



The Military to Civilian Transition: Exploring Experiences of Transitions to ‘Civvy Street’ and Implications for the Self

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current research was to explore veterans' experiences of the military to civilian transition, specifically focussing on the role of their sense of self. Twenty military veterans were interviewed through semi-structured interviews and asked about their experiences of transition. In answering the question "What is the role of the self in navigating transition into civvy street?", three themes were generated using reflexive thematic analysis: (a) Destabilising Individualism: People should be standing by their word, and they're not; (b) Re-negotiating the Self: Extracting what I needed from the forces to get me forward now; and (c) Forging a Self-Understanding. This article provided insight into the challenges and complexities that are faced by military veterans as they negotiate their transition. Several implications were discussed including a need for greater recognition of the challenges and a need for greater connectedness through community practices.

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In the United Kingdom (UK), around 14,000 people left the armed forces and entered civilian life in 2022 (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Most UK service leavers are suggested to “fare well” upon their return from military, with 87.5% of individuals in full-time employment (Iversen et al., 2005). Employment, however, does not explain the whole story; a significant minority of service leavers face considerable stress in the return to civilian life, not only with employment, but also with family conflicts, financial difficulties, and housing (Ashcroft, 2014), as well as mental health difficulties (Iversen et al., 2009). Experiences of anxiety and depression among veterans are higher than experiences of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and have a higher prevalence than within the civilian population (Hunt et al., 2014). The reasons for the increased prevalence of anxiety and depression amongst veterans are, at present, unclear, although it has been hypothesised that there are pre-enlistment vulnerabilities (Murphy et al., 2019), or increased social isolation upon leaving the military (Hatch et al., 2013). While there is an increased recognition of adverse effects of transition to civilian life and risk factors to a difficult transition (e.g., Harden & Murphy, 2018), there is limited understanding of the psychosocial factors that may underpin transition difficulties. Indeed, therapeutic interventions for a range of difficulties have mixed outcomes for the veteran population (Haagen et al., 2015), and this may be due to the complexities of pre, during, and post-military experiences (Murphy et al., 2019). As such, there is a need to investigate further the military to civilian transition and the psychosocial implications of such a transition. In response, this research undertook 20 semi-structured interviews with British military veterans to explore their experiences of the military to civilian transition.

MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION

Adjusting to the military has been posited as a culture shock (Bergman et al., 2014), which requires individuals to incorporate a common sense of worth, rested in a sense of belonging, a selfless commitment to service, and a mutual loyalty that reinforces a sense of unit identity and moral cohesion (Ministry of Defence, 2014). This contrasts with common individualistic notions of speaking one’s mind and taking care of the self in non-military, Western culture (Hofstede, 2011). The adjustment to this military culture takes place at a crucial period of development from adolescence to adulthood, which typically involves establishing one’s career, independence, and relationships; key proponents of identity explorations (Arnett, 2000). Literature has provided veteran accounts of

an experience of significant disconnection between civilian life and military life (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). Following acculturation to military life, the move into civilian life is a major transitional process for service leavers where individuals must navigate new experiences requiring significant cultural adjustment (Ashcroft, 2014). Rigorous basic training aids the acculturation process when entering the military, but when leaving, support often focusses predominantly on employment or as a service when difficulties arise.

Much of the military to civilian transition (MTC) research seeks to understand how veterans come to understand their experiences of transition through identity processes (Ahern et al., 2015; Brunger et al., 2013; Smith & True, 2014). Other explorations of the transitional experience have pointed towards crises of identity as a considerable contributory process, through identification of a loss of purpose and disconnection (Demers, 2011), being trapped between two worlds (Demers, 2013), increased social isolation (Hatch et al., 2013), and a sense of emptiness (Marchiondo, 2016) upon return from the military.

The MTC has further been interpreted as a process of being trapped between two identities, where this trap is compounded by social distance (Smith & True, 2014). Military identity is determined to be reinforced due to a lack of shared understanding between loved ones and participants; attempts to connect to their civilian identity through interaction result in failure and withdrawal, acting as a catalyst for the exacerbation of their difficulties with mental health in civilian life (Smith & True, 2014). Further, being misunderstood by others in society has repeatedly been identified as a barrier to reintegration (Ahern et al., 2015; Demers, 2011; Hatch et al., 2013). Additionally, Hatch et al. (2013) found this social isolation to partially account for increased risk in common mental health disorders.

The lack of structure and regimentation within the civilian environment has been emphasised (Ahern et al., 2015; Marchiondo, 2016; Smith & True, 2014). For example, Ahern et al. (2015) captured the veteran experience through descriptions of frustrations with civilian interpretation of punctuality and authority. Smith and True (2014) illuminated the power autonomy has in instilling a sense of uncertainty. Marchiondo (2016) found veterans hold value in their discipline, as it prevents them from “flailing in the wind” (p. 73) through a lack of purpose. Brunger et al. (2013) argued participants experienced a loss of self-efficacy resulting from a loss of their life as a soldier, their vocation, and their uniforms. Further, Binks and Cambridge (2018) described veterans as experiencing an “us and them” culture, whereby some civilians’ negative beliefs were generalised to the entire out-group population.

