

Theorizing military student transitions in U.S. higher education

Background:

Within the United States today, post-9/11 veterans and service members are returning to civilian communities after more than twenty years of continuous war (Castro et al., 2014). It is estimated that, by 2021, more than five million post-9/11 servicemembers will have left the military (McBain et al., 2012), representing the largest flux of servicemembers out of the military since WWII. Known as a bridge between military and civilian professions, higher education has historically played a vital role in supporting our nation's veterans military personnel as they reintegrate within civilian life.

Those serving in the U.S. Armed Forces are rapidly enculturated within a distinctive set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors (Clemens & Milson, 2008; Rausch, 2014); servicemembers who do not adapt to essential aspects of military culture are swiftly removed from service roles. Thus, it is inevitable that those who serve, regardless of service length, branch, rank, or job speciality, develop and internalize a military identity. And, while all who serve do not come to embody their military experience to the same extent or in identical ways, elements of military culture not only shape their identities as members of the Profession of Arms, but also seep deep within their personal ways of being in—and perceiving—the world.

Considering ways in which colloquial discourse describes entry into postsecondary education as a ‘transition from high school to college,’ the central premise of this paper argues that current conceptualizations of military student “transition” do not fully capture, nor do they authentically describe, what military students (must) do in college to successfully prepare themselves for professional civilian careers. Rather than simply repositioning themselves into new roles and contexts (as the word “transition” implies) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), we posit that military students are unique in higher education in that they engage in complex processes of *identity hybridization* as they reflect on, adapt, and mesh their existing military identities with new ways of being in society, the academy and civilian professions. Based on theoretical conceptualizations of identity (Abes et al., 2007; Gee, 2001; Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000) and professional identity formation (Ibarra, 2004; Slay & Smith, 2011; Weike, 1979), we propose that military identity hybridization is characterized by on-going and recursive deconstruction and negotiation of existing military identities. Concurrently, aspects of military identities deemed essential to retain are adapted to and blended with the norms, values, and ways of being that prevail within higher education, as well as within the civilian careers being pursued.

Purpose:

This theory paper presents a new conceptualization of military student transition in higher education that foregrounds *military identity hybridization* as a key process for achieving positive education and professional career outcomes for SVSM. Our conceptualization builds from existing empirical and theoretical literature related to identity and identity development to more authentically model military student transition. As authors, we suggest that this work can lead to new ideation and development of appropriate, equitable, and effective services and supports for military students in 21st century higher education.

Perspectives:

Military identities include core values, attitudes, and beliefs that persist long after service time has

transpired (Schein, 1978). In light of documented challenges experienced by military students, including poor college retention and graduation rates; under-employment; workplace attrition; and physical, emotional, and psychological ill-effects of being under- or unemployed (Amdur et al., 2011; Barrera & Carter, 2017; Rausch, 2014; Student Veterans of America, 2017; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), the need for higher education to consider its role in supporting military student transition and identity development is warranted.

Theoretically, identity development is considered vital for promoting positive educational and professional outcomes. In relating identity to “being recognized as a ‘certain kind of person’” while “act[ing] and interact[ing] in a given context,” Gee (2001) emphasized how personal, social, and cultural forces shape identity; identity is continuously developed via self-identification and the “internalization of roles and reflected appraisals of others” (Capobianco et al., 2012). Others describe how identity is dynamically reconstructed via contextual factors that reframe relative salience of more stable or “static” (Bowen & Johnson, 2020) identity dimensions, such as race, gender, culture, and class (Abes et al., 2007; Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Because scholars suggest that identity influences one’s ability to achieve “meaningful connections ... within a larger cultural milieu” (Capobianco et al., 2012), career success is frequently associated with professional identity (Hall et al., 2002; Slay & Smith, 2011). Generally, professional identities are developed through experiences and subsequent reflections in professional contexts (De Weerd et al., 2006). Scholars (Ibarra, 2004) suggest that sensemaking processes, in which individuals consider the requirements and benefits of professional roles in light of personal interests and existing self-images, catalyze the process of professional identity formation. Wieke (1979) compared sensemaking to self-reflection wherein one makes meaning by retrospectively framing and reframing events to achieve coherence and continuity. In this way, sensemaking is a process of self-discovery that leads us to acceptance of new skills and abilities amid current ideas of who we are and who we are becoming (Ibarra, 2004).

