

Fall 2017

Aspects of resiliency among the lives of student veterans

Sydney Nolan
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nolan, Sydney, "Aspects of resiliency among the lives of student veterans" (2017). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 503.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/503>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Aspects of Resiliency Among
the Lives of Student Veterans

An Honors Program Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Undergraduate

Honors College

James Madison University

by Sydney Nolan

December 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the Honors College, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

Project Advisor: Debbie Sturm, Ph.D.,
Director of Counseling Programs, Associate
Professor

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,
Director, Honors Program

Reader: Jaime Kurtz, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor,

Reader: Bryan Saville, Ph.D.,
Professor

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the James Madison Honors Symposium on December 1st, 2017.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Abstract	4
Background	5
Student Veterans	8
Purpose of Study	10
Participants	11
Themes	12
Emerging themes	21
Advice	21
Pride	22
Desire of Knowledge	24
Obstacles	25
Additional Reflections	27
Implications	28
Conclusions	29
Personal Reflection	31
Work Cited	36

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the kind and patient Dr. Debbie Sturm for her unwavering support throughout the completion of this thesis. I would also like to thank her for inspiring me to complete a thesis, and for being a mentor throughout the project. I would also like to thank Dr. Kurtz and Dr. Saville for their encouragement and input throughout this project.

Abstract

This study focuses on aspects of resiliency among the narratives of student veterans; specifically psychosocial difficulties, being in a relationship, social support, and sense of purpose and control. Seven student veterans attending James Madison University participated in the study. Using qualitative interviews, the researcher was able to gather information about the transitional experience of each veteran from active duty soldier, to civilian, to student. The purpose of this study is to identify the key aspects of resiliency that helped these men transition, in hopes that programs can use this information in the future to better assist veterans in their transition to a school setting.

Background

Resiliency can have multiple meanings depending on the context of situations and each individual's subjective interpretation of the word. However, in the Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014), resilience is beautifully described as encompassing three domains: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration. A metaphor using a tree was used throughout this piece of literature in order to draw a more holistic picture of what resiliency can look like. When describing resilience as a form of recovery, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) drew the metaphor that during a storm a tree will bend to adapt to the strong winds, that way it does not break. Once the winds have subsided the tree returns to its upright position once more. To relate this metaphor back to humanity, a person may bend or adapt to a less than ideal condition, however once the stressful event has passed it is expected that the person will return to their natural healthy selves once more. This expectation is resilience. However, there is debate about how soon after the end of the stressful event a person is expected to return to their previous state. Though some studies suggest in order for the person to be labeled as resilient they must instantaneously return to their normal selves, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) suggest it is a process, and the length of time depends on the person.

The second form of resilience is resistance. To use the tree metaphor again, the tree would not waiver in the storm. It would not allow itself to bend, but would rather take on the full brunt of the storm, and function normally during the storm, as well as after the storm has passed. Though the public often sees this coping mechanism as unhealthy, research suggests otherwise. Even among the psychological community, refusing to adapt or acknowledge a stressful event is often seen as a problem. Psychologists and psychiatrists often prescribe therapy, which involves "facing the reality" of the event to those individuals who do not express grief or depression

during times of stress. Yet these individuals are using their own resilient coping mechanism in order to remain strong and psychologically healthy long term after experiencing a traumatic event.

The third kind of resilience is reconfiguration. In this metaphor the tree would not just bend in the wind, but would reconfigure itself in order to withstand any future storms. This form of resiliency not only allows the individual to return to health, but also allows them to grow and become more resourceful. In the academic field, this kind of resilience has been likened to accommodation or assimilation. These individuals, according to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) are able to reconfigure their beliefs, behaviors, and cognitive processes in order to more readily be able to handle future traumas. This kind of resilience is much like posttraumatic growth (PTG), which will be discussed later on.

