



Veteran Autofiction: Empirical and Practical Possibilities

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Recent calls for methodological innovations in the field of veterans studies have emphasized the benefits of employing narrative methods. I argue that veteran autofiction—a genre of life writing that combines elements of autobiography and fiction—can usefully and uniquely inform the field of veterans studies and provide practitioners with a useful tool for enhancing veterans’ supports. Supported by critical reflections on and an analysis of my own autofiction short story (*Transition to Home*), I explain how veteran autofiction can enable narrative analysis in veterans studies, provide researchers with material needed for instrumental case studies, support practitioners who are helping veterans find useful coping strategies, and elicit communal responses to veterans’ issues. In conclusion, I urge scholars and practitioners to turn to the production, dissemination, and analysis of veteran autofiction to enhance veteran supports and advance the field of veterans studies.

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In a recent call for methodological innovations in the field of veterans studies, scholars and practitioners noted that many traditional methods—methods that rely on clinical, survey, and institutional data—inadequately capture the complexities of veteran experiences (Boyd et al., 2025). Echoing the calls of their colleagues on these points, one contributor suggested that “[r]ethinking methodology means questioning our assumptions about what counts as evidence,” arguing that “[w]hen we broaden our methodological imagination, we begin to see veterans not as data points but as narrators, meaning-makers, and institutional navigators” (Abby Kinch, as quoted in Boyd et al., 2025, p. 46). Herein, I argue that veteran autofiction—a genre of life writing that combines elements of autobiography and fiction—should be recognized as meaningful evidence in veterans studies and considered an accessible tool in the researcher’s and practitioner’s toolboxes. Presenting my own autofiction short story as an exemplar, I demonstrate that this form of writing has the potential to inform social scientific work in the field of veterans studies, enhance our understanding of veterans’ experiences, promote veteran well-being, and incite communal responses to veterans’ issues. I thus argue that broadening our *methodological imagination* in the field of veterans studies should include a turn to the *imaginative methodology* of autofictional storytelling.

Veteran storytelling involves the recounting, telling, or recording of experiences and feelings by veterans. To date, social scientific research that explores or incorporates veteran storytelling primarily takes two forms. On one hand, there is a substantial body of work demonstrating that storytelling can assist military veterans in processing traumatic and emotionally distressing experiences (Alston, 1995; Giesler & Juarez, 2019; Mamon et al., 2017) and support their reintegration into their families and communities (Flora et al., 2016; Giesler & Juarez, 2019; Mamon et al., 2020). On the other hand, a number of scholars have relied on autoethnographic storytelling to expose potential themes in veterans’ experiences (Dunlap, 2022; Hunnicutt, 2022; Senecal et al., 2022). In general, each of these streams of research focuses on autobiographically factual recollection and recounting. Less attention has been paid to veteran autofiction and its place in veterans studies. This is an unfortunate gap in the literature given the capacity for veteran autofiction to enhance our “understanding of... narrated events... [which] are heavily linked with real-world happenings” (Arminio, 2024, p. 131).

In the sections that follow, I first introduce and describe the genre of autofiction before presenting my own autofiction short story titled *Transition to Home*. I then present a critical analysis of and reflection on *Transition to*

Home to support my call for scholars to embrace autofiction storytelling as a meaningful method of knowledge creation, and my call for practitioners to leverage this mode of storytelling to support and elicit public support for veterans.

AUTOFICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

Simply stated, “autobiographical writing is a self-referential mode” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 7). As a form of writing that “posit[s] the conceptual identity between writer, narrator and protagonist” (de Muijnck, 2022, p. 79), autobiographical work relies on personal recollection (Hart, 1970), self-examination (Smith, 1998), and narrative construction (Howarth, 1974). Given the self-representational nature of autobiographical writing, Smith and Watson (2001) characterize “autobiographical truth” as “an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of *the meaning* of a life” (p. 13, emphasis added). To produce this shared understanding, autobiographers may dramatize or fictionalize various aspects of their story to convey meaning.

