feels alone in the new setup might help in providing relief; however, if an individual remains in constant mode of reminiscence, it can lead to adjustment problems. **Reminiscence bump**, which has been defined as innumerable memories in middle-age adulthood and older age from one's adolescence and early adulthood (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014; Rubin, Wetzler & Nebes, 1986), is a distinctive and defining feature of autobiographical memory (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014; Eysenck & Keane, 2010; Goldstein, 2015; Rathbone, Moulin, Conway & Holmes, 2012). A U.S. military veteran-associated suicide prevention program in the year 2016 revealed that in 2014, 65% of veterans who committed suicide were 50 years old or older, when reminiscence bump is the most common occurrence (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Remembering one's past might pave way to a **purpose of life**. Research states that it can facilitate individual development. Erikson (1959) has appreciated the importance of reviewing one's past life, especially in his last stage of development where an individual either gains integrity or is lost in despair. When one reviews his past, he might end up feeling that some crucial part of the self went un-lived. The purpose is to integrate these conflicts into one's life and gain wisdom through the review.

Butler (1963) was one of the first to talk about the adaptive role in reviewing personal past. He coined the term 'life review' and, according to him, it is a process to consciously recall one's past so as to integrate it into one's life story. People of all ages use recall from the past as a source of guidance and work on unresolved conflicts to have a meaningful picture of life (Butler, 1963). It is up to an individual how he utilizes his memories while going through the transition phase.

Service-related nostalgia

Nostalgia is a **sentimental yearning** for the past. Negative emotions can trigger nostalgia (Wildschut, Sedikides, Amdt & Routledge, 2006). Transition from military to civilian life is a major life event which might at times lead to fear, dissatisfaction, insecurity and worry that causes nostalgia (Davis, 1979). The positive aspects of nostalgia are a heightened feeling of social connectedness (Wildschut et al., 2006; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt & Cordaro, 2010; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut & Gao, 2008), escalation of defences against existential threat (Juhl, Routledge, Amdt, Sedikides & Wildschut, 2010; Routledge, Amdt, Wildschut, Sedikides, Hart, Juhl & Schlotz, 2011) and heightened positive self-regard (Wildschut et al., 2006). Veterans might utilize these nostalgic memories of their service time as a means of thwarting the civilian transition struggle.

Civilian military divide

Military life is quite challenging and one who chooses this life has to undergo rigorous training. The entry-level training is actually meant to do away with traces of civilian life and imbibe in the trainee **military values**, transforming them from civilians to soldiers. During their tenure in the military, soldiers face innumerable instances which could prove morally injurious, such as taking someone's life (Maugen et al., 2010, 2011), failing to prevent the death of a comrade (Grunnert, Smucker, Weis

& Rusch, 2003) and so on. Though a great amount of emphasis is laid on taking a soldier out of any major traumatic event, the moral and ethical implications still receive minimal attention (Litz et al., 2009). Lack of attention to moral aspects leads to guilt and shame. This guilt and shame is exaggerated once veterans enter civilian life due to lack of understanding and no shared experience. There is no substantial evidence on the disparity between military and civilian life; however, there are various articles on the web and numerous books focussing on the adjustment to civilian life.

One of the transition stressors while entering civilian life is the **socialized masculinity** of the military. While serving in the military, an individual undergoes rigorous training and spends their tenure in the fields sculpting their personality as per war norms, which are masculine in nature. Stoicism refers to a stereotypical masculine role (Cheng, 1999; Jansz, 2000; Murray et al., 2008), and today's soldier's mindset is similar to many of its facets. Veterans undergoing transition from a military environment that promotes stoicism to a civilian life which does not encourage such an attitude can cause **internal dissonance** (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Women officers undergo almost the same kind of socialization. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2016 found that from 2001 to 2014, **women veterans' suicide** rate doubled in comparison to their civilian counterparts. The military environment's emphasis on masculinity and a striking divergence from that in civilian life could be the potential source of transition stress for women veterans (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

There are those veterans who join **new work, post-retirement**. It is important to understand that career progression in the military is altogether different than in civilian employment. Career progression in the military is based on annual evaluation with the chain of command and little involvement from service personnel. In the military, **competition** is not obvious; rather it is to attain personal pride by accomplishing goals rather than seeking a personal advantage over colleagues. Trust and faith in colleagues, supporting each other and going beyond the call of duty to accomplish tasks is the military way of life. Civilian life is quite different, where job security might depend upon achieving individual targets and career advancement is attained by competing with colleagues on daily basis. All this can be a surprise for veterans upon entering into the civilian world of work.

