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VETERANS' PATH TO REINTEGRATION

Anthony D. Terry
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ABSTRACT

Military service members transitioning to civilian life in general, and college specifically, may experience significant difficulty losing their individual identity as a service member. Past research has shown that there are a number of challenges in transitioning, including finding a home, reintegrating with family, and dealing with new disabilities (Brunger, Serrato, & Ogden, 2013). This project reviewed how veterans' sense of identity can change throughout the process of reintegration into civilian life and the problems that surround this change, both for veterans and their families. Specific attention was directed to a successful veteran transition to college and strategies for facilitating effective educational achievement for veterans.

INTRODUCTION

Veterans' Path to Reintegration

By the year 2020, more than five million veterans will be transitioning from all branches of the military back into civilian life (Stern, 2016). Veterans leaving the military are often faced with many challenges on the path to reintegration, caused by trouble adjusting to civilian life, finding a home, adapting to the family environment, and dealing with disabilities gained during or because of their military service. The success of their reintegration is often threatened by the struggle between the veterans' identity in the military and the individual identity that emerges during their transition to the civilian environment (Brunger, Serrato, & Ogden, 2013). While in the military, veterans work with highly

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trained and disciplined people whom they can trust to support them professionally and personally. The military environment, in which teamwork, knowledge, and discipline are highly valued, leads many veterans to become frustrated when faced with the loss of that structure in civilian life (Vacchi, 2012). One problem that arises from this training is that veterans are not used to experiencing failure or being the “weak link” in a challenging situation. Having difficulty with accepting personal faults or acknowledging their need for help may lead some veterans to problems with addiction, homelessness, mental health, and various other difficulties (Vacchi, 2012). Veterans are trained to adapt to difficult circumstances in order to succeed, but, when forced into a new environment, often with responsibilities such as family relationships, bills, and finding new housing—all without the security of the military to guide them—life can become extremely overwhelming (Brunger et al., 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges to Reintegration

Many factors pose challenges to veterans’ successful reintegration into civilian life. Veterans may not have an adequate support network after leaving military service, or lack experience with finding housing and employment on their own. Transitioning to the college setting can be also difficult for veterans; while their military training may make them very disciplined in doing schoolwork and leading group activities, the college campus typically lacks the organizational structure to which veterans are accustomed. Many former service members suffer from mental and physical disabilities that pose additional challenges. This, combined with the veterans’ sense of pride in their identity and their conditioning to be mentally tough, can lead them to avoid asking for help, even when they require it.

Homelessness. Veterans are estimated to constitute 12.3% of all homeless adults in the United States (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016). Risk factors for veterans that contribute to veteran homelessness include disability, unemployment, substance abuse, and mental health conditions (Tsai, Kaspro, & Rosenheck, 2013). Several factors may contribute to a veteran becoming

homeless after leaving the military. Finding a home can be hard enough for the average person, but it becomes considerably more challenging when the veteran no longer has a continuous source of income and is used to having the military to fall back on. A military background may also predispose a veteran to homelessness through experiences or traumatic events that caused injuries or affected the veterans' mindset (Brunger et al., 2013). These may result in the veterans' lack of support or poor coping strategies. Veterans with disabilities or mental health conditions may not be able to provide for themselves; financial loss may result in homelessness and lead to a downward spiral. Veterans who are low-income are also at a higher risk for homelessness when combined with other factors (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2015).

The United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) has developed five programs to combat veterans' homelessness. The Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs program offers vouchers to ensure former military personnel easier access to rent and offers them a better chance of acquiring housing (Tsai et al., 2013). Grant and Per Diem programs use community agencies to give veterans temporary housing, with the goal of helping them readjust and find more stability as civilians. The Healthcare for Re-Entry Veterans program assists veterans who have been incarcerated by providing them with access to medical, psychological, and additional support to prevent them from experiencing homelessness or recidivism (Tsai et al., 2013). The Veterans Justice Outreach program provides veterans who are involved in criminal or legal activity support in understanding the criminal justice system. The Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans program provides services such as outreach, temporary housing, substance abuse, and counseling all in VA buildings.