Acknowledging that biographers may rely on various degrees of objectivity, creativity, and fictionalization in their work, Clifford (1970) distinguishes between five ideal types of biography: objective, scholarly-historical, artistic-scholarly, narrative, and fictional. While a thorough delineation of these ideal types is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that they exist along a continuum depending on their degree of objectivity and fictionalization. Whereas subjective interpretation and fictionalization are absent in objective biography, they are prominent in fictional biography. While factual representation is predominant in objective and scholarly-historical work, artistic-scholarly, narrative, and fictional biographies are written by authors who rely on imagination and creativity to present a lively and engaging story, with fictional biographers being the least committed to an objective presentation of the facts (Clifford, 1970). For autobiographers writing in the fictional mode, their works—commonly characterized as autofiction (Saunders, 2020)—traverse the genres of autobiography and fiction as the author “navigates... between narrating oneself and writing about another self” (Roussel, 2022, p. 29). While some autobiographically factual content is characteristic of the work, when presented as autofiction, “reader and author have agreed that exceptions exist” (Hansen, 2017, p. 3). Though these exceptions may seem to imply poor autobiographical reporting, author Tim O’Brien (1990/1998)—an author who employs the autofictional mode in his account of experiences in Vietnam—suggests that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (p. 179).

Simply stated, biographies can be both “factual and highly imaginative at the same time” (Smith, 1998, p. 197) as the imaginative element is generally applied to demonstrate, emphasize, or reiterate the factual element. Elaborating on O’Brien’s distinction between two truths, Vonnegut et al. (2018) make the following note:

‘Happening-truth’ refers to a historically accurate account of what happened; ‘story-truth’ refers to the narrativization of the event that often takes liberties with or alters actual events, *but does so in the service of rendering a deeper ‘truth’ about the event than the happening-truth could ever convey* (p. 132, emphasis added).

Fictionalization is thus a useful tool for authors engaged in real-world storytelling as it helps them “clarify and explain” (O’Brien, 1990/1998, p. 158). Through autofiction, veteran authors aspire to produce “informative texts that speak seriously about the real world” (Arminio, 2024, p. 105).

MY AUTOFICTION ACCOUNT: TRANSITION TO HOME

To demonstrate the potential for veteran autofiction to “speak seriously about the real world” (Arminio, 2024, p. 105), I present my own autofiction short story and offer a critical reflection on and analysis of it in the sections that follow. To provide some context, I first provide the autobiographical backdrop on which my short story is situated and explain why I initially turned to the medium.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BACKDROP

I am a United States Army veteran with more than seven years of service on active duty as an infantryman. I enlisted in the Army in 2000 and married early in my term of service. My first child was born just six weeks after I left home for a 12-month deployment to Afghanistan. When I returned home from that year-long combat deployment, our daughter was 10 months old. I separated from service in 2007 and immediately began work in ‘Corporate America’ while attending graduate school in the evenings. Though my transition from military to civilian life may have appeared seamless and successful from the perspective of an outsider—gaining professional employment immediately after separating from service and completing graduate school in the years that followed—I struggled with many of the challenges often faced by veterans as they make this transition. Making sense of and explaining these successes and challenges is the primary task I took up in writing *Transition to Home*. Though the account is partially

fictionalized, the general themes and many of the details in the narrative below are true to my story. In the spirit of autofiction storytelling, the partial fictionalization of my account is deliberate, and intended to present an engaging story that conveys meaning and fosters understanding.

MY TURN TO AUTOFICTION

As a military veteran and university faculty member, I have been asked on a number of occasions to share scholarly and personal insights on common challenges faced by military and veteran students. After one such presentation, I was encouraged by a colleague to consider an autoethnographic study on the topic. With no personal experience employing ethnographic research methods, I initially dismissed the idea, but as a military scholar aware of the limited scholarly attention granted to veterans and veterans’ issues, I found merit in the suggestion.