Whilst the above research offers excellent insights into the MTC, there is a need for further exploration of veterans' experiences of their transition in relation to how the self may influence veteran reactions to the transition, and how individuals seek to cope throughout. Our research with 20 British Military Veterans explicitly set out to explore this experiences, however before reporting our findings, attention now turns to literature seeking to conceptualise "the self" to develop the theoretical basis of this paper further.

THE SELF

A growing body of literature has identified the self as an important factor in the MTC transition. What has also been indicated in the research, as identified by Binks and Cambridge (2018), is the possible role of societal attitudes towards military personnel and has been recognised as an area requiring further investigation. To work towards developing an understanding of the self and the role of society, this article drew upon the foundational work of William James' (1890) theory of the self, and more recent interpretations (e.g., Smith, 1993; Comello, 2009; Strube et al., 1993), utilising theory to help with understanding our participants' experiences. James' primary focus of enquiry pertained to the empirical self, consisting of the material, the social, and the spiritual self. Whilst much has of course changed since his writings, the framework which he developed has represented a cornerstone to theoretical understandings of the self (Strube et al., 1993). This current section will turn to other arenas in which James' theory have offered useful grounding in the development of our understanding of the self.

The material self consists of one's physical body and material possessions, such as clothes or home (James, 1890). The body has a strong association with identity across health-related research (Ellis-Hill et al., 2000; Mathieson & Stam, 1995; Watson, 2002). Ellis-Hill (2000), for example, highlighted the shock individuals felt when confronted with a body that had been "split" from the self. Kiliç and colleagues (2018) highlighted the impact a loss of control of the body can have on the sense of self, with individuals diagnosed with epilepsy. Feminist literature has considered how social discourses influence the understanding of our self in relation to our body (Garrett, 2004; Lester, 1997). Not only our bodies, but our clothes can act as a means through which we understand ourselves and achieve recognition for our social self (Crane, 2000). Clothes, as a form of consumption, can enable us to work towards a better understanding of our "authentic self" (Cushman, 1996). There is relevance here in relation to the

MTC, where participants in studies have referenced uniform as a reinforcer for their identity (Binks & Cambridge, 2018).

The spiritual self can be interpreted as the psychological self (Comello, 2009), in that it constitutes our attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about our qualities (Burkitt, 2008; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Zhao, 2014). Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) posited an adjustment to assumptions we once held, suggesting a likely shift in our belief system as we go through a transitionary process. Recent transitionary research, incorporating James' (1890) notion of the self (Slotter & Walsh, 2017), has suggested that transitions can result in confusion in one's beliefs about their attributes and value. The importance of the spiritual self in transition adjustment is reinforced specifically in relation to the military through US literature highlighting attitudinal and emotional changes in the return from deployment (Adler et al., 2011).

The interrelatedness of the components of our empirical self suggest that societal attitudes may be influential in the construction of our beliefs about our own qualities. The social self consists of the recognition that we receive from others, and how we are recognized influences the understanding of our self (James, 1890). How we are perceived or treated by others is strongly influential in how we construct our understanding of ourselves regarding our qualities. For example, the role of stigma for people experiencing mental distress increases social stress, and in turn has negative connotations for our sense of mastery (Wright et al., 2000). The wider social context in which we live has consequences for how we perceive ourselves, such that we are encouraged to perceive ourselves as having personal responsibility for our lives (Rose, 1999; Trevisan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, James (1890) embedded possible selves necessarily within the structure of the entire self. He described how we engage in self-seeking and self-preservation, whereby we act to seek out self-congruity and behave in ways that preserve how we conceive ourselves across our empirical self. James brought into discussion the notion of our potential selves, and noted that we have numerous conceptions of how we imagine ourselves in the future and act in accordance with this future view.

This notion is underexplored in veteran literature, but is found to play a significant role in other transitionary processes (e.g., parenthood and university), where participants who negotiated transition successfully towards a desired future self reported higher well-being (Manzi et al., 2010). Walker (2013), in his study of pre-exit military transition, noted that participants were projecting their current skills towards a civilian life, and suggested that these may have been of negligible civilian value. The notion of possible selves may be relevant in the MTC; if

veterans seek continuity and strive towards a valued future self that is incompatible with current societal structures, this may play a role in the adverse consequences found in the veteran population (Ashcroft, 2014).