The VA recently established the VA Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES), which is an online data collection system (Tsai et al., 2013). The data is used in a registry that can provide information on benefits for homeless veterans and helps researchers and policymakers. HOMES includes information from many specialized sources and homeless relief organizations and shares it nationally. In a study using data from HOMES on a sample of over 120,000 homeless veterans, Tsai et al. (2013) classified the veterans into four groups: those with

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decreased chances of being homeless; those with a high likelihood of mental illness and drug abuse; those with an increased chance of poverty, drug abuse, and criminal history; and those with a high likelihood for physical disabilities. Data from this research showed that substance abuse, disability, and mental illness are significant factors in veteran homelessness.

Family reintegration. Reintegration for veterans and their families can be a stressful and arduous process that requires patience and commitment. Veterans and their families must deal with moving to a new environment and relearning and reprocessing their family relationships (Gil-Rivas, Kilmer, Larson, & Armstrong, 2017). Family members must gain an understanding of the veteran's moods and changes in identity, and veterans must re-familiarize themselves with their family; the "family" must be created all over again. This process can be further complicated by other factors arising from the veteran's military career.

The nature of the process differs for individuals and families based on military status. For example, active duty and reserve service members are still subject to subsequent deployments, which results in ambiguity regarding the degree to which their return home is permanent or temporary (Gil-Rivas et al., 2017).

This can create added stress and little time for bonding between family members. More research should be conducted to examine the influence and relation of the reintegration of veterans and their families in a successful long-term plan. Most service members will be deployed to another part of the world at some point during their career (Gil-Rivas et al., 2017). These deployments, depending on the experience of the veteran, can change how they perceive the world and sometimes cause trauma that influences their ability to reunite with their family members. Mental health conditions can further complicate a veteran's chance of successful reintegration. Some experiences, such as deploying to a combat zone, can lead to the veteran developing mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, among others (Gil-Rivas et al., 2017). Factors that helped the veterans survive in dangerous environments, such as being hyper-aware of their surroundings or very authoritative towards others, can negatively impact their family relationships when they return, resulting in the veterans and their family members being more cautious with each other.

An additional resource available to veterans is family reintegration services. These services can re-introduce families and veterans slowly and give them different methods of coping and understanding each other. Reintegration services can be hard to find, though they do exist; they are usually located in areas close to military bases (Gil-Rivas et al., 2017). The limited availability of reintegration services for the family should highlight the need for more readily available sources. Services should be specifically developed to combat and address the broad cultural differences of veterans and their families in order to ensure that everyone's needs are being met.

Research and reintegration services have come a long way in recent years to help veterans, primarily due to the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Macdermid Wadsworth, 2013). This legislation resulted in millions of veterans deciding to go back to college and increased the research carried out on how to best support veterans' reintegration into civilian life. There are many methods of helping veterans and their families get the help they deserve, which reflects the variety of needs of this particular community. These programs should highlight the strengths of veterans and their families to show that, though the families may have endured numerous difficulties, their challenges can be overcome.

Disability/mental health. Disability is one of the factors that can profoundly affect veterans' identity and negatively impact their family, lifestyle, and income. Members of the military are trained to be self-sufficient and confident. Service members who experience a disability may struggle to reconcile their past with their current situation (Freytes, Lelaurin, Zickmund, Resende, & Uphold, 2017). Veterans need a clear path to help them achieve their next objective. If that goal is not identified and met, veterans may lose their sense of purpose, which could lead to poor coping mechanisms and substance abuse. It is vitally important to have strong support groups, both for the service members and their families, in order to survive difficult periods. Freytes et al. (2017) wrote that:

Numerous efforts have been put forward by federal, state, and local agencies to provide assistance to veterans and their families. These efforts aim to facilitate veterans' transition from deployment into their homes and communities.

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Despite these efforts, little is known about differences in the veterans' and family members' perceptions of family functioning post-deployment and how these perceptions impact family reintegration or fluctuate across time. (p.150) Further research examining the experiences of spouses and children during reintegration is needed.

PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) are conditions that continue to hinder veterans' proper reintegration into civilian life (Freytes et al., 2017). Both conditions affect proper communication and can impair veterans' chances of creating and maintaining close relationships with the larger community. PTSD and TBI can create stressful situations for family members who serve as caregivers. These conditions may affect the veterans' emotional control, lead to memory loss, and hinder their ability to perform, leading to frustration, guilt, and a lack of confidence. This is further exacerbated when veterans are used to being independent and not asking for help.