As I sought to educate myself on the autoethnographic method, I was introduced to ethnographic work that relies on fiction writing techniques to enhance ethnographic insight. Works addressing “anthropological fiction” (van Voorst, 2024, p. 13), “ethnographic fiction” (Inckle, 2010, p. 27), and “creative ethnography” (Corbett, 1994, p. 308), for example, suggested that fictionalized work can be “faithful to... lived experiences” while employing techniques of fictionalization to “...promot[e] innovative thinking and compelling storytelling” (van Voorst, 2024, p. 13). Whereas rigorously employing techniques of an ethnographic methodology I was unfamiliar with seemed daunting, writing a short story utilizing a method that “privilege[s] evocation over cognitive contemplation” (Denzin, 2003, p. 119) seemed feasible. Whereas I spent months contemplating how to initiate a rigorous autoethnographic study informed by an admittedly clouded recollection of past events, I wrote a full draft of *Transition to Home* in a span of just two days. While I was hesitant to share some details in a truthful autobiographical account, I felt unrestrained in my sharing of them in the following autofiction story that relies partially on *story-truth* to convey *happening-truth*.

TRANSITION TO HOME

She would not stop crying. Screaming, actually. She was warm, fed, tired, and nestled comfortably in the bed between me and my wife. New to parenting, I was overwhelmed and felt totally helpless. I had no idea what to do to console her. Gently rub her back to calm her down? Back away to give her some space to kick and flail? Talk softly to her in a soothing voice? Stay as silent as the night so as not to make matters worse?

After some time, my wife sat up and said in a hesitating whisper: "I think it's because you're in the bed; she's not used to that. Maybe if you leave for a while she'll fall asleep and you can come back." I nodded as a knot appeared instantly in my throat. I gently slipped out from under the covers, off the bed, and out of the room.

The cries seemed to die down instantly as I lay down on the living room couch. I pinched my forehead. Hard. An impulse that seemed to set in that night we lost Hernandez and Fisher along that riverbank in the Oruzgan Province.

I stayed on the couch for some time. The harder I pinched, the fewer the tears. It always did the trick. I listened to an hour of silence tick by then slipped back into the bedroom. I grabbed the two small baby blankets off the rocking chair and a stuffed penguin with a yellow bowtie from the toy bin for a pillow. I made myself as comfortable as possible on the floor next to the bed and tried to fall asleep in the silence. I pinched my forehead instead.

My wife had a ten month on-ramp to parenting. Ten months to establish a relationship with the daughter I was just getting to know. Ten months to learn what her cries meant. Ten months to learn how to soothe her. Ten months to become a family. I had ten months away. When I left for Afghanistan, my wife was eight months pregnant. When I reunited with her twelve hours before the bedroom incident, she was a mother.

I pinched harder.

The next morning, I was up and gone before the two of them were awake. To be clear, I was happy to be up and gone before the two of them were awake. I reported to my unit where we were set to begin the Transition to Home program: Four days of classes from 7:00 am to 12:00 pm in which civilians would tell us how to deal with the feelings we might be having, how to reestablish our relationships, how to find purpose and meaning in our daily lives, how to focus on the future, and a number of other topics that felt entirely unimportant to a roomful of soldiers just a week removed from a combat zone. Once we finished this four-day program we would be experts on the transition to home and would be able to submit our separation paperwork and get out of the Army.

I pinched my forehead as a community volunteer facilitating a workshop on the power of journaling explained how using differently colored ink pens depending on my mood could help me use my journal to track my feelings across time. The clock read 7:42 am. I pinched harder.

We were free to go home at noon, after the last workshop of the day. I think it was called Hobbies and Healing. I didn't go home, I joined the unmarried soldiers for darts and pool at the recreation center. They were offering free ice cream. Something to keep us busy, I suppose. Neither darts nor pool is a hobby of mine but being with a group to which I belonged rather than with a family to which I didn't seem more important for my healing in the moment. I went home at 5:00 pm. That's what time I told my wife the workshops ended each day.

After nearly a week of transition training and another week of paperwork, medical discharge exams, equipment turn-ins, and military records sign-offs, I was discharged from the Army. I was free to pursue my hobbies and healing, I suppose.

