Definition of a veteran: the military viewed as a culture

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The definition of veteran, why does it matter in the transition process?

In 2014, at the NATO summit in Wales, the heads of state and government acknowledged the demanding nature of military service and reaffirmed their nation’s support to the men and women of the armed forces and their families, while still serving, but also after service (NATO, 2014). While this document does not include the word “veteran,” it certainly includes veterans in its scope. The reason is simple. In an international context, using the term “veteran” would cause undue confusion, as nations have defined who is a veteran quite differently, let alone the differences in who the public in any given country considers to be a veteran. Because this book is about military veterans transitioning to civilian life, we are going to take a closer look at who we mean when discussing issues connected to military–civilian transition. Who exactly are veterans?

Generally speaking, the definition of a veteran is based on either the length or the nature of the service, ranging from broadly inclusive to quite narrowly exclusive (Dandeker, Wessely, Iversen, & Ross, 2006). The most inclusive and broad definition of a veteran encompasses all those who have served in the armed forces for any period of time. For example, in the United Kingdom, the length of service to qualify as a veteran is a single day. In this case, the underlying factors are the intent and initiative of the person to serve and the subsequent acceptance of service by the armed forces. In essence, a life-long binding contract exists after a single day of service. For other nations, like the United States, the length of service is 2 years, yet that service must have occurred on active duty, along with having served “honorably” during the entire time of service.

The most exclusive or strict definition of a veteran only includes those who have served in combat. Many nations even make the further distinction between being a “combat veteran” or simply a “veteran,” with the former obviously being seen in a more favorably light than the latter. In practice, however, most nations include as veterans those who have served on any type of operational mission (i.e., deployed outside of their home nation). For example, the Dutch and Australians, as well as many other nations, define a veteran either as a former or current military service member who has served on a peacekeeping or peace enforcement mission in another nation. Indeed, this definition of a veteran appears to be the most widely accepted.

Both extremes of the definition spectrum have drawbacks, as well as advantages. More inclusive definitions are clearer and can potentially allow even the newest members of the armed forces to position themselves as a part of a larger veteran community. Yet, at
the same time, calling someone a veteran who had not even successfully completed basic combat training may diminish the contributions of other service members who did. Likewise, referring to service members who may have been dishonorably discharged from the military may also diminish the status of being a veteran.

Paradoxically, a strict or narrower definition of a veteran can also create unintended drawbacks. For instance, in the United States, someone who has served honorably in the National Guard or reserves, yet never served on active duty for the required 2 years, would not be considered a veteran, even if they served for 30 years. Such a situation would also be true for those nations that require serving on an operational deployment to be considered a veteran. Determining who is and is not a veteran is important, as being a veteran often determines the level and eligibility of support that a service member leaving the military will receive.

There are a range of aspects that determine whom a nation acknowledges as a veteran, including the nation’s history, civil–military relations, force structure (Dandeker et al., 2006), and social factors such as economic wealth and the social welfare system that exists within the nation (Danilova, 2010). The historical background of a nation can include many factors. For example, veteran status may be linked to participating in a specific war or conflict, with specific service required during a specific time period. If the service member served during that period, then they are acknowledged as a veteran of that conflict. The Croatian definition is one that can be given as an example in this context, as veterans are those who participated in the Croatian Homeland War 1991–95, members of National Liberation Movement (i.e., partisans) in WWII, members of Home Guard in WWII, and former active duty personnel who served after 1996 (Survey). The Croatian example also includes people who technically were not members of the official armed forces but nevertheless participated as combatants in an armed conflict. Therefore, some nations may include individuals who never wore the uniform.

Estonia can be given as an example when considering the force structure of the definition of veteran. Estonian Defence Forces are structured according to the principle of a reserve force, employing conscription and voluntary service for its Defence League and reserve units. Thus, the Estonian definition includes those who have participated in the military defense of the country as part of the Defence Forces (which in the Estonian case is a part of the definition looking into the future), a person who has participated as part of the Defence Forces on either international or collective defense operations and those who have sustained permanent incapacity for work while discharging duties in the Defence Forces or as an active
member of the Defence League. Thus, the definition supports the logic of the national defense model and also takes into account the contribution to national defense made by conscripts, Defence League members, and reservists (Veterans Policy, 2012). Countries with historically controversial civil-military relations are trying to find a different way of how to frame and understand the new emerging group of veterans. This process adds a specific set of challenges (Michael, Nicola, & Naser-Lather, 2018).