In their review of the empirical identity literature, Trede et al. (2012) reported minimal consensus amongst scholars as to higher education’s role in supporting student identity development. During the past decade, research related to identity development in higher education has grown (e.g., Barbara-I-Molinero et al., 2017; Gilardi & Lozza, 2009; Tracey & Hutchinson, 2018); identity development is currently receiving attention within several professional domains, including counseling, nursing, engineering, and science (Camacho et al., 2021; Dollarhide et al., 2013; Shahidi et al., 2014). Yet, while many colleges and universities make substantial investments, via veteran resource centers, student veteran organizations, college credit for service, and veteran orientations, to support the current influx of SVSM (Kirchner, 2015), scholars have yet to examine processes of professional identity development specific to growing military student populations.

Researcher Positionality:

As researchers, we (Author 1 and Author 2) come to this work as former military servicemembers currently pursuing academic careers at civilian institutions of higher education. I (Author 1) was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army after graduating from West Point. I served for seven years on active duty as an Aviation officer and helicopter pilot before leaving the military to become a professional engineer and engineering educator. I (Author 2) enlisted in the Army National Guard as a cannon crewmember. After serving a six-year term, including a year-long

deployment to Iraq, I worked professionally for non-profit organizations and as director of a university veterans resource center prior to moving into a faculty role. Along with having internalized our own unique military professional identities, each of us have since done the work of transforming our military professional identities within one (or more) professional civilian career fields. We recognize the important roles—sometimes helpful, sometimes hurtful—that higher education has played within our own transition and approach this work with a desire to develop and communicate authentic understandings of the processes military students employ seek new personal and professional realities in higher education.

Methods:

To develop our conceptualization of identity hybridization as a key process supporting military transition, we reviewed empirical literature related to military transition within the fields of education, human development, management, psychology, and sociology to identify and consider existing theories used to frame professional role transition and career development. Concurrently, we examined theoretical identity literature, searching for applicability to military identity and transitions. Moving beyond the literature, we collaboratively reflected on personal experiences as military students in transition. As our ideas for reframing military student transition in light of identity took shape, we reflected on our interactions with military students, both as teaching practitioners and as researchers, to consider how our emerging conceptualizations both supported and diverged from our understandings of their experiences in transition.

Sources of Evidence:

Several frameworks have been used to explore military transitions empirically. Studies we examined considered military transitions from the standpoint of “transitions supports,” only weakly tying these transitions to identity and identity development. For example, Schlossberg’s original transition theory (1981) is widely applied to study military transitions although it only obliquely links to identity by arguing that life’s transitions result in new networks, relationships, behaviors and self-perceptions. Schlossberg’s updated 4S system model is often used to plan for expected life transitions by identifying resources through examination of situation, self, supports, strategies (Goodman et al., 2006).

Other applicable frameworks include Military Transition Theory or MTT (Kinzler & Castro, 2018) and Turner’s Theory of Liminality (Turner, 1967; Turner et al., 2017). MTT outlines three stages (i.e., approaching the transition, transition trajectories, and assessing the transition) of movement between military and civilian contexts. While loss of military identity is highlighted as a transition issue, MTT provides limited insight into how new identities are formed (Castro et al., 2014). Instead, the theory considers the many individual, cultural, community, organizational, and societal factors which influence the transition experience (Castro & Kinzler, 2014).

Camacho et al. (2021) employed Turner’s Theory of Liminality to examine ways military students perceived and navigated transitions in engineering. We found liminality helpful in theorizing military transition as a time dependent, non-linear journey through unknown territory ‘betwixt and between’ transitional endpoints. While Camacho et al. (2021) used liminality to frame higher education as the bridge between a prior military position and a (new) professional engineering identity, their findings reported on how students used assets developed in the military to manage transitions, rather than on military students’ professional identity development as engineers.

Researchers (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Wieland, 2010) emphasize how early career professionals begin to develop their professional sense of selves by practicing preconceived ideas about what it means to be a professional, and then contrasting those notions with what is experienced. Ibarra (1999) describes how experienced professionals transition between roles through iterative experimentation with provisional selves, which serve as trials for possible professional selves. Ibarra (2004) points out that most research on role transition is situated within early career socialization periods, when roles are more clearly defined and easily observable. Ibarra describes how mid-career (and later) transitions are more complex because they bring additional requirements for envisioning and creating later-stage professional roles, and for adapting and merging habituated skills and attitudes within these new roles. We found Ibarra's (1999, 2004) work useful in conceptualizing professional identity development among military students who a) have fulfilled professional roles within the military and b) may not have clear visions of the professionals they want to become.