I was fortunate to find an opportunity to cash in on the leadership experience I had as a sergeant in the Army. I got a salaried position as a training specialist for a large corporation. The pay and benefits were decent, but to be honest, I was just looking for something—anything—to keep me busy. I worked in the human resources office where the hours were 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, but as a salaried employee, there was little tracking of my hours. I noticed that many of those in the office took advantage of this and showed up around 9:00 am and left by 4:00 pm. I was usually in the office by 7:00 am and rarely left before 5:00 pm. I told my wife these were the expectations. I didn't have the heart to tell her I was looking for something—anything—to keep my mind busy and my body out of the house.

My boss frequently thanked me for bringing "an Army work ethic" to the office. She commented that she couldn't believe how dedicated the military makes a person. Outwardly, I shrugged off the compliments. Inwardly, I relished the praise. I stopped focusing on work as a reason to get out of the house and started focusing on work as something worthy of my commitment. It gave me purpose. I became a workaholic as my work hours stretched from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. The change was so gradual I hadn't noticed. My wife had. But that didn't stop me from looking for something—anything—to keep my mind busy and my body out of the house.

I explained to my wife that if I wanted to move up the corporate ladder at my current job or ever wanted an opportunity to search for a better paying similar job somewhere else, I would need a college degree. I had no idea if that was true. But I wasn't

journaling and I couldn't imagine there to be a hobby out there that would help me heal. I missed the camaraderie of the Army and had too much time at home to wallow in the fact that family life felt less family-like than Army life. I found myself pinching my forehead a lot in the evenings.

With my military background and veteran's educational benefits, getting accepted to the local university was no problem. I enrolled in the business management program. It was the only program they offered that could be completed with all evening classes. This meant that I could attend classes from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm and complete the program in four years. I liked that plan. It kept my mind busy and my body out of the house.

My professors often commented on my work ethic. Dr. Makowski said she wished the "traditional" students were just half as committed and engaged as I was. Inwardly, I relished the praise. I worked harder, committing more and more time to my studies. I wasn't pinching my forehead as much.

My wife didn't like being stuck in an apartment all day, so we bought a house with a decent-sized backyard in a quiet neighborhood. My salary wasn't quite what the banks wanted, but I was able to get a government-backed veteran's home loan. The house was 30 years old and could use some work. That's why I wanted it. It would give me something to do and something to keep my mind busy.

My stepdad made the three-hour drive to our house every weekend to help me make home improvements. Having recently retired, he said he liked the new schedule working weekends and having the full week off—the opposite of "the grind" he said he was happy to be leaving behind in retirement. In the first month we stripped out and replaced the carpet in the bedrooms; gutted and rebuilt the small bathroom; and sanded and painted the kitchen cabinets. Putting in a good 15 to 20 hours of work around the house each weekend was tiring, but it gave me something to do and it kept my mind busy. My stepdad said he was in awe of my ability to manage work, school, and home life. He said I had the true dedication of a "military man." Inwardly, I relished the praise. I generally spent what little time I had at home each week preparing the house for the upcoming weekend project.

It was September 30th. I remember the date because it was the same date we lost Hernandez and Fisher along that riverbank in the Oruzgan

Province. On my drive home from school my legs started to go numb. I assumed it was because I had just spent three hours sitting in an uncomfortable school desk. I arrived home and somewhere between the car and the front porch I collapsed. I felt it happening, seemingly in slow motion, but I couldn't stop it. My legs went wobbly, my shoulders slouched, and by the time my body was falling onto the walkway my arms were too weak to catch my fall. My face settled on its side in the prickly grass next to the walkway with my eyes directed toward the street. Everything was blurry but I could make out the lights on my neighbor's front porch. I was mindful enough to know that something was terribly wrong. Heart attack, I assumed.

Fortunately, my wife was meeting me at home to collect a few more things to take to her friend's house where she and our daughter were staying while she waited for me to decide whether I felt our marriage was worth saving. I still wasn't sure. I found solace in committing myself to work, school, and housework. I hadn't pinched my forehead in a long time.