Previous MTC transition literature has laid important groundwork for understanding the role of the self in transition. However, experiences of veterans beyond specific subgroups (i.e., homelessness) has focussed primarily on social identity (e.g., Demers, 2011). James' (1890) broad theoretical account of the self provides an important avenue through which to further explore transitional experiences whilst also responding to the call to consider the role of societal attitudes in influencing the transition (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). The current paper utilized James' (1890) empirical self as a means through which to understand the MTC transition of the participants in this research, whilst considering the wider social implications for how the self is being constructed through the transition.

METHOD

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

To consider the self along with the wider social implications on the self, the current article adopted a critical realist position. Critical realism posits that the data can tell us something about the real world, but not directly (Willig, 2012). Rather, the data relies on the researcher to make inferences about the underlying mechanisms of the data (Willig, 2013) because what is knowable is dependent upon the subjective knowledge of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Critical realism rests within an ontologically realist position, whereby reality exists independent of human knowledge, and an epistemologically relative position, where what we know is socially, culturally, and historically located (Harper, 2011). Thus, critical realism holds that there is no one way of knowing about objects of enquiry (e.g., events), but those objects of enquiry are created by enduring phenomena (Willig, 1999). The current study aimed to capture participant meaning making whilst attending to the socio-political climate of today that may be informing the meaning-making process, rather than a search for an objective truth. A key consideration in adopting this approach was to ensure that social attitudes could be incorporated into understanding how participants made sense of their MTC experiences.

PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

In-line with the critical realist approach highlighted above, data was collected using semi-structured interviews (e.g., Bonnington & Rose, 2014). Semi-structured interviews

enable an open exploration of the topic, whilst allowing for participants to discuss their subjective experiences (Evans, 2018). Existing literature suggests that qualitative research utilising semi-structured interviews should consist of 10–20 participants for medium-sized projects (Braun & Clarke, 2013), as such the author sought a number of participants between this.

Participants were eligible to participate if they had served in the British Armed Forces and met veteran status (served at least one day; Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2020). Furthermore, participants met inclusion criteria if they had left either voluntarily or for medical reasons. Participants met exclusion criteria if they had retired fully in civilian life, were early service leavers, or were dishonourably discharged. A total of 20 participants met the study criteria, of which 17 were male and 3 were female. All participants identified as being white-British.

Participants were recruited via posts on social media and through snowball sampling, as has been used elsewhere in qualitative literature (e.g., Grogan et al., 2013). The recruitment post was advertised on social media (Twitter/X) with a link to express initial interest. Snowball sampling also took place, where participants shared the post on social media to other people within their network. Once participants had expressed interest, they were provided with an information sheet. The researcher then sent a link to the consent form, which also detailed study information via the information sheet. Once informed consent had been provided, the researcher provided several dates and times, so that the participants could choose a time best suiting their schedules.

The semi-structured interview was used to provide prompts and facilitate a detailed account of the area of interest. Interviews took place via online video software or by telephone, according to participant preference, and lasted between 40 and 105 minutes. These technological solutions facilitate a wider geographical range of participants and allow for the participant to remain in their own comfortable environment (Hanna, 2012), as well as supporting participant recruitment through the COVID-19 restrictions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was utilised as a means through which to interpret the data through the outlined philosophical positioning. Thematic analysis is an epistemologically flexible mode of analysis that facilitates a deep understanding of participant meaning making (Braun et al., 2015), whilst also maintaining reflexivity such that the author could be mindful of assumptions being made (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis facilitates the ontological and epistemological

foundations of critical realism (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013), as it enables the development of meaning from described experiences whilst recognising that the meaning described is not necessarily fully realised (Bonnington & Rose, 2014; Maxwell, 2012), and may take on different characteristics in different contexts (Willig, 1999).

The analysis followed the six stages of analysis as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). To familiarise with the data, the first author firstly transcribed all data prior to reading and rereading the data. Patterns of participant meaning making was sought and initial codes utilising qualitative software Nvivo (Version 12) were identified through close reading. Codes were subsequently sorted into potential themes. Key to reflexive thematic analysis is an awareness that the researcher is constructing themes rather than identifying already existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Some themes were collapsed into one overarching theme as a means to establish a “central organising concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 224). Additionally, both authors reflected on and questioned more common-sense cultural assumptions when organising themes. For example, initial codes of “Civvy self-interest” and “lack of trust in Civvies” could have, *prima facie*, been themes in and of themselves; however, through considering the intuitive ideas of societal beliefs in the pursuit of the authors’ personal goals, they were brought together to form the theme “destabilising individualism,” since they reflected the social, cultural, and historical climate that need be considered in critical realist positioning. In the interest of transparency as it pertains to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), no inter-rater reliability was accounted for, since this more readily represents a positivist framework that is inconsistent with the epistemological underpinnings of the current article (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research project received favourable ethical approval by the University of Surrey Ethics Committee.