From this study by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) it can be concluded that resilience looks different in different individuals, yet in all cases those who face adversity find ways to return to healthy mental functioning. This book also touches on who is most likely to be resilient. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) once again return to the tree metaphor. How that tree responds to the storm is dependent on what kind of soil it is rooted in, what kind of tree it is, and how much sun it has gotten in the past year. Humans are similar. How a person was raised, what kind of social environment they are currently in, and a history of psychosocial difficulties can all impact how a person responds to trauma (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2014).

Those who are capable evolving and growing stronger from their traumatic experience are said to be experiencing post traumatic growth. A study by Tsai, El-Gabalawy, Sledge, and Southwick (2014) studied post-traumatic growth. This growth was defined by those who experience traumas, in this case veterans who survived war, and then experience a positive

psychological change, such as a new appreciation for the world around them and their relationships, or a better understanding of themselves and their personal strengths (Tsai et al., 2014). The results of this study showed that of those veterans who screened positive for PTSD, 72% reported Post Traumatic Growth, specifically in the domains of ‘relations with others’ and ‘new possibilities’ (Tsai et al., 2014). This study also found that veterans who reported moderate PTSD symptoms experienced the most PTG. Furthermore, those who reported moderate PTG had better health and mental functioning, and experienced positive psychosocial factors such as purpose and social support (Tsai et al., 2014). However, veterans do not have to experience Post-traumatic growth in order to be labeled resilient.

A study by Pietrzak, and Cook (2013) looked at positive psychological outcomes and resiliency in veterans. Pietrzak, and Cook (2013) defined resilience as veterans who encounter a large amount of trauma in their life, but were able to overcome those experiences and live overall psychologically healthy lives. According to the study, nearly 70% of the veterans were labeled psychologically resilient (Pietrzak, and Cook, 2013). Those categorized as resilient were found to be more likely to have some form of higher education, and to be married (Pietrzak, and Cook, 2013). In addition, the resilient group also scored higher on emotional stability, social connectedness, characteristics such as purpose in life and control, and believed that their life and military experiences has positively impacted them (Pietrzak, and Cook, 2013). Further, the resilient group experienced less physical and psychiatric difficulties, and were more open to experiences (Pietrzak, and Cook, 2013).

While some people manage to recover from traumatic experiences, or even grow from them, others take longer to recover and return to the point of normalcy. This is part of the reason why this study is so important. Seeing where veterans are lacking support can help universities

promote and facilitate growth for these veterans after trauma and help create a supportive atmosphere to help veterans on campus return to a healthy psychological mindset.

Student Veterans

Over the past few years, as the U.S has begun withdrawing soldiers from war zones, the student veteran population has rapidly increased. In 2013 over 34,000 troops were brought home and were then able to use benefits such as the Government Issued (GI) Bill, which promise to cover the cost of higher education (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). From 2009 to 2013, the number of veterans attending higher education rose from 500,000 to 1 million (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). These numbers, however, are small when compared to the 8 million service men that used their GI bill upon returning from World War 2 in 1947 (Student Veterans Fast Facts, 2014). Many of the veterans attending institutions of higher education now have served time in active combat zones. The switch from active duty soldier to civilian is often emotionally taxing and confusing. In order to help with the transition from soldier to student, student veteran associations have become commonplace at colleges and universities (About Student Veterans of America, 2016). Nationwide there are approximately 1,3000 schools supporting student veteran associations and 500,000 student veterans involved in these programs (About Student Veterans of America, 2016).

Student veteran associations allow veterans to share their difficulties and past experiences with those who have experienced many of the same circumstances they have. In addition, The Student Veteran Association of America (SVAA) has awarded over \$1 million in scholarships to student veterans in order to support all academic endeavors (About Student Veterans of America, 2016). The mission of the student veteran association is to “Provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following