The official definitions of veteran may be viewed as political statements. How one defines a veteran can be used to promote veteran issues to help those who need help, but they can always be used to further other political goals. There are some groups of former military service members who have not been recognized by their nation as “veterans.” Typically, these former service members denied veteran status participated in unpopular or controversial conflicts and wars. For example, during the Soviet–Afghan War, because it was considered to be unsuccessful one already while it was still going on, those service members killed in action were sent home in closed zinc coffins and families had to bury them in the dead of night (Aleksievich, 1992). These veterans were only later recognized by the current Russian government, with some arguing purely for political gains (Porter, 2017).

Definition of veteran frames not only how we as individuals but also as societies understand and relate to the men and women who come under this definition. It determines who is eligible to receive financial support and services, public recognition, and private gratitude. In other words, definitions influence governmental policies and distribution of and access to resources—that is the sociological framework and more widely the social inclusion or exclusion within any given society (Burdett et al., 2013). In short, how a nation defines a veteran will determine how that nation recognizes and supports that service member after their military service is completed.

Because of the fact that some countries have a strict as opposed to a broad (Dandeker et al., 2006) definition of veteran, not all military service members are entitled to the same services and support. Indeed, even veterans from different wars may be entitled to different services and support, depending on the laws of that nation. In the United States, for example, the highly popular and successful education program that supports veterans obtaining an advanced college degree, known as the GI Bill, varies from one conflict to another, with the veterans of WWII receiving more generous support to attend the college or university of their choice compared with the veterans of the Vietnam War of those who served in Iraq or Afghanistan.
Despite the importance of how veteran status is defined, our aim here is to show that regardless of how each nation defines a veteran, all service members leaving the military will require some level of support as they are transitioning back into civilian life. Transitions can be stressful, and military transitions in particular entail moving from the military culture to the civilian culture, producing changes in relationships, assumptions, work context, and personal and social identity (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). An unsuccessful transition will be a burden on the social networks of the veteran and a burden for the community and for the state. So when discussing different aspects of the transition process, it is important to bear in mind that in terms of transition, the most inclusive idea of who is a veteran should be applied.1

It should be kept in mind that research shows most military service members do not experience major difficulties in their transition process (see Elnitsky, Fisher, & Blevins, 2017, for a comprehensive review). In addition to the more obvious reasons as to why some transitioning military service members need support, such as mental and physical health issues that they acquired during their military service, it has been proposed that transitioning from the military culture back to the civilian culture plays a significant role. Bergman, Burdett, and Greenberg (2014) propose that there is a “reverse” culture shock that separating service members experience. The “first” cultural shock being the one experienced when joining the military. Cultural shock denotes the feelings of unease and stress that people experience when the cultural practices that they are used to no longer serve them well in a new environment, causing them to rethink and adjust the competences they used to thrive in one cultural context to another cultural context (Raud, 2013). In the case of military service personnel, we can frame their experience as a reverse culture shock as they are in fact returning to a civilian culture where they used to have cultural competences, much like someone who has spent a significant amount of time abroad will have to readjust to their country of origin once they return. Although it can be argued that for those who have joined the military at a young age, culture shock may be more salient than reverse culture

1 Another point to be made is that this book does not look into the transitional needs of conscripts or the continuous transition of the members of the reserve forces but concentrates on the professional soldier. Finnish studies with conscripts have shown that also during conscript service socialization into the military organization will trigger adaptation to military culture and values (Salo, 2008). With regard to reservists Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, and Ben-Ari (2008) have proposed the concept of transmigration, i.e., reservists are equally proficient in military and civilian cultures and can move between the two with ease.
shock because they are in fact transferring into a culture where they have never gained competence or capital as grown-ups.

Arguably, the militaries of nations employ different force and organizational structures between the different services of the armed forces, let alone the armed forces of different countries. Nonetheless, various military organizations share certain traits that stem from the unique purpose of militaries, namely that the primary goal is to produce operationally ready units (Siebold, 2001) and thus the occupational culture of militaries is subjugated to that ultimate goal.