FINDINGS

Three themes were identified throughout the data: (a) Destabilising Individualisation, a theme which elucidates the interaction between “civvy street” (veterans’ conceptualisation of life outside the military) and participants and the way this informs their sense of themselves; (b) Renegotiating the Self, which describes the process of negotiating different aspects of the participants skills and attitudes from the military and applying them to “civvy street”; and (c) Forging a Self-Understanding,

which describes how participants aim to positively embed themselves in “civvy street” through forming a connection with themselves or others (see Table 1 below).

DESTABILISING INDIVIDUALISM: PEOPLE SHOULD BE STANDING BY THEIR WORD AND THEY’RE NOT

The first theme pertains to the intersubjective interaction between the participant and the civvy street, which impacted how they perceived themselves. Transitioning out of the military involved a process of leaving behind a sense of community or “camaraderie” that is associated with the military, into a world of individualisation. The majority of participants saw a shift from collective beliefs within the military, to a realisation that each individual may hold their own differing beliefs:

You assume that people are going to behave a certain way, and I’ve been stung a couple of times, I’ve just, I’ve very much had to realise that I can’t just go into a group now, and assume that everybody’s got the same intentions, the same

THEMES	COMPONENTS OF THE SELF
Destabilising Individualisation	Struggling to come to terms with the shift from military culture which embraces collective attitudes and working for each other, to the civvy understanding of the self which places emphasis on individual goals and achievements, impacted what James understands as the ‘spiritual self’.
Re-negotiating the self	Trying to bring aspects of the spiritual self to civvy street but realising that the cultural capital in the military and in civvy street are distinctly different. As a result, the key to successful transitioning was extracting the skills, values, and qualities that constitute their understanding of the self and renegotiating these through their social self.
Forging a self-understanding	Questioning self-views and understanding of the spiritual self as a result of engaging with civvy street with psychological distress as a potential outcome of this questioning. For some, turning to understandings of their pre-military self enabled them to move forward, for others they connected/re-connected with veterans to embrace their social self.

Table 1 Themes and components of the self.

beliefs that they want the same outcomes ... and that's everything from what people want and need, but down ... and but also down to how they're going to do something. (Participant 17, male)

In the extract above, Participant 17 highlighted how the military collective is not translatable to the civilian world. Through "I have been stung a few times," the participant understood their experiences through the suggestion that they have wrongly assumed a uniformity in people's belief systems, but ultimately, this has come as a detriment to himself. Indeed, it is argued that society holds personal pursuits and goals to great importance (Trevisan et al., 2021). This is further exemplified by one participant's description of civilian society:

You, you kind of lose perspective with the outside world and what a real cutthroat, capitalist, money driven world it can be because I was used to delivering in the form of flying for the greater ... what I saw was a greater good. (Participant 15, male)

Depicted here is the contrast between acting through togetherness towards a collective goal, versus acting for the benefit of someone's self-interests. Participant 15 offered an account in which their experiences are understood through notions of civilian life being organised by self-interest and thus they grapple with trying to trust others for fear of getting "burned by people."

One way in which this can be understood is through the spiritual self (James, 1890), whereby within the military each person holds the same common aspiration or value, such that there is a congruence with one another. This has implications for the social self, whereby within the military there is a mutual recognition of one another as a loyal and hardworking service member, which is likely to be beneficial when considering the nature of military operations. Upon returning, Participant 15 highlighted how the personal-pursuit-driven society (Trevisan et al., 2021) is unfamiliar, and in some sense may be seen as destabilising the self that had been constructed in the military.

Participants felt forced into individualising and that individualising process appeared to result in a loss of bondedness that is initially attempted with others. As the following participant commented:

My misses thinks that I live in this flippin absolute utopia, where, or in my head, there's this utopia where people, you know, turn up for work, you know, in a state where they can work and, you know, all this sort of stuff. And, and, you know, people are loyal, and work hard and all that naturally. And now,

I know the world doesn't work like that. I do get it. But it's just really disappointing, especially when you bend over backwards to sort people out. (Participant 27, male)

Participant 27 may be interpreted as demonstrating their value in loyalty, working hard together, and a capacity to help others.

However, this is not met by civilians, who are in it for themselves and do not reciprocate the support that this participant has provided. Capitalist or neoliberal conditions actively influence our self-understanding (Rose, 1999), which can induce a heightened sense of loneliness (Becker et al., 2021), and the stark contrast outlined by participants suggests civvy street to be perceived as an isolating, individualised society. Civvies were understood to be much more self-interested than compared to the desire for a collective goal:

I find that hard really, that's probably the hardest thing I find is you should – people should be standing by their word. And they're not. That's the thing I wasn't prepared for was the lines you get told. You get told, you get lied to a lot more. (Participant 22, male)

Participant 22 may be seen to describe how there was a lack of preparedness for the inability to trust civvies. A way in which this could be understood is that the military necessarily fosters an environment in which one is able to trust others with one's life; however, entry into civvy street ultimately results in a realisation that civvies are self-interested.