graduation” (About Student Veterans of America, 2016, p.1) This association gives veterans a certain comfort, which only those who have been through similar situations can provide. With only 15% of the student veteran population being the average age of a college student, (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011) it can be difficult for veterans to connect with their peers and feel at ease on a college campus. In fact, this feeling of isolation from the rest of the civilian population can be so psychologically straining that it leads to suicidal tendencies. A study conducted by the National Center for Veterans found that 46% of student veterans have contemplated suicide. Out of that 46%, 7.7% have actually attempted to end their life (Student Veterans Fast Facts, 2014). Possible key factors in what led that other 38.3% to not act on their thoughts of suicide are some of the key characteristics found in people labeled as resilient, such as social support. This is why it is so important for the voices and stories of this population of students to be heard, and for their resiliency to be examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore aspects of resiliency within the narratives of individual student veterans. This study utilized qualitative interviews from student veterans and analyzed their stories for fundamental aspects of resiliency. For the purpose of this study, resiliency is defined as “A positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (Herman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, et al., 2011, p. 259). The key aspects of resiliency of specific interest within the narratives of the veterans’ interviews are: being in a relationship, having few psychosocial difficulties, a perception of purpose and control, and family/ social support. In a study conducted by Pietrzak and Southwick (2011), a group of veterans labeled as high in resiliency all displayed the attributes listed above. For this reason,

these attributes were selected to be examined. The James Madison University Institutional Review Board has approved this study.

Participants were identified as individuals who have served in the armed forces, and are now currently enrolled in college level courses, either part-time or full time at James Madison University. Participants were gathered from a convenience sample, using the members of the Student Veteran Association on the James Madison University campus. Volunteers were not compensated for their participation.

Data collection occurred in the form of semi-structured qualitative interviews. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The key aspects of resiliency considered were: being in a relationship, having few psychosocial difficulties, a perception of purpose and control, and family/ social support. The main method of analysis was a phenomenological qualitative inquiry due to its focus on the subjective interpretation of reality and events by the participant. The following steps were utilized when analyzing the transcripts of the interviews (Creswell, 2007): Reading through transcripts multiple times to gain an understanding of the data; Identification of significant phrases, sentences or words that match aspects being coded for; Formulation of meaning and gathering key phrases into themes among the individual transcripts; Collection of data and formation of an in depth cohesive description of the phenomena being explored.

Given the personal nature of the interviews, participants were asked to give written consent, and had the choice of remaining anonymous. Information such as age, years of duty, length of deployment if deployed, and year in school was recorded. In order to establish the sense of comfort and trust necessary to encourage participants to explore aspects of resiliency in

their own lives, the interview included careful pacing, empathy, and the following eight questions:

1. General: Name, Age, year in school, branch of military, years active duty, any deployments, and relationship status.
2. Can you tell me a little about your story?
3. What are some unexpected challenges you have had to face transitioning from military life to student life?
4. What helped you overcome those challenges?
5. How connected do you feel to the student community on campus?
6. What has been a strong influential factor in your life? (Family, religion, a passion or hobby?)
7. How has your family felt about you joining the military? Pursuing an education?
8. What do you wish you had known prior pursuing a job in the military?

All information gained through the interviews were kept private until completion of the study, and held in a secure location. Once all of the interviews had been conducted and the recordings had been transcribed, the interviews were coded for the main themes of resiliency.

Participants

Seven student veterans participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 26 to 39 years old, with an average age of 30.2. Years served in their respective branch of military ranged from two years to 14.5 years. All but one participant experienced a deployment or mission overseas during their service. The participant population contained four senior -level students, two juniors, and one sophomore. Class level was based on credits earned rather than on typical admission years or age. Three of the participants interviewed were previously in the Navy, two were in the

Marines, one was in the Army and one was in the Air force. One of the participants is still in the reserves, and is therefore still engaging in Air Force activities. Three of the participants were medically discharged, which impacted their transition. Participant PF planned to retire in the military, but after 14.5 years of active duty he was in a submarine accident and medically discharged, which left him without the benefits or resume he needed in order to transition to civilian life comfortably. Therefore, his discharge greatly impacted his story. This diverse population of students allowed the study to have a more holistic perspective of what the transition from military to civilian life can look like.