I'm not sure how much time passed, but my neighbor's porch light seemed to change from soft glowing white to flashing red. My vision sharpened as I made eye contact with a group of paramedics that were asking me questions as they strapped me tightly down to a stretcher. I understood the questions, but I couldn't formulate a response. My mouth opened, but I was unable to speak. I felt the sensation of crying, but I am not sure if tears actually fell. I had generally lost all physical functioning, but even worse was the fact that I was mentally aware of it.

After a two-day hospital stay and countless tests, I felt normal and the doctors had no answers. After talking with me and my wife about my life, lifestyle, and schedule, they suggested it was stress induced. I am still not convinced stress can physically affect a person in the way I experienced, but the medical professionals and my wife all seemed to agree.

Back home, she would not stop crying. Screaming, actually. She was furious that I was committed to everything but the family. Furious that I was putting my life—our daughter's father's life—at risk. I tried to interject, explaining that those commitments kept me sane. "No!" she yelled in reply, "they keep your mind busy and your body out of the house!" She was right. I knew she was right. I went silent. The fight ended with artificial goodbyes.

This morning I went to the post office to have my signature on the divorce papers notarized. I pinched my forehead as the kind woman behind the counter performed her official duties. She tried to ease the tension with a joke about me having more time for my hobbies now. I pinched harder and asked her to add my envelope to the outgoing mail.

It's Saturday, but my stepdad is taking a break from his visits so I can work through the divorce. But now that I've finished writing this, I'm just not sure what I'm supposed to do to keep my mind busy. I thought journaling was supposed to help.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON VETERAN AUTOFICTION AND *TRANSITION TO HOME*

When I was planning to leverage my story as the focus of a methodologically-sound autoethnographic study—that is, before I settled on the medium of autofiction—I wrestled with decisions regarding which details were necessary to include, what information about my experience I was comfortable sharing so publicly, and how to craft and present my autoethnographic account. Choosing autofiction freed me from these arresting concerns and afforded me an opportunity to tell a story in a compelling manner that emphasizes a set of main ideas that aptly characterize my lived experience. In particular, I leveraged strategies of autofiction storytelling to demonstrate the challenges I experienced when (re)connecting with my family after returning from a combat deployment; my struggles with the transition from military to civilian life; and the effects of these challenges on me, my family, and my relationships. Through autofiction, I was able to craft a narrative account with relative ease that is revealing and informative. Incorporating critical reflections on and analysis of *Transition to Home* in the sections that follow, I demonstrate some of the benefits of this genre of life writing for the field of veterans studies. In particular, I explain how veteran autofiction can enable narrative analysis in veterans studies, provide researchers with material needed for instrumental and collective case studies, support practitioners who are helping veterans find useful coping strategies, and elicit communal responses to veterans' issues.

VETERAN AUTOFICTION AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Transition to Home is not just a story; it is a narrative. As characterized by Longo (2015), “a narrative text tells a story...by describing a series of actions or events” (emphasis

added) and identifying “changes (from an initial status x to a final status y ,” p. 20). With a focus on actions, events, and changes—key characteristics of narrative—*Transition to Home* lends itself well to narrative analysis.

Though the concept of narrative is contested in the social sciences (Chase, 2018), narratives are often distinguished from other forms of discourse given their focus on the ordering of events. To borrow from scholarly descriptions, narratives “give order to events... by interconnecting them” (Longo, 2015, p. 3); they “shape what becomes experience through ordering events” (Smith, 2016, p. 205), and they “organiz[e] events and objects into a meaningful whole” (Chase, 2005, p. 656). It is not just the individual events, but the interconnectedness and ordering of events that has meaning. Extrapolating this meaning is a common goal of narrative analysis.

As Smith (2016) observes, whereas “most qualitative analyses break data apart” by relying on “some form of intense coding,” a common aim of those conducting narrative analysis “is to keep the story intact in order to preserve and examine the wealth of storied detail contained in it” (p. 210). “What distinguishes narrative analysis” from other methods of study “is a focus on [an] account in its entirety and integration among its parts, rather than on discursive or thematic parts” (Chase, 2018, p. 552). Given that those writing in the autofictional mode allow for story-truth to reveal “a deeper ‘truth’... than the happening-truth could ever convey” (Vonnegut et al., 2018, p. 132), veteran autofiction is well suited to convey meaning and thus support narrative analyses in veterans studies.