The perception of increased self-interest ultimately led participants to feel "isolated" or "cast out into the wilderness." The association of isolation or loneliness on our mental health is well-documented (Beutel et al., 2017), and these experiences were expressed by most participants, regardless of whether they had deemed themselves to be transitioning successfully or unsuccessfully. Our sense of self is intertwined with those that we connect and bond with (Burkitt, 2008; James, 1890): the social self, which develops esteem through recognition from others. Experiencing rejection, having civvies undermine them, or perceiving civvy street as cutthroat, was expressed as detrimental to participants, as highlighted in Participant 22's comment. Our experience of our self is additive but fluid in nature, such that we extract our self-understanding from previous experiences (Burkitt, 2008; James, 1890).

Participants described how they had in the military internalised the notion that they were the "best," and to be the best, one must work hard. In the face of the

individualising process of transition, many participants demonstrated hard work in maximising their achievements. Some participants however, experienced civvy street to be continually rejecting such that they felt that had their “ego beaten to death” (Participant 30, male). This rejection and continual experience of civvy self-interest had a key role in participants’ understanding of themselves. As the following participant commented:

It chips away, you just you just put yourself in a position where you think I’m just not good enough ... people say that if you continually tell kids something, they sort of eventually believe it because you have a frame of reference, it was almost like that. It just got to the point where you think we’re not going to get a job I’m not good enough. (Participant 30, male)

Participant 30 offered an account that could be understood as a demonstrating the continual impact of external societal forces, such that the continued rejection has a destabilising impact on the self. High esteem had existed within the military, where the social self had received positive recognition. Over time the individualised nature of a capitalist society, that has negative implications for our sense of self (Becker et al., 2021; Bell, 2019), erodes participants’ sense of their qualities and abilities.

RENEGOTIATING THE SELF: EXTRACTING WHAT I NEEDED FROM THE FORCES TO GET ME FORWARD NOW

In relation to the transition process, participants drew on an account that suggested that the military equipped them with a strong sense of self described as “indoctrination” (Participant 17, male). This theme suggests that participants attempt to bring forward their understanding of their self into civvy street, and that this process required some learning. Participants exemplified this through their descriptions of their attempts at acting in civvy street in a way that was consistent with their understanding of their military self:

I’ve made, even going to university, I’ve made rooms go quiet with some of the stuff that comes up my mouth because I just think it’s normal. And to be told, it’s not normal to talk like that. It’s not, well, no one’s told me it’s not normal. Because to me is normal, you know, my attitude towards things is normal for me. But in civilian life, that’s not normal. And there’s no, your, your resettlement programme prepares you for work. But it doesn’t prepare you for civilian life. (Participant 19, male)

What could be understood by Participant 19’s comment is the belief that civilian norms and attitudes contrast significant with what has been learnt through the military, such that it creates a sense of feeling out of touch. It seems that what is normal about oneself in regard to their attitudes may be perceived as abnormal by civilians.

We can understand this difference through James’ (1890) notion of the spiritual self, which includes beliefs in one’s own qualities (Swann & Bosson, 2010) and attitudes (Burkitt, 2008).

Participant 19’s account can be understood as highlighting how he suggested his attitudes, which rested within military norms, no longer fit when it comes to navigating civvy street. Furthermore, he felt unprepared for the difference in what is considered “normal” to communicate with one another. Participant 19 brought forward his understanding of his “spiritual self” into civvy street; however, an aspect of his self, namely his “social self” had not received the recognition anticipated, bringing about a sense of self consciousness. In other words, this participant has accrued cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in the form of specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes (spiritual self), that inform his understanding of himself as a social actor (Cooper et al., 2018). However, the capital accrued by civilians informs an alternative way of understanding their selves as social actors.

Cooper et al. (2018) considered a framework in which veterans may have developed a cultural competence that is vastly different from the competence required in civvy street, which Participant 19’s comment above highlights. Another participant commented:

There was, there was when I started working purely with civilians having ... for the first time ever, there was um ... occasionally my manner or my, my ability to crack a tasteless joke, or to get a bit of, as I say, banter wrong. It didn’t land me in trouble; someone would say, “Oh, no, we don’t really talk like that in this office.” And that kind of, that kind of warming up period over a couple months, was um ... not difficult. There was just a couple of learning points for me over that first couple of months. (Participant 15, male)

Participant 15 demonstrated the differences in humour expressed by most participants, where the humour internalised throughout the military is not translatable to civvy street. What could also be understood by Participant 15 is that this feedback process facilitates learning about the new norms of civvy street, such that he adjusted his attitude so as to fit the social norms contained within civvy street. Key to transitioning was extracting the skills, values,

and qualities that constitute the spiritual self and applying them to civvy street.