Veteran Critical Theory or VCT (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), an emerging form of critical theory aimed at critiquing (civilian) education structures from the perspective of military veterans, was also useful for conceptualizing identity development among military students during transition. VCT theorizes post-service *veteran identity* as another of the more stable forms of identity — similar to class, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality — that can draw oppression from dominant societal groups. We used VCT to conceptualize key differences between *military identity* and veteran identity. We conceptualize military identity as an “insider” cultural /professional identity developed and embodied by servicemembers *while serving*. During transition, servicemembers deconstruct their military identities, over time, through a process of *military identity hybridization*. During this process, military students transform military identities into hybrid identities, which comprise an “outsider” cultural identity as a veteran within civilian society and an “insider” professional identity as a civilian professional.

Results:

The theoretical results of this theory paper are presented in figures located at the end of this document.

Scholarly Significance:

Because military culture becomes so deeply engrained within the personal and professional identities of servicemembers, it is challenging for them to transform and integrate their military identities within civilian society while attending school. The first step in supporting military transitions in higher education is to understand the underlying processes that military students use to develop new identities in light of existing ones. Our military identity hybridization model provides a theoretically-grounded framework to assist scholars and practitioners develop and assess new strategies for supporting successful transitions of military students in higher education.

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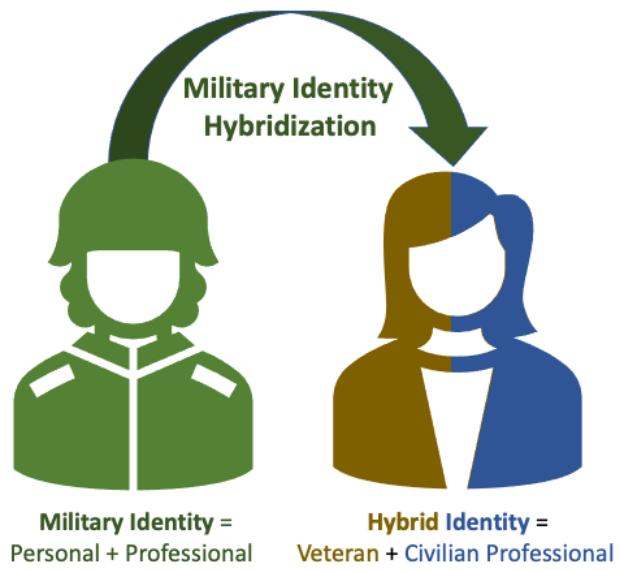


Figure 1. Military Identity Hybridization. Servicemembers transform military identities into *veteran and civilian professional identities* through a process of *military identity hybridization*. Former servicemembers retain essential elements of their personal and cultural military identity within their veteran identity. Concurrently, they transform professional attributes of their military identity into a civilian professional identity that is coheres with the values and norms within their chosen career field/profession.