In *Transition to Home*, I present the reader with a set of interconnected events that collectively characterize a transition experience that cannot be reduced to the events occurring in any one scene or context alone. When the story is read as a narrative whole, it is evident that the story is not about a combat veteran who struggles to connect with his family after returning from deployment; it is a story about a combat veteran whose coping strategies include excessive commitments to non-familial roles, and whose excessive commitments threaten their health and well-being and damage their familial relationships. It is not a story about a veteran who finds success in education and in the workplace while struggling with life at home; it is a story about a veteran whose success outside of the home is dysfunctional and dynamically intertwined with their dysfunctional home life. Though partially fictionalized, *Transition to Home* is a story that demonstrates with considerable accuracy the dysfunctional coping strategies I employed as a combat veteran and the detrimental effects they had on my family and my well-being.

To borrow phrasing from Kinch (as quoted in Boyd et al., 2025), it is through the crafting of my narrative and

the sharing of my story that I was able to demonstrate my “situated expertise” and share “a lived understanding of transition that cannot be accessed through traditional top-down research” (p. 46). Had I been presented with a series of surveys or questionnaires addressing post-combat and post-service experience in work, school, and home life, it is unlikely that the story I was able to tell in *Transition to Home* would have been evident. Had researchers relied on indicators such as employment history and educational accomplishment to assess challenges with the transition from military to civilian life, it is unlikely that my successes outside of the home would have been interpreted as dysfunctional. My story is most informative when viewed as a collective whole. It is the interconnectedness of my successes outside the home and my challenges in the home that is the most revealing and meaningful. This interconnectedness is uniquely demonstrated through storytelling, and applying the autofictional mode empowered me to tell my story.

Simply stated, “veterans are... the best narrators of their own experience” (Abby Kinch, as quoted in [Boyd et al., 2025, p. 43](#)), and analyses of their narratives are essential for advancing the field of veterans studies ([Boyd et al., 2025](#)). However, like me, some veterans may find it difficult or challenging to publicly or even privately share some aspects of their experience ([Flora et al., 2016](#); [Mamon et al., 2017](#); [Purcell et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, with unique experiences and insights that are often not well understood by those outside the military and veteran communities, veterans may find it difficult to characterize their experiences or explain themselves to a lay audience ([Ahern et al., 2015](#); [Giesler & Juarez, 2019](#)). Autofiction allows for veterans to “take liberties” in their storytelling ([Vonnegut et al., 2018, p. 132](#)), empowering them to depict themselves in a comprehensible and compelling story that leaves their *narrative* intact. Applying methods of narrative analysis, researchers can then “examine the wealth of storied detail contained in” these narratives ([Smith, 2016, p. 210](#)) by “attend[ing] to layers of meaning within” them ([Chase, 2018, p. 552](#)) and “foreground[ing] the temporal and emotional textures” evident in the stories they tell (Abby Kinch, as quoted in [Boyd et al., 2025, pp. 46–47](#)).

As [Boyd et al. \(2025\)](#) suggest, “advancing the field [of veterans studies] requires pluralistic approaches that incorporate... narrative inquiry—” among other approaches (p. 48). I argue that such narrative inquiry should not dismiss veteran autofiction as fabrication but rather embrace the medium as a meaningful and informative source of data. In particular, I argue that veteran autofiction can support and enable case studies that enhance social scientific research on and our understanding of veterans’ experiences.

VETERAN AUTOFICTION AS INSTRUMENTAL CASE

In the social sciences, the case study methodology takes a variety of forms. Whereas some case studies have the expressed intent of developing a nuanced understanding of a specific case and its particularities, others study a single case or multiple cases for the purposes of hypothesis generation or theory development ([Yin, 2014](#)). This latter interest is often the goal of case study research in the social and behavioral sciences ([Schwandt & Gates, 2018](#)). Veteran autofiction can support this goal in the interdisciplinary field of veterans studies as it provides the researcher with an informative instrumental case for analysis.