Through social interaction, feedback is provided enabling an adjustment of self understanding (Gergen, 2004). As Participant 1 (male) suggests: “Yeah, this is one of the again, it’s one of those things I found for, you know, over the years is extracting what I what I needed from the forces to get me forward now.” Participant 1 described extracting learnings that assist him in civvy street. The utterance could be understood as a process of self-reflection that takes place to evaluate one’s own performance.

The “I” as conceptualised by James (1890) observes the spiritual “me” (Burkitt, 2008), noticing what in civvy street is deemed appropriate or inappropriate. Furthermore, the need to extract what is needed appears dependent upon the reactions from others, where “shocking” people or inappropriate “banter” may result in negative feedback, creating a sense of self that is undervalued relative to others (Kraus & Park, 2014). Furthermore, Participant 1 may be understood to recognise that some components of his skills and abilities could prove useful, whilst others may prove less useful.

Specific characteristics that were present in most participants was a desire to help others and a sense of personal integrity. These characteristics were applied by participants navigating a different environment, which at times produced positive outcome:

To be honest, the ... it’s bizarre, though, because before I moved in with my partner, the people on the street didn’t really talk to each other. But now everybody talks and everybody goes into each other’s houses for cups of tea and flippin’ all this. And, and, and that’s like, what my neighbour two doors down calls the [name] influence. So I mean, [name]’s been here for 10 years and haven’t been in anybody else’s house for a brew, before I turned up. And within like three months, I’ve been in everybody’s house and been shown round two of them, and they’ve had work done and what have you, and all that. And all it is, is just saying, Good morning, and you’re helping someone with a bin or, you know, you’re doing something that doesn’t cost you anything, but helps them out loads. (Participant 27, male)

The social act of helping others within the community drew feedback deemed by Participant 22 as positive. In stating that it “helps them out loads,” Participant 27 may be understood to interpret the action of bringing others together as part of his spiritual self, in that he draws upon his qualities in creating a communal neighbourhood. This perhaps, has provided him with a sense of achieving greater

recognition, allowing him to strengthen these aspects of himself as he navigates civvy street.

The community context in the example provided by Participant 27 produced positive feedback, as opposed to destabilising feedback others had experienced. A process of rebalancing took place through social relations, which for Participant 27 above, occurred upon leaving the military. For others, there was an explicit recognition that beliefs once held needed to change:

Well, the other thing for me, that’s a good way to describe it, is also transformation. It’s an ability to change. And actually, this could be ... well not could, but this is the maybe, the beliefs that I hold. Therefore, I’ve also got the ability to challenge them and change them. Yeah, which is, which is really, like, quite powerful. Sometimes a bit scary. But um, but ultimately, an incredibly, incredibly powerful. So maybe, maybe it’s not the idea of transitioning, it’s the idea of transforming. (Participant 9, female)

In the above extract, Participant 9’s rhetoric can be understood as one way in which she understood the magnitude of the changing nature of the belief systems during the transition to civvy street. The nature of the transition is transformational for Participant 9’s belief system, such that at times it was scary. Through using the word transformation, we may interpret this as major shift in numerous aspects of one’s spiritual self, as opposed to small changes in specific attitudes and beliefs.

FORGING A SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Participants’ drive to calibrate important aspects of their spiritual selves, at times, brought about existential questions and uncertainty. Key to this theme is that participants had a drive to answer the questions of uncertainty as to who they are in terms of where they want to be. The individualising civvy street brings about a rebalancing process of the self, and the application of calibrating the self can, at times, create an unknown self-understanding. As one participant describes:

I started to question whether everything that I thought about myself and the Army as a good bloke, capable top third, top of the top third – was any of that even true. Maybe it isn’t true, but you have just been lied to all these years, you really start to question who you are, what you are, what you’re capable of. (Participant 30, male)

Here, Participant 30’s account can be interpreted as describing a process where he was questioning key aspects

of his self that he felt were stable as a result of a difficult transition; namely, a good and capable person.

Such an interpretation can be conceptualized through James' (1890) descriptions of our successes and our pretensions; our actual achievements versus our desired achievements (Swann & Bosson, 2010). As Swann and Bosson (2010) depict, our self-esteem is rooted in our competent performance in important areas of living. The military invokes a self-view of capability and goodness, which is threatened in civvy street, where our pretensions do not meet our previous successes. Participant 30's experience could be understood to have, perhaps due to his interactions in civvy street, had a significant reduction in his self-views in areas of life deemed important to him, which can result in significant psychological distress (Thoits, 2013). This appears to have led to his questioning of his self-view such that it has become unknown. In questioning what he is capable of, he may be implying that his vision of a future possible self shifted in a way that his congruent with his current self view, one that has reduced in its esteem.