Military-to-civilian transition seen through the lens of cultural transition

To begin our short discussion on how military culture influences transitioning military service members, we need to determine what is culture or rather how we see culture within the context of this chapter. Culture has been much used and at times overused and has not always been clearly or well defined (Minkov, 2012). There are also those who have denied the utility of using the concept of culture (Barber, 2008). However, we propose to use Raud’s (2013) fairly straightforward definition of culture: it is a loosely tied set of representations, texts, and practices that give meaning to a person’s environment. Cultural practices are the things that people do and actively participate in, creating meaning and maintaining meaning. Culture is always learned and essentially a group phenomenon. Another useful definition that will help understanding the role of culture in transitioning between cultures is that proposed by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), with culture being “the software of the mind,” the sources of this software lie within the environments not only where people grew up but also where they collected their life experiences. This software allows us to make sense of the loosely connected sets of texts, representations, and practices within our cultural environments, but for those with different software or cultural background our environment might seem different or even not make sense at all (Raud, 2013). Military culture as any culture can be discussed on micro- and macrolevels, but, in this chapter, we are going to discuss culture more on the macrolevel, yet acknowledging that culture is practiced and performed by individuals in different and sometimes even contradicting ways even within the same cultural environment and among people with the same essential software.
So what makes the military culture distinct and separate from other occupational cultures? As the military is a large and constant organization in most countries, it has been the focal point of a lot of research and there have been various attempts in trying to establish what military culture is. Grimell (2015) points out that the commonalities of military cultures across militaries include traits such as valuing the collective, having an anti-individualistic perspective, as the group is placed above the individual and camaraderie is reinforced as much as possible. These bonds are more often than not mainly within the military culture, forming a strong in-group identity (Tajfel, 1974). The people in the in-group form close psychological attachments to each other. This often leads to forming a psychological distance between the military and civilian worlds (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011). Military culture generally promotes qualities such as unity, discipline, physical fitness, duty, and self-sacrifice, where the latter two are prominent among military personnel (Grimell, 2015; Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012). At the same time, military culture also has values that conventionally are not often associated with the military mind-set, values that seemingly clash with common idea of what the military is. Coll et al. (2011) bring out that armed forces also value restraint, obedience, and peacefulness. They explain that peacefulness is valued through preserving harmony that in some cases also means waging war to re-establish balance, restraint in using lethal power only as a last resort. Obedience to orders has to be seen as more complicated than simple compliance, as only orders that are just and morally justified should be carried out, though as Coll et al. (2011) concede it is unlikely that a direct order by a superior will be challenged.

One way of discussing military culture is through considering cultural dimensions that Hofstede produced in his large-scale research on culture in different organizations and countries. Hofstede et al. (2010) present the idea that cultures, especially national cultures, have four dimensions, i.e., aspects of culture, which can be measured relative to other cultures. These dimensions are power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. Later, on Minkov’s research, two more dimensions were added, which are the long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Hofstede is careful to point out that national culture dimensions are not fully applicable when explaining organizational cultures, if only because people usually do not grow up in organizations. However, Soeters, Winslow, and Weibull (2006) have demonstrated
in their research that national cultures have a strong influence on their militaries. At the same time, as pointed out earlier, it is the purpose of the military organization to produce operationally ready units, an aim that underlies all the activities taking place within the military organization. This singular purpose gives the militaries of different nations a starting point that reaches beyond the national borders and forms a military culture that shares commonalities across nations. That is to say that not all military cultures are the same, but as discussed above, there are universal traits that all militaries share.

The first dimension that Hofstede et al. (2010) discuss is the way cultures handle that people are in fact unequal. This is measured by the power distance index; in countries where the power distance is low, there is a smaller emotional distance between superiors and subordinates and thus subordinates have fewer trepidations in approaching or contradicting their superiors. The collectivism (Hofstede et al. 2010) refers to the power of the group, how willing are people to put the collective, common good above the needs of the individual. Hofstede et al. (2010) see masculinity in cultural dimensions as referring to traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness that are highly valued within the cultural environment. Avoidance of uncertainty according to Hofstede et al. (2010) refers to how tolerant cultures are to ambiguous and uncertain situations. They continue that long-term goal orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift, but also include such traits as willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose, respect for circumstance, and concern with personal adaptiveness. The last and final dimension that Hofstede et al. (2010) bring forth deals with restraint, which reflects a conviction that instant gratification needs are to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms. Indulgence here refers to the disposition in cultures to have fun and enjoy life, not indiscriminately gratifying human desires.

Military culture tends to be more masculine, collective, with greater power distance, less tolerance for ambiguity, and geared toward restraint. These were also findings in Soeters et al.’s (2006) research, which also showed that cultural dimensions within the military culture are at least to an extent explained by the differences in cultural dimensions of national cultures. It is quite plausible that transitioning from a more collective military culture into a strongly individualistic national culture will present certain readjustment issues. The same difficulties can be found when considering all the cultural dimensions that we have discussed. Relatively high ambiguity avoidance within the military culture is not an easy match for
the fast paced and changing societal life of contemporary western societies.