Identity and Identity-based Theory

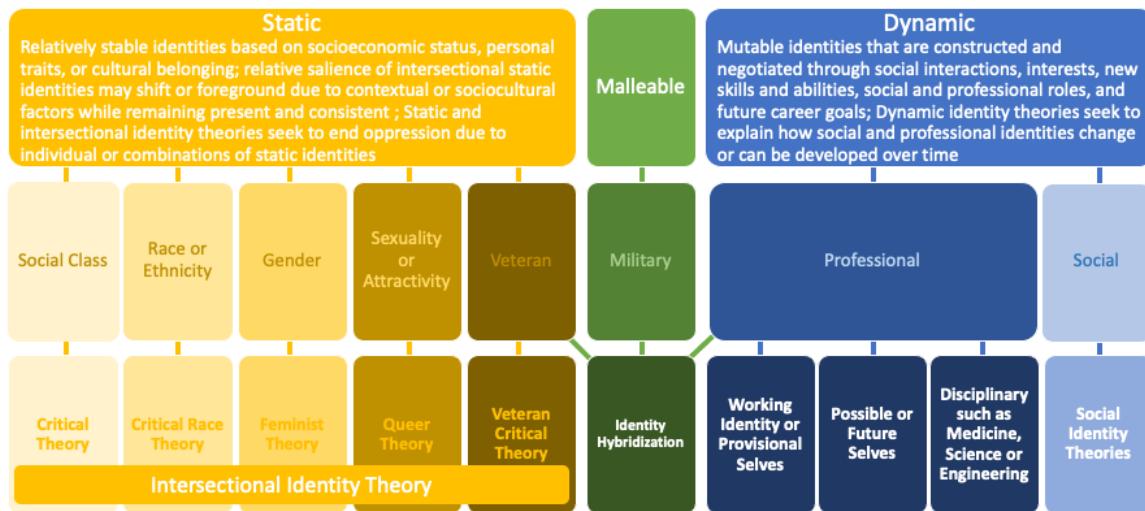


Figure 2. Locating Military Identity and Military Identity Hybridization Theory. Figure adapted from Bowen and Johnson (2020). Military identity, as it exists within civilian society, is located as a unique form of identity that is neither static nor dynamic. Rather, in society, military identity is an unstable, *malleable* form of identity located between the two. Malleability suggests that military identity can be/must be deconstructed and negotiated (i.e., “worked on”) to form new identities that are coherent and congruent within civilian society. This identity work occurs through a process called *military identity hybridization*. During this process, personal and professional military identities are deconstructed and negotiated in order to be transformed into co-existing and congruent static (i.e., veteran identity) and dynamic (i.e., civilian professional) identities. Military personal identity is transformed into a veteran identity, which is a static or more stable form of cultural identity (i.e., such as class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.) within civilian society; military professional identity is transformed into civilian professional identity, which is a dynamic identity that continues to develop in light of subsequent professional (civilian) role transitions and changes in responsibilities. Hybridization identity work requires continuing professional and relational experiences within (civilian) society and on-going introspection and self-reflection; completion of military transition is not reached until coherent and congruent hybridized identities are achieved.

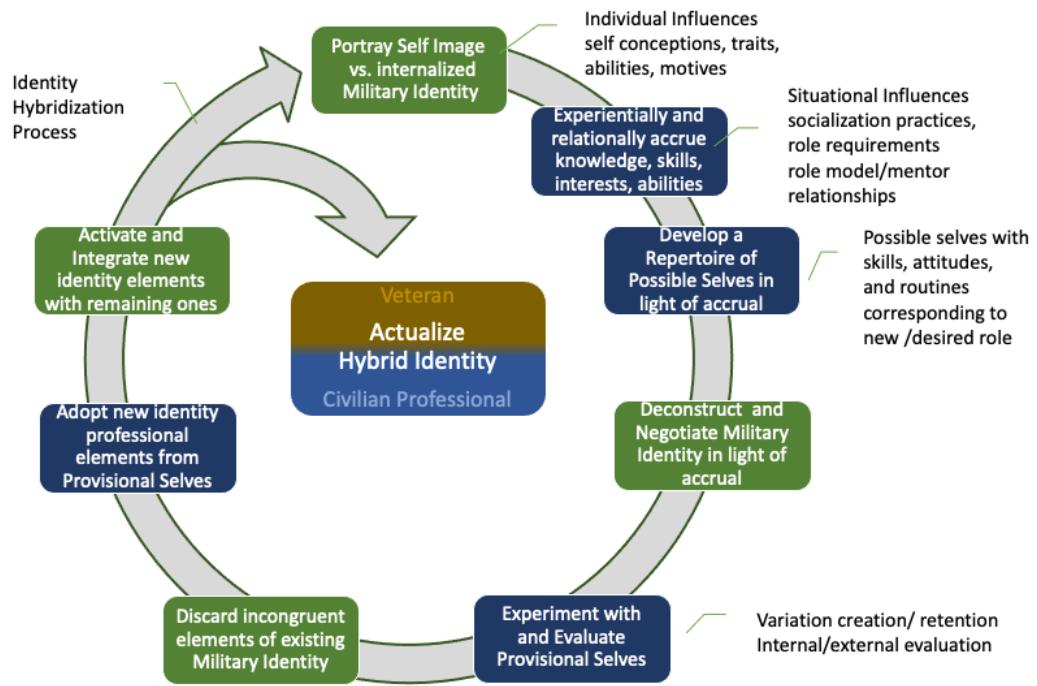


Figure 3. The Military Identity Hybridization Process. As they enter college and begin the longitudinal and iterative identity hybridization process, military students adopt initial self-images that may or may not be consistent with their internalized military identities (Kartchner, 2021). Because they are likely to lack a well-developed “repertoire of possible [civilian] professional selves” (Ibarra, 1999) as they enter college upon leaving the military and because veteran professional role-models are often scarce in higher education, military students need to construct repertoires of possible selves via the experiential and relational accrual of knowledge, skills, interests and abilities with civilians in society. As this repertoire is constructed, military students begin the work of deconstructing and internally negotiating their military identities in light of this accrual. To do so, military students experiment with elements of provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999), which are specific pieces or elements of their possible professional selves, and evaluate outcomes of their experiments via internal critique and the “reflected appraisal of others” (Gee, 2001). During this time, military students are likely to discard certain elements of their military identities that no longer cohere with their developing veteran and civilian professional identities. Along with abandonment of certain existing elements, military students will also adopt new elements from their provisional selves. Military students continue this process until they have integrated new identity elements with existing/remaining military elements and are able to actualize coherent and congruent veteran and civilian professional identities .