Participants worked to develop an understanding of themselves in different ways. Some sought to embrace the uncertainty that pervades civvy street through reconnecting with their past self-understanding:

I always have said I'd like to be the person, the the mindset of that person that joined up before he joined up. And that was being able just to relax around people. It doesn't matter if they're late, it doesn't matter if they're not early, doesn't matter if they leave stuff lying on the floor. Because that's not important in life as such, and just being able to deal with and take that. (Participant 19, male)

Participant 19 appeared to be describing a process whereby he has identified how he wants to be within civvy street. Further, he may be understood to suggest that he hopes to be able to embrace the less predictable nature of civvy street in a way that he perhaps once did prior to entering the military. In drawing upon possible selves (James, 1890; Markus & Nurius, 1986), Participant 19 may be reconnecting with past qualities and attitudes that formed his spiritual self and casting them towards a future possible self so as to seek greater comfort during the MTC transition.

Other participants worked to reconnect with old or connect with new veterans rather than previous versions of their self, which helped reduce a sense of being misunderstood and a need to change the self in a new climate:

I think it's because people in the services know what everyone else is about and know what they've gone through. Where someone from civilian background,

wouldn't understand that. So, if I turned around and said to my friends start using slang, slang words, slang sayings, they understand, they understand, that they laugh. And then they reply with some things like that. But if I do that to someone from civilian background, I mean, I've probably get frowned upon but yeah, I don't know why, just feel more naturally relaxed really and more understood. (Participant 22, male)

Participant 22 appeared to describe feeling more relaxed and connected to those from a military background compared with those from a civilian background. It seems that he is describing an interconnectedness and mutual understanding between others from the military that does not exist with civilians. Reconnecting with other ex-military personnel can be conceptualised through the social self (Comello, 2009; James, 1890). The recognition received from mutual understanding assists in boosting esteem. When there is a mutual understanding between people, there is a natural inclination to connect, rather than put up with an individualising society where a lack of recognition could result in distress (Slavich et al., 2010).

Numerous participants described this experience of feeling a greater sense of recognition and connection with other veterans, and some worked to develop ways in which to maximise this, by retaining friendship groups or establishing new networks. For example, one participant, having established a veteran networking group, explained: "So, considering you know, 18 months ago, I didn't want, you know, veteran was the last word that I ever wanted to hear. It's now going to be fully embedded part of my day now" (Participant 8, female). Here, Participant 8 appeared to be describing how she was connecting with the term veteran through her networking group, having previously not sought to define herself in this way, since it offered a way to "get some support and have a safe place to practice and all that kind of stuff." Participant 8 could be seen to appreciate the mutual connection and understanding provided by connecting with a group of people that offer recognition. Further, she highlighted how opportunities to connect with others when leaving the military was limited, and as such she needed to set up a specific group. Based on participants' responses, it seems that connecting with ex-military personnel may be a route through which people can seek to forge a positive self-understanding.

DISCUSSION

Military veterans face a host of challenges in transitioning into "civvy street" (Ashcroft, 2014). The current article

shows the complexities faced with the transition. UK veteran literature predominantly holds that most “fare well” in MTC transition based on employment figures. This article, however, elucidates that veterans, even those that are not considered the “significant minority” that experience difficulties, face considerable and complex challenges in negotiating civvy street and the multiple ways in which they conceptualise their understanding of themselves throughout their transition. The focus on employment as a means of what it is to fare well neglects many key transitional experiences.

Our findings build upon the MTC transition UK research base that points toward a key role one’s self understanding has in the MTC transition (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Brunger et al., 2013). However, through the lens of William James’ (1890) foundational theorising of the self, this paper highlights the complex interplay between civvy street and the self, such that a sense of self developed prior to leaving the military becomes destabilised by an increasingly individualised society. Participants in this study tried to reconfigure who it is they believed that they were to adapt to the needs and demands of an entrepreneurial and productive civvy street. However, society is not structured in a way that facilitates a positive experience for veterans, and thus they often turned to fellow veterans in their identity renegotiation.

Participants were forced to renegotiate many aspects of the self as an attempt to accommodate themselves within the civilian environment. Common components of the self, such as altruism, conflicted with a societal preference to take care of one’s self and earn their place (Cushman, 1996; Rose, 1998; Trevisan et al., 2021). A key context that was apparent in discussions of the self was a shift from working collectively toward a shared goal within the military, to working towards a goal for only the self. A lack of trust in civilians and a sense of repeated rejection, ultimately led participants to renegotiate their self-view in a way that was detrimental to them. Important ways of construing the self required change in order to adapt, and damages to important self-views may be considered more threatening and can be more psychologically harmful (Thoits, 2013). Participants, however, demonstrated adaptability in pursuing new ways to come to terms with their sense of self, such as through reconnecting with veterans where positive recognition promoted a more positive sense of self and a mutual understanding. Perhaps though, as previous research has pointed to (Smith & True, 2014), a sense of misunderstanding with civilians and reconnection with veterans reinforces a previously held sense of self that may act as a barrier to integration. As one participant suggested, the stereotypes that civilians live by act to reinforce the military sense of self that is incompatible with civvy street.