Family members must be encouraged to assist veterans in getting the help they need and to assure veterans that they are not weak when asking for help. Veterans must understand that, by helping themselves, they help their whole family. Veterans and their families may have to find different ways to deal with their challenges; examples of this include getting professional therapy, avoiding triggering the veterans' anger by bringing up traumatic events, being examined for signs of medical conditions, or even going to couples' therapy (Freytes et al., 2017).

Family members may struggle with not knowing how to handle the veteran coming home. Family members may want the veteran to behave the way he or she did before his or her service, which they perceive as "normal" (Freytes et al., 2017). This desire for normality results in emotional pain and stress for the veteran and family members alike as they struggle to live up to such expectations. Not only does this directly affect the veteran's relationship with a spouse, but it may also complicate the veteran's relationship with his or her children. Gil-Rivas et al. (2017) wrote:

Parental functioning influences family processes, parenting, and parent-child relationships in multiple ways. Although the specific demands associated with deployment and reintegration likely differ based

on children's age, developmental level, gender, and dispositional characteristics, children benefit from structure, consistency, and predictability. However, the deployment and subsequent reintegration process may increase parental distress, diminish parental resources, and disrupt family routines, parenting practices, and discipline. (p. 178)

While a change in family dynamics can be positive, often this is not the case for returning veterans. In some cases, the changes in the overall relationship stemming from shifting roles can have a negative impact on the veteran's and their significant other's ability to communicate effectively. For these couples, communication problems may become a major obstacle in the reintegration process and can lead to failed interactions (Freytes et al., 2017).

Other factors that influence reintegration. Other factors that hinder veteran reintegration include the loss of self-worth and nostalgia for the military. The loss of the military identity can dramatically impact the veteran's confidence and drive to succeed in civilian life (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). This loss can result in poor communication within the family, a lack of fulfillment in the workplace, or a sense of general displacement, resulting in depression (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Nostalgia for the military can also be a common factor experienced during a loss of self.

Nostalgia for the military can be complex; even if all the memories were not the most positive or exciting, the veteran may remember those events fondly after leaving the service (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). When struggling with their transition, many veterans may have thoughts of returning to military service and regret having left the service. These thoughts can be considered a type of self-protection when negative thoughts or fears overwhelm them. Further research is needed to examine the effects of nostalgia and how it impacts veteran reintegration.

Mental health professionals striving to assist veterans should examine their relationships and their need for the camaraderie that existed during their time in the service (Elnitsky, Fisher, & Blevins, 2017). Providing access to support

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groups and counseling addressing these needs may also promote successful reintegration. Clinicians should be aware of the stigma in veteran communities of asking for help and how care needs to be approached carefully.

Veterans' college experience. Veterans are trained to seek to overcome all obstacles, with failure seen as an unacceptable option (Vacchi, 2012). Veterans who seek higher education must learn how to be both a civilian and a college student. College is often a completely new experience, with many environmental and intellectual challenges. First, veterans must learn how to adapt to the lack of strict structure on many college campuses (Vacchi, 2012). The need to make an ongoing series of individual decisions, such as choosing a major and selecting classes, may overwhelm a veteran. This decision-making process may be an enormous change for veterans who derive a sense of self-confidence from being able to respond effectively to the structure and orders of the military (Vacchi, 2012). Veteran student success may be supported by workshops or training programs designed to educate faculty and advisors about this population's unique needs.

Most veterans going to college are using the Post 911 GI Bill, which pays for tuition. Any veteran who has served active duty for at least 90 days after September 10, 2001 is eligible for the Post 911 GI Bill. The Post 911 GI Bill is only used when the student veteran is actively taking classes, but it results in stress for many student veterans who try to rush through college to finish before their funding eligibility ceases. Student veterans may also find course selection stressful or experience concerns over the lack of available classes (Vacchi, 2012).