We have so far concentrated on the military culture, but as pointed out by Atuel and Castro (2018), military identity can be considered as a role identity that develops within the military cultural environment. Research has shown that military identity can supersede that of race and ethnicity, but at the same time there is little research to establish a direct causal link. Without question, the rigorous training and the socialization into military values and culture leaves a lasting mark. Whether individuals who self-select into the military already possess military values and integrate these values into their lives also remains a possibility. It is clear that the military aims to create through a rigorous socialization process a strong collective identity. One of the purposes of collective identity is to create strong emotional attachment to the group; this emotional attachment makes them loyal to the group (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999), which in the case of militaries all over the world is a desirable goal. Still this very same loyalty to the group and one’s own identity connected to the military group and culture is one of the more difficult transitions that a former service member will experience after leaving the armed forces.

In the often-discussed transition from a civilian to a soldier, the new recruit’s perceptions, goals, motives, and behaviors will come under the influence of military culture and military leaders (Halonen, 2007), but when the transition into a civilian happens, then there is no such rigorous training program to undergo, although some militaries do use some forms of re-acclituration programs. At the same time, it is clear that some form of cultural readjustment will take place, regardless of the period of time spent serving in the military, and the rate and success of such an adjustment also depends on the willingness to unlearn some of the cultural competences and in the case of a military service member transitioning back into his or her original cultural environment, to relearn forgotten or changed cultural competences that are important within the civilian culture that they are returning to. There is some research on the obstacles to a successful transition, usually involving people who have physical or mental-health hampering transition into their civilian life. There is less research on an average transition and we have tried to show that looking at the military as culture can add to the understanding that all members of the military experience some form of transitional difficulties when they move from one cultural environment to another.

There is no one typical veteran or former military service member, just as there is no one typical veteran, but veterans carry some
values and traits of military culture just as a member of a nation carries some values of his or her national culture, but not all. Some of these values and traits can be of great use in a transition process, whereas others might be a hindrance.

**Transitioning back to civilian society**

As noted earlier, research shows that most veterans ultimately transition back to their civilian communities successfully (cf. Elnitsky et al., 2017). It has been argued that skills obtained during military service aid the veteran in this transition process (see Castro & Kintzle, 2016), as many of these skills have direct application to civilian jobs. Other skills that aid veterans in transition include adaptability, enhanced decision-making, and tolerance for ambiguity, among others.

This is not suggested even for these veterans transitioning successfully that there will not be bumps in the road to transition. The transition from military service back to civilian life has been described as a reverse “culture shock” (see Beverly, Bergman, Howard, Burdett & Greenberg, 2014), with the initial cultural shock occurring with the veteran first joining the military. The reversed cultural shock is dramatic for a number of reasons, including loss of status on leaving the armed forces. However, often not appreciated is that veterans feel like strangers in their own country, with many veterans reporting that they “just don’t fit in” (Castro & Kintzle, 2014).

**The veteran as an immigrant**

In this section, we use “the immigrant” as a metaphor for elucidating the many challenges that all veterans will be confronted with as they leave the military and rejoin their civilian communities, recognizing, of course, that military veterans are not immigrants, yet having to deal with many of the challenges that all immigrants must deal with. Therefore, if one were to immigrate to another country, what are the things that they would have to sort out to have a successful transition? First, they would need a job and place to live. Next, they would have to figure out where to shop, where to bank, and where they would receive their health care. If they had a spouse and children, they would have to figure out where they would go to school and where their spouse might work. There are literally thousands of details, both big and small, that someone immigrating
to another country would need to figure out. For a service member transitioning back to civilian life, they too have to figure out all of these details. Therefore, in a very real sense, service members transitioning back to civilian life are like new-comers in their own country.

As noted earlier, the military has its own distinct culture, differing in many ways from its civilian counterpart. However, often not appreciated is that the military also consists of a different economic structure as well. Namely, the military is basically a socialist system, existing in most cases within a civilian culture that is capitalistic. Like the nuclear family in nearly every society in the world, the military strives to meet every need of the service member (and to a lesser extent their families). Albeit, some armed forces, especially those of smaller countries', would be more closely connected with their parent society and a larger integration is promoted.

First and foremost, every service member in the military has a job. While this might seem obvious as serving in the military is a job, the military culture differs from the civilian culture in many important respects. The military goes beyond just providing employment to all its service members. The military is structured so that every entry position in the military can lead to a career lasting 20 to 30 years until retirement. In the civilian world, this is not the case. While a civilian may have a job for life, many of these civilian positions are not ones that would be considered a career. In addition to every job in the military leading to a career, most career pathways in the military come with required education and training that is provided by the military, while most civilians have to figure out for themselves what career they want and the educational requirements for obtaining it.