IMPLICATIONS

In this article we have highlighted the struggles that participants experienced in the negotiation of the self when moving into civilian life. Whilst some attitudes and beliefs taken forwards from the military were helpful, for example, through bringing together a neighbourhood, other attitudes left people further isolated. Implications from the current research are manifold.

There is a clear need for veterans in civvy street to have the opportunity for greater connectedness and a sense of community. Given the impact on both the social self and the spiritual or psychological self and the challenges this brings, attention needs to be paid to community approaches to mental health in the context of the MTC transition. Shared experiences formed some participants’ pursuit of reconnection, and this provides opportunity for improved transition experiences.

Community spaces offer much as a means of improving social relations and well-being (Walker et al., 2017). As the transition currently stands, the process of extracting what is needed from the forces, a sense of the collective is a challenge in a society where individuals work to their own personal goals. Community spaces do not need be veteran specific, as this may only maintain the current disconnection that persists between the military and civilian society, and may target veterans with an aim to support the reintegration into civilian society such that shared experiences can be harnessed.

There is a need for recognition that veterans are undergoing a process of rebalancing. Their sense of self—where their social self, attitudes, and beliefs are in flux—may facilitate distress (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). Our sense of self plays an important role in much of the theoretical underpinnings of mental distress (e.g. Breakwell, 1986) and is recognised in psychological models pertaining to specific areas of mental health (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Greenberger & Padesky, 2016; Waller et al., 2007). What has been elucidated through participants’ experiences is that they are having to manage and negotiate key aspects to the ways in which they construe themselves, which in consideration of much literature, will likely have implications for their own mental health, regardless of whether they require or seek support. Recognition then, needs to come from multiple sources.

Whilst mental health support services may consider aspects of the self, wider consideration of the role of transition on the sense of self may prove beneficial for veterans coming to terms with the experience. For example, whilst the self is considered in PTSD treatment (Ehlers & Clark, 2000), it specifically pays attention to the interpretations of the self based on the traumatic event(s). This article highlights that there may be wider and broader

interactions taking place that are further confounding those interpretations that also need attending to in clinical work in this population. This may include developing an understanding of known risk factors such as financial, housing precarity, and family conflict, as well as exploring how the individual perceives themselves in navigating civilian life and the challenges that arise as a result. Systemic models that attend to the wider context such as the coordinated management of meaning (Pearce, 2005), may prove useful in aiding the exploration of transition and veteran's sense of self.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current research facilitated an in-depth analysis of participant experiences of the MTC transition, there are however, several limitations to consider. Although participants represented a wide range of job roles and experiences within the military, diversity characteristics in relation to gender and ethnicity were limited. All participants identified as white-British, and the interviewer too was white-British. Whilst the UK military is a predominantly white population, there is an increase in global majority military personnel (Ministry of Defence, 2020) whose voices have not been heard. Entering a civvy street where explicit and implicit racism exists (Miller, 2021; Razai et al., 2021) may create additional transitionary stress, as such research attending to global majority transition experiences is paramount. Furthermore, the current research did not explore in detail the experiences of participants prior to serving in the military. It has been speculated that pre-enlistment difficulties may account for difficult transition (Murphy et al., 2019), and it may be that the experiences of the participants during transition may reflect pre-enlistment experiences.

Of participants interviewed for the current research, three of 20 were women. Recent research has highlighted key gender differences in women veterans' willingness to access support for mental health upon their return to civvy street (Godier-McBard et al., 2022). Experiences of feeling overlooked as women within the military, as suggested by Godier-McBard and colleagues (2022), may be influential in their subsequent transition. One participant, whilst not suggesting it was harder for women, recognized barriers in connecting with female civilians that may not be present for men. Further research may incorporate a larger sample of women to consider in greater depth possible gender differences in how society and the self interact in the MTC transition.

Voluntary and medically discharged leavers were included in the current research. Whilst being medically discharged from the military has different implication for the material self, whereby it may be perceived as a

failure (as described by one participant), leavers described similar experiences regarding their sense of self and the challenges faced in civvy street. There may indeed be differences amongst voluntary leavers, whereby some may be motivated by a wish to leave, and others may be motivated by a wish to pursue something specific and tangible. Further research is required to examine the complexities of transition for both voluntary and medically discharged service leavers.

The current research has facilitated consideration of how veteran and societal attitudes may hinder the MTC transition as advised by Binks and Cambridge (2018). Participants highlighted how their own perceptions of societal attitudes and structures have hindered their transition and impacted their sense of self in important and complex ways. Further research may be carried out with civilians with no military experience to examine the perspectives held of military veterans.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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