Recent studies show that veterans in college may experience extreme amounts of stress due to their transition from the service to student life (Smith, Villhauer, & Chafos, 2017). Some of the outcomes of stress include drinking, suicidal thoughts, and depression (Graf, Miller, Feist, & Freeman, 2011). Even though the Post 911 GI Bill covers tuition and provides a housing allowance, it may not be sufficient to cover all of the student veterans' expenses. Student veterans who are struggling with financial hardships display increased symptoms of depression and PTSD (Elliot, 2014). Student veterans transitioning out of the

military have to deal with the added stress of finding a new job and dealing with family issues (Perkins et al., 2019). This stress may be handled well by student veterans who, due to the military, might be used to handling large amounts of stress, but they can become vulnerable when other conditions, such as mental health issues or disability problems, surface.

Academic advisors should be trained on how to assist student veterans in order to meet their expected professional standards. Veterans expect that they are helped by trained professionals and deserve appropriate support (Vacchi, 2012). To ensure that student veterans continue their education and successfully transition into civilian life, advising must both meet a standard and exceed it.

Because of their time in military service, student veterans are generally older than traditional students, and, because of their experience in the outside world, they do not always interact easily with traditional students (Barry, Whiteman, Macdermid Wadsworth, & Hitt, 2012). Compared to college students who are taught to be independent and question everything, veterans are taught to obey orders without question. This open college environment can bring unneeded stress to student veterans (Elliot, 2014). When added to a sense of not belonging or fitting in with traditional undergraduates, student veterans sometimes struggle during their college experience. If student veterans have no one with whom they can identify, they may have trouble opening up or talking about their military experience, feeling that traditional students might not understand (Graf et al., 2011). It is vital that the student veteran is able to develop a base of support, whether from family, college, or the larger community.

Social support has been shown to protect veterans against stress and stressful environments (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). After leaving the military, many student veterans have lost their support system, resulting in stress and a sense of isolation. This isolation can lead to veterans losing motivation and experiencing overwhelming anxiety and depression (Campbell & Riggs, 2015), particularly if the student veteran cannot connect with other students or is unaware of available support services. Many veterans report a difference in levels of maturity as a reason they are unable to connect with others (Ness, Rocke, Harrist, & Vroman, 2014).

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College faculty may not be able to help support student veterans perform to their best ability because of a culture gap (Lim, Interiano, Nowell, Tkacik, & Dahlberg, 2018). Similar to the differences between student veterans and traditional college students, student veterans and faculty may have vastly different viewpoints, which may result in miscommunication. The findings of a study by Lim et al. (2018) point to how self-sufficiency, leadership, and accountability are seen differently by both groups. Faculty may behave in a certain manner in the belief that they are helping the student veteran, when they are actually putting additional pressure and stress on the student (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Student veterans may feel that speaking up may negatively affect their grade or relationship with the faculty member. Instead of making their needs known, they choose to suffer in silence. Lim et al. (2018) wrote:

For example, faculty members may find it beneficial and relevant for student veterans to lead a team, whereas leading a team with uncommitted peers would be a significant challenge to student veterans who believe in and have lived through the ideas and practices of shared leadership and team accountability. (p. 304)

Another of the methods that might improve veterans' chance of academic success is the academic institution's establishment of a veteran student affairs office. If well organized, a center dedicated to veteran success can be very beneficial for student veterans (Albright et al., 2019). These offices should provide assistance in choosing classes, managing financial aid, finding peer support, mentoring and tutoring opportunities, and developing confidence and a sense of cohesion with the campus community.

Recent studies have primarily focused on veterans' mental health concerns; little research has been done on how faculty can better assist this population (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016). College campuses should identify student veterans early in their studies and offer them support through the veteran student affairs office (Albright et al., 2019). Faculty who understand the challenges faced by veterans transitioning into student life may play a major role in college completion and a successful readjustment to civilian life.

CONCLUSION

While there has been some progress in understanding veterans' reintegration process, it is a subject that deserves continuing research. With the large population of men and women returning from active duty, and many suffering from mental and physical wounds, a greater understanding of the transition from military to civilian life is needed. This paper has examined some of the roadblocks to veterans' successful reintegration, whether it be homelessness, problems with family, or dealing with disabilities. Further research into family reintegration and student veterans' academic success should be done. Veterans have sacrificed much for their country, often with no expectation of ever being recognized for their service. While most will never ask for it or admit to needing it, proper recognition and support will help them toward a more productive life in the civilian world.

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