Themes

One of the aspects of resiliency coded for was being in a relationship. For the purpose of this study relationship status is defined as either divorced, separated, married, dating someone, or single. Of the seven participants interviewed, two were married, one was divorced and now separated, and four were not in a relationship. The one participant who was divorced and now separated stated his military career often kept him from his family. He said,

“Total deployed time was 8 years 11 months. So split that up I think all total, it was seven strategic deterrent patrols on one submarine, one deployment on an aircraft carrier, and four deployments on a fast attack submarine, and one to Iraq and one to Afghanistan.”

The total time PF spent away from his family during his military career was 8 years and 11 months, which put an immense strain on his marriage. However, he revealed the real demise to his relationship when I asked what he wished he could go back and change. He states,

“I wish I would have talked to my wife about it [mounting debt]. You know. I didn’t want her to be worried. So it was nah baby, it will be okay. It’ll all be okay... And then

it's not okay. So I'm a liar. You know. I wish I would have communicated more with her, and let her know. Because she's an amazing woman, and what I did to her was not fair. It wasn't fair to her. It really kind of took away her agency. You know? I didn't let her deal with the grown up stuff. So, so maybe not taking away her agency so much as infantilizing her. You know, god I wish I wouldn't have done that.”

Though it may seem like PF was simply dishonest with his wife, the need to be a protector and provider, to handle things on his own and not do things like file for bankruptcy, take favors, or depend on a loans, are all pride issues, which he openly admits. Pride became an emerging theme throughout the interviews, and many of the participants revealed they had their own issues with asking for help. PF is also currently separated due to moving away from his girlfriend to take care of his mother. PF was the only participant who really touched on his relationship besides BS and CR, who both said their wives have been incredibly supportive.

The second theme examined was psychosocial difficulties, or lack there of. Psychosocial difficulties were defined as any environmental and psychological interaction that impacted a student veterans' overall psychological mindset or wellbeing. Many of the examples of psychosocial difficulties stemmed from the student veterans lacking the appropriate tools to convey how they were feeling during their transition. Many of the participants explained that upon returning to civilian life they felt a sense of loss. These veterans went from being around the same people everyday, all day, to now being one among a campus of strangers. In addition, they were returning home to families who had grown and changed in their absence. MD had his own difficulties, and I feel as though the way he talks about loss, and how much he suffered when he first got out of the military, could help people better understand to how psychologically taxing this transitional process can be for these soldiers. MD says,

“Umm, the only thing I can really think about is, you know, when you first come out, like I said, there’s this sense of loss. And the worse part is, is that no one really explains to you what that’s going to be like.”

Feeling unprepared to return to a different family, a family that had changed and adapted over four years, left MD feeling like an outsider, and left him angry and dealing with homicidal thoughts. This psychosocial difficulty not only scared him, but also pushed him to pursue therapy in order to learn how to communicate with his family more effectively. MD was unprepared to return to the people who had grown while he was gone, and for that reason he was met with grief. BS also talked about the sense of loss he suffered when getting out, but in reference to the brothers and sisters he served with.

“I think the biggest challenge I ran into was, I’m sure almost every branch of military has something that’s similar, but serving on a submarine I was with the same people, day in and day out, within a 200 yard of each other for up to 6 months at a time. And, so it turns into almost like a brotherhood. You depend on each other for everything”

This quote illustrates how close these members are with each other, and what a strong bond they form. It makes it difficult to imagine leaving these people, who you spend more time with than your own family, with little preparation in order to return to school or civilian work. One can only imagine the sense of loss that must accompany leaving this family you formed over the course of the years, behind. In addition to the psychosocial difficulties accompanying the sense of loss many of the veterans felt, many participants also suffered from posttraumatic stress symptoms, which could be seen as a psychosocial difficulty. PF stated, “I haven’t slept much, I have nightmares, and just bad stuff. You know?” This quote shows that no one is immune to the difficulties of posttraumatic stress. For PF, these symptoms interfered with his ability to hold a

job and his ability to maintain relationships. AA and AC also had difficulties adjusting to the civilian world after deployment. AA states, “getting use to like, normal settings and surroundings. That was a little difficult at first, but... its all good now.” AC also stated he struggled with “The stresses, and just me having combat stress, and being a little more anxious.” All of these symptoms impacted the veterans day-to-day life and mental well-being, thus were all psychosocial difficulties. However, each participant stated that they have found a way to rebound from that stress, demonstrating a perfect example of resilience.