Service members’ careers are also actively managed by trained professionals so that they are provided increasingly challenging assignments that prepare them for promotion. Once again, civilians are expected to figure this out for themselves unless they are in a trainee position, while service members have someone to do this for them. Furthermore, when a service member desires a career change, there is typically a structure to help the service member change their career, all the while remaining in the military. For example, many militaries have processes whereby an infantryman may become an intelligence officer. If a civilian wants to make a career change, they have to figure out how do it by themselves and typically have to leave the organization in which they are working to do so.

In addition to the military providing a highly structured career and promotion processes, the military also provides other services that are indicative of a social system. Key among these include food, housing, and health care, which are typically provided free to all
service members. Even in nations where there is a national health care system, there is typically a parallel military health care system that provides priority support to service members.

Once a service member leaves the military, they must figure out where they will live and how to access the civilian health care system. In the United States, former service members must pay for their health care, including their dental care, which was provided free when they were in the military. Oftentimes, service members have very little concept of the costs of food, housing, and health care, because these are provided either for free or at greatly reduced costs to them. Other services may be provided by some militaries such as commissaries, military shopping centers, schools for their children, and day cares, which are also heavily subsidized, which masks the true costs of these services. For civilians, managing all of these expenses is just part of life. Many service members leaving the military lack the practical experience to appreciate these costs.

Furthermore, employment in the civilian culture is very individualistic. Unlike in the military culture where a premium is placed on working as a team, the civilian culture is more interested in individual achievements and skills. This can lead many veterans to view “civilian” employment as self-promoting, with a “dog-eat-dog” mentality. Many military skills have no direct civilian equivalent, which makes it difficult for former military personnel to obtain a job and leaving them with the feeling that their military skills are not appreciated by civilians.

Finally, military pay and benefits are standardized. No matter how “good” a service member thinks they are, they will receive exactly the same pay and benefits as every other service member of the same rank and time they have been in the military. For example, there are over 40,000 sergeants (E-5) in the U.S. Army, and the best sergeant receives exactly the same pay and benefits as the worst sergeant, as would be expected in a socialist system. In civilian society, this would not be the case. There would be significant pay and benefit differences based on performance. Yet, while the best sergeant is likely to be promoted to the next rank earlier than the worst sergeants, there is still a degree of frustration that can set in that can demoralize a service member that causes them not to give 100% effort, a situation that is frequently seen among workers in socialist systems.

**Transitioning back to the civilian community: avoiding the bumps**

Despite the challenges in transitioning from a military culture back to a civilian culture, most former service members do
eventually transition successfully, albeit with a few bumps along the way. To have the smoothest transition possible, service members must remember that the military culture differs significantly from most civilian cultures. Therefore, they must plan every aspect of their transition as if they were moving to another country. Second, service members must maintain their aggressive, competitive spirit. Separating service members should not expect anything to be handed to them. They must expect to compete for everything they want, including their civilian job. In short, they must maintain their hustle. Third, they must learn to adapt their military identity to their new civilian culture. Civilians are not their enemies. Approaches and behaviors that were successful in a military culture may not be successful in a civilian culture, and in fact some aspects of a military culture might interfere or impede a successful transition.

Identity shift that will inevitably occur when transitioning from the military to civilian culture is likely to be just as difficult as it is for immigrants who struggle to embrace the new culture that they find themselves in. Part of the difficulty is the difference of the military ethos, the particular combination of a number of core values, which differ from the ethos of the society as Bar-Tal (2000) has termed it. Ehala (2017) points out that when core values are questioned or come under attack, it instigates moral outrage and this makes identity shifts particularly difficult to navigate.

The military must support service members in the transition process. The most important thing that militaries can do is to provide adequate time for service members to prepare for their transition. This might include the time to retrain or obtain critical certifications or education that will allow the former service member to compete for job and career opportunities as a civilian. Regardless, if the service member is leaving the military after 1 week or 30 years, every service member needs time and support to have a successful transition. Indeed, the shorter the length of service, the more support a service member typically needs.

Governments and local communities also have an important role in assisting former service members in their transition. At the governmental level, essential programs and services must be provided to separating service members, particularly housing and employment programs. Local communities must anticipate veterans returning to their communities and welcome them back. Civilians who have not served must understand that while some veterans might have mental and/or behavioral health issues, most do not. Veterans overall make an important contribution to every community that they are a member of.
Conclusion

The military represents a unique culture. Service members leaving the military are in essence moving from one culture, the military culture, to another, the civilian culture. There are aspects of the military culture that can result in challenges that a former service member has not encountered before. Yet, through individual preparation and support by the military, government, and local community, every former service member can have a successful transition, with minimal bumps along the way.

References


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