Differentiating between types of case studies, [Stake \(1998\)](#) defines the “instrumental case study” as a study in which “a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (p. 88). The case is *instrumental* in enhancing our social scientific understanding of a particular issue or phenomenon, but the details of the case are of lesser interest. In an instrumental case study, the case “plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else” (p. 88). It is noteworthy that in autofiction story-truths ‘plays a supportive role’ to convey happening-truth—that is, story-truth is relied on to ‘facilitate our understanding of something else.’ In *Transition to Home*, for example, I relied on story-truth to facilitate an understanding of the dysfunctional coping strategies I employed as I managed my transition to home life after deployment and to civilian life after more than seven years of active-duty service. Like other veterans’ narratives, my story presents a case that, when subjected to analysis, may enhance our understanding of the myriad ways service members and veterans experience and manage these transitions.

As [Borus \(1976\)](#) notes, “[t]he entire experience of military service is characterized by a multitude of often stressful transitions” (p. 28). In the field of veterans studies, considerable attention has thus been given to studying and understanding these transitions, ways veterans cope with them, and the social, psychological, and relational consequences of these transitions and coping strategies (for some examples from the post 9–11 era: [Ahern et al., 2015](#); [Elnitsky et al., 2017](#); [Hunnicutt, 2020](#); [Markowitz et al., 2023](#); [Renshaw et al., 2008](#); [Sørensen, 2015](#)). While this body of work has produced relevant conceptual frameworks and theoretical models to explain observable patterns among and distinct characteristics of veterans’ transitions, my review of the literature suggests a lack of concerted attention to workaholism or work addiction as coping strategies.¹ My narrative, however, suggests that these conditions might warrant consideration in studies of military and veteran transitions.

While a thorough consideration of the conceptual distinction between workaholism and work addiction is beyond the scope of this article (for a discussion of this distinction see [Kun et al., 2020](#)), it is noteworthy that elements of both workaholism—that is, a “need for work [that] has become so excessive that it creates noticeable disturbance or interference with [the workaholic’s] bodily health, personal happiness, and interpersonal relations” ([Oates, 1971, p. 4](#))—and work addiction—a condition in which the work addict “spend[s] a good deal of time in work activities at the expense of family and other... obligations” ([Scott et al., 1997, p. 292](#))—are evident in my narrative. Though it may be that these aspects of my experience prove to be fairly unique and uncharacteristic of military and veteran transitions, *Transition to Home* may alternatively prove to be instrumental in exposing an understudied set of conditions that warrant further consideration in studies of veteran transitions. In either case, an analysis of my transition narrative is informative as it lends credit to the argument that “veterans do not simply ‘move on’ from the military, but must negotiate their place in shifting social networks, community roles, and systems that are often ill-equipped to receive them” (Abby Kinch, as quoted in [Boyd et al., 2025, p. 45](#)).

VETERAN AUTOFICTION AS SELF-CARE

Given the reported benefits of storytelling for veteran well-being ([Alston, 1995](#); [Flora et al., 2016](#); [Giesler & Juarez, 2019](#); [Mamon et al., 2017](#); [Mamon et al., 2020](#)), I would be negligent if I did not report on the therapeutic benefits I received from writing *Transition to Home*. In support of my initial plan to complete a more academically oriented autoethnographic study of my transition experience, I spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on and making sense of my experience before committing to autofiction. This process of recollection, reflection, and sensemaking helped me craft my story and feel more comfortable with and confident in my narrative. The sensemaking process and psychological comfort I experienced in writing *Transition to Home* support Alston’s (1995) characterization of storytelling as “the art of using stories as a tool of wisdom and healing” (p. 394).