Besides the psychosocial difficulty of dealing with loss and PTSD, CR talked about how difficult it is for veterans without degrees to get jobs once they are out of the military. This can cause a financial strain on the veteran, and lead to psychosocial difficulties as well. CR explained to me that often times veterans get employed working as security or doing manual labor because other skills and attributes, which come with working in the military, are overlooked. CR said,

“You got discipline. You got attention to detail. You’re willing to take orders and give orders as needed, being part of a team. These are all big things that add up to something that an employer wants. And it has nothing to do with shooting guns and blowing things up.”

This quote is important because these veterans are so valuable to a community and have so many specific and general skills that make them prime employees, yet they are still being overlooked for jobs. This is in many cases why veterans feel a need to pursue an education, because they are not getting jobs they are qualified for due to the lack of any legal or formal recognition of their skill sets. PF is one of the participants who struggled to find a job once out of the military due to no formal or tangible recognition of his skills. PF states,

“So then I get out, right? And I have 15 years military experience, 15 years experience on a nuclear powered submarine”... “I have manned an entire submarine. Said nope, this guy is leaving in three years so we need his replacement here in 2 and a half years. I can brief the captain, the captain’s boss, and the captain’s boss’s boss, about all of it. That was all part of my job. I don’t have my paper. I can’t get a job.”

This quote again demonstrates how undervalued veterans are in our society, and how the many facets of their military jobs, though they may not fall under the formal title they are given, need to be recognized by the community they are reentering in order to help avoid the psychosocial difficulties that can accompany unemployment. This inability to hold or get a decent job only magnifies the loss of routine, which also adds to the psychosocial difficulties many of the participants experienced.

This was another area of difficulty that many veterans encountered. Veterans went from having every hour of their days planned out, to now having free time and needing to relearn how to regulate themselves in order to make sure their work got done and deadlines were met. When asked what he struggled with most, AA said, “Umm, its probably just transitioning back into like the real world. I guess, not having a set schedule set for you, like doing your own thing, just managing time and stuff like that. That’s pretty difficult.” Many of the veterans handled these difficulties with grace, but they all admitted it took some time to get use to their new civilian lives. In order to overcome this sense of loss from routine, friends, and a meaningful career, each individual pursued a different solution. Some of the veterans explained they pursued therapy in order to learn how to communicate effectively with their family and friends. Others kept themselves extremely busy in order to avoid that feeling of boredom. Many of the participants

were able to form a sense of purpose by engaging in new activities and hobbies to keep themselves busy. Purpose and control in the next aspect of resiliency to be examined.

Purpose and control was defined in this study as individuals feeling as though they were working towards a goal, and were able to make decisions and influence the events in their lives. Many of the veterans expressed they found purpose in pursuing an education with a grounded end goal. When I asked the participants about their major, many did not just tell me what their diploma was going to say, but what they hope to do with that degree. This demonstrates a sense of purpose within these participants. Many hope to again one-day return to working for the government, but in a different capacity. Some were majoring in intelligence analysis, others public policy, all hoping to return to governmental jobs. In addition, many had the hopes of positively impacting the veteran community. This sense of purpose, to one day be able to make a positive impact in the community, helped many of the veterans add structure to their lives. In addition to this purpose, many veterans sought out some form of control. Everything from a strict diet and workout regimen, to a daily around the house to-do lists helped these participants maintain a sense of control over their lives. An example of someone who found purpose and control in a to-do list is AA. He explained that when he got out of the marines he was faced with boredom before he could start school. This left him without that sense of purpose he had had for the last four years. To combat this he stated “I had about a month and a half break before I got started, but in that time I was just looking to stay busy. So I just like fixed stuff around the house.” Though this may not seem significant, the ability to take control of the situation and find a way to fill each day with purpose illustrates an aspect of resiliency. While AA found purpose in a carefully planned out routine, MB seemed to stumble into his sense of purpose. When I asked MB what he would go back and change if he could, or what he wish he had known he stated