Building and committing to new life

Planning

Improved and increased pre-retirement assistance has been recommended from time to time. Even if there is no assistance from the military regarding pre-retirement planning, a soldier is well aware of the time when he becomes eligible to retire, so he has an opportunity to plan for subsequent civilian employment (Wolpert, 2000). McNeil (1976) reported that an efficient pre-retirement planning begins from the day an individual joins the military. Though the individual is certain that he has to move into civilian society post-retirement and the exact timing of retirement eligibility is known, only a few individuals end up planning ahead.

Sharp and Biderman (1966, 1967) explained that the cause of low rates of pre-retirement planning is **high optimism that transition to civilian life is easy**. McClure (1993) gave two factors for the low rate of pre-retirement planning. First, a competing need to keep one's self-image positive by giving first priority to work over plans for future. Second is rationalization, by focussing on familiar tasks and providing a justifiable reason for postponing planning for the unfamiliar scenario.

Henry (1978) reported that preparing and planning for retirement result in a favourable factor during midlife military-to-civilian transition. McClure (1993) found that those military officers

who planned well are those who had military experience which could be utilized once they moved to civilian employment. When a military officer is unsure how to transfer his experience into a civilian job, planning ahead becomes difficult. Standford (1971) explored the factors that facilitate reintegration into civilian life. His study consisted of those army personnel who were about to retire and were undergoing an anticipation phase as they were in middle of pre-retirement planning and adjustment. He found that high-ranking personnel viewed retirement favourably. Fuller and Redfering (1976) studied various factors such as number of years in service, rank and pre-retirement planning effect on post-retirement adjustment. Pre-retirement planning came out to be the only significant factor affecting post-retirement adjustment.

Re-employment

All military retirees do not have the **career maturity required for a smooth transition** into civilian life with a new job. Biderman (1969) found that generally military men plan to replicate their service life work style into civilian setup rather than opting for something completely new. Positions occupied by veterans in civilian jobs involved **less command** of men and materials than military jobs (Biderman, 1973). A majority of veterans are able to find satisfactory jobs in a civilian setup though at lower pay scale and skill utilization (Biderman & Sharp, 1968).

Reemployment provides a boost to a **veteran's healthy adjustment**. Attempts made before retiring to prepare veterans for employment in civilian environments would make their transition a little smoother. Henry (1978) found that employment opportunities for veterans can be improved before retirement by focussing on their education, training programmes for civilian occupation, actually finding a civilian job even before leaving military and finally by developing skills that can be utilized in a civilian job.

Key to a successful reemployment of veterans is **transferability of skill to the new job**. Garber (1971) also reported transferable skills of veterans into the civilian labour market are their biggest asset. Standford (1971) found that transition of veterans is smoother into new civilian jobs if they continue to work in a field similar to their military job. Garrett (1961), too, reported a similar finding where he found a significant relationship between military skill transfer and a similar civilian job. Even in the financial aspect, veterans who have been found to work on a similar kind of civilian work as their military field are better off than ones who are engaged in different work (Cooper, 1981).

Transferability of skill helps in smoother transition to the new job and lack of transferability of skills leads to frustration (Biderman, 1969; Biderman & Sharp, 1968; Ostertag, 1976). More than frustration: it can also be a cause of stress and strain. In one study on Navy personnel, it was found that there are two chief strains in the workplace related to low transferability, i.e., low self-esteem and job dissatisfaction (French, Doehrman, Davis-Sacks & Vinokur, 1983). In fact, low transferability of skills is an eminent reason that leads to low satisfaction among veterans (Biderman & Sharp, 1968).

There has been a positive correlation between rank in military and level of education (Dunning & Biderman, 1973). A better education leads to good chances of serving in a civilian job (Biderman, 1969; Lenz, 1967; Collings, 1969). Collings (1969) found that it is only education that affects veteran's salary, particularly starting salary.