For those who have experienced psychologically distressing or traumatic events, personal storytelling has been endorsed as a viable means of psychotherapy ([Honos-Webb et al., 2004](#)), as a mode of self-healing ([Henke, 1998](#)), and as a form of self-care ([Ostaszewska, 2022](#)). In the field of veterans studies, scholars have reported that through personal storytelling veterans have felt relief and an enhanced sense of confidence ([Mamon et al., 2017](#)), felt a sense of affirmation of their lived experiences ([Giesler & Juarez, 2019](#)), and established stronger connections with

their communities ([Mamon et al., 2020](#)) and families ([Flora et al., 2016](#)). Given that veterans often find it challenging or distressing to share their stories with others ([Flora et al., 2016](#); [Mamon et al., 2017](#); [Purcell et al., 2016](#)), practitioners may find value in supporting veterans in their development and writing of autofictional accounts to empower them as storytellers, promote self-healing, and support self-care. As with all modes of veteran storytelling used to negotiate traumatic or distressing experiences and events, practitioners should be conscientious and attentive when implementing this method.

VETERAN AUTOFICTION AND A CALL TO ACTION

Beyond the potential benefits of storytelling for veteran well-being, when shared with public audiences, veterans’ stories may elicit communal responses to veterans’ issues. In their study of a community story sharing event for veterans, Mamon et al. (2020) report that notable percentages of civilian audience members at the event reported an increased understanding of veterans’ experiences, increased empathy towards veterans, and, for some, a felt “call to action” in result (p. 810). As a unique form of storytelling, autofiction may enhance such responses.

As noted above, writing in the autofictional mode affords the author an opportunity to allow “story-truth” to more clearly and wholly convey “happening-truth” ([O’Brien, 1990/1998](#)). Given that a felt “call to action” on veterans’ issues is premised on the recognition and understanding of them—that is, on a recognition and understanding of the happening-truth—autofiction may be well suited to elicit this impulse among those who have limited knowledge of military life and veterans’ experiences. This impulse may be heightened by the ability of autofiction to foster empathy.

As Drabek (2018) suggests, fiction can be uniquely *instructional* because it enables *understanding*. With a plot and a cast of characters, as we engage with a fictional story “we follow the development” of a course of events, “we begin to feel” what the characters in the story feel, and “[w]e experience—at least to a limited degree”—what those in the story experience (p. 252). Techniques of fictionalization can be relied on to provoke empathy, and such empathetic responses among a public can prove highly beneficial in fostering a felt need to treat a particular issue as a problem in need of remedy ([Best, 2008](#)). While much of the publicly accessible information about military and wartime experiences may be “impersonal and detached” ([Arminio, 2024, p. 9](#)), veteran autofiction is personal and impassioned and, when shared, may prove beneficial in provoking a communal response to veterans’ issues. Practitioners who oversee or wish to develop programs that

rely on community engagement or community support may find that veteran autofiction is a useful resource capable of inciting a “call to action” on veterans’ issues.

CONCLUSION

In the field of veterans studies, it is imperative that the methodologies employed and the data collected “represent the full spectrum of veteran lives” (Boyd et al., 2025, p. 40). While critical ethnography, autoethnography, life history interviews, and other narrative methods have been endorsed by scholars for this purpose (Boyd et al., 2025), I have demonstrated the potential of veteran autofiction to advance knowledge in the field. Because all veterans have a story and all veterans speak with “epistemic authority” (p. 48), we should encourage them to share their stories in any and all forms that are accessible and informative. Moreover, given the potential benefits of storytelling for veteran well-being and the ability of the story sharing process to incite a call to action on veterans’ issues, practitioners should consider when and how they can employ autofictional storytelling for these purposes. As Longo (2015) notes: “At least intuitively, we know that tales, stories, and narratives are relevant” (p. 1). I thus call on scholars and practitioners to identify and harness the relevance of veteran autofiction.

NOTE

- 1 While some researchers analyzing military transitions note that an interviewee or study participant(s) commented on or highlighted their compulsive or excessive commitments to non-familial roles as a coping strategy (e.g., Fegley, 2024; Purcell et al., 2016), my review of relevant literature failed to identify a concerted focus on or thorough analysis of workaholicism or work addiction as coping strategies characteristic of service member and veteran transitions.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study did not require IRB or university review.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author is an Assistant Editor of *Journal of Veterans Studies*. The author has no competing interests to declare.

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