To have a **meaningful role in society** is not only essential for a person's identity but also helps in gratification of his need to have sense of purpose. Work or any other meaningful activity is important to form identity and gives feedback regarding an individual's skill, capacity and value in society. Failure to find meaningful work creates disturbance in an individual's life (Kroger, 2007).

Peer support

For centuries, veterans have been **helping each other adjust** to the civilian environment (Gerber, 2003). This tradition is also being followed today, where the veteran community helps other veterans. Peer groups are those groups who have a similar social identity and interests. People are keener to help those who have a similar social identity than a stranger. Research conducted by Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam (2009) found that mental functioning and well-being of a vulnerable group can be improved through interventions. One of the interventions used for people suffering from mental illness and stigma was peer group support; this intervention reinforced in them the feeling of having a similar social identity and assisted them in rejecting negative stereotypes. Not only does peer support provide assurance during the transition phase, it also gives veterans an opportunity to share and relive their military life experience as people in a civilian environment might not be able to relate to it. There is a program being run in Canada named 'Sol 2 Lead'. In this program, one veteran who has established himself in a particular field acts as a mentor to veterans who want to succeed in that field (Rehman, 2017). Brown (2016) revealed that he and his fellow veterans who had served in U.S. forces during the Iraq war bonded together and helped each other go through transition when they returned to university. Later, they started working independently.

There is increasing confirmation that identification with a social group enhances and protects well-being. *The Social Cure: Identity, Health and Well-Being*, edited by Jetten, Haslam and Haslam (2012), explains how group membership and an individual's social identity affect his well-being. In the same book, the authors explained how social isolation negatively affects health and psychological well-being on one side and becoming a part of a social network leads to benefits.

Social recognition

Veterans, after leaving the military, face identity issues as they are required to part with their military identity and formulate a civilian identity. For formulating this new identity, support from culture and one's social environment act as reinforcers. When a person is recognized, he feels valued and **his identity is validated**. This validation ultimately helps in formulating a well-integrated post-retirement identity in veterans (Thompson et al., 2016). Recognition gives them a sense that they have been seen as they actually are; however, not all types of recognition from civilians makes sense to veterans. For instance, Norwegian veterans posted in Afghanistan desired only to be respected and understood rather than being honoured on a personal level (Gustavsen, 2015).

It has been reported that military personnel and veterans want to be seen in a specific military role and experience. Canadian and Norwegian veterans and military personnel felt disappointed when civilians could not comprehend their deployments (Gustavsen, 2015; Dentry-Travis, 2013); they got limited media coverage and absent or low reporting of casualties, and this was perceived as how society supports their armed personnel (Dentry-Travis, 2014).

Ten years ago, a concern was raised in the United Kingdom regarding the lack of awareness among civilians regarding military duties. As a result in 2008, the United Kingdom's prime minister invited a study to improve the understanding and appreciation of UK armed forces in the eyes of the British public (Davies, Clark & Sharp, 2008).

A strong hierarchy system is followed in the armed forces, and this hierarchy of military identities is deeply rooted in veterans. It makes a lot of difference to the veterans who were low in the hierarchy that they are appreciated for supporting their comrades, wearing the uniform and ultimately helping in making the mission a success (Gustavsen, 2015). Military personnel and

veterans feel marginalized, as they perceive they are not being understood by civilians (Davies et al., 2008; Smith & True, 2014). For civilians, the military experience or knowledge is through the media and movies. Various medals, honours and badges have a little meaning in civilian life.

Though it has been seen that recognition for military personnel and veterans is important, how society can make them feel recognized is not yet clear.

Conclusion

The transitional journey from military to civilian life is a complex and multifaceted task. Soldiers, by virtue of their selection and training, are resilient; however, they are not superhuman beings. The transition process and reintegrating into civilian life are stressful for them and can lead to psychological issues. This is a theoretical framework to bring into the limelight various aspects pertaining to the transition from military to civilian life. The goal is to find the means to ease this journey of transition and assist veterans in adjusting well to civilian life. We hope this chapter will be fruitful in paving the way for studies on veterans' transition and reintegration into civilian life.

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