“I mean there’s nothing I would really change, because I really didn’t see myself doing all this stuff, or having all these opportunities, and yet here I am doing them. Here I am a sophomore, and I’m looking at becoming the president of a student organization.”

MB who originally struggled immensely with a sense of control and purpose now states that he has accomplished more than he ever imagined he could, and is even looking forward to being president of a club. This is an example of purpose, and his continued effort to be able to pursue the opportunities presented to him is an example of control.

However, for a few control seemed to be an elusive wish as they were constantly bombarded with unfortunate events. PF explained that once he was discharged due to a medical issue after 14.5 years active duty, nothing in his life seemed to be within his control. His retirement plan went out the window when he was discharged early. Though he and his wife had a financial plan at the time, it was not enough to sustain an early retirement, and soon their financial situation spiraled out of control. He explained

“So over that period of time we lived off of credit cards for about a month. We had like four and a half months worth of saving in the bank, but that goes pretty quick. I mean four and a half month isn’t long, you know? So that was gone. Then we started using our credit cards to live, and I mean it ballooned up, not counting the mortgage, but just the cars, and credit cards, and pass due bills...it ballooned up to about 60,000 dollars in debt. And like revolving debt. The absolute worst kind of debt.”

Around this time he and his wife divorced. In addition, the multiple medications he was prescribed for issues ranging from pain to anxiety soon turned into an addiction. He lost his wife, and soon due to having to pay child support, his home as well. He states, “I was divorced. I’m paying her a thousand dollars a month in child support, just you know off the rib. I couldn’t pay

my bills...just literally I couldn't, and all of that stuff kind of kept compounding until what do you do, you know?" He fought for each job he had, yet things never seemed to stay stable for more than a year or so. He went from couch surfing, to paying for a small apartment through favors done for a landlord, to moving in order to take care of his ill mother. Thankfully he was able to regain some manifestation of control through pursuing an education and surviving off the benefits of his GI-bill. Once attending school, PF found hope and support among the faculty and his fellow veterans. This support, which helped PF regain control of his life, is the final aspect of resiliency being examined.

The last aspect of resilience, social support, is defined as any positive, helpful, or supportive person the participant was surrounded by and felt as though they could turn to. Social support could come from friends, coworkers, family, school faculty, or even strangers. Some examples of social support included when BS in-laws financed a new car for he and his wife. He states ,

"They turned around and handed us a 10 thousand dollar check and said go buy a car, because we know how important school is for you. Umm and that was probably the biggest show of support I could think of. Like who hands somebody 10 thousand dollars, says go to school. So yeah, they've been, everybody's been excellent. Even little things. Like my wife doesn't complain when I don't do the dishes because I'm too busy studying or something. Umm, you know I, I would get irritated if she did that to me so, little things."

BS was extremely fortunate to return to such a supportive family. In addition, AC explained his own father was a veteran, and was able to help him through the anxiety he experienced upon returning home from deployment, and that the acceptance he received from his family, the

acceptance that he had changed over the years and was no longer the same boy who left, really helped his transition. All of these participants were able to find some capacity of support, whether in an on campus organization or in family or friends. When I asked AC what he found most difficult about being on campus he said initially he had a hard time connecting to the other students. This can be interpreted as a lack of support. However, after talking with and opening up to some of his classmates he states,

“Because I find when people, like younger traditional college students actually sit down and talk to you, like people like myself, they're actually interested to hear our stories. I think they're more afraid of us than we are of them, but we perceive it completely opposite I guess”.

Though AC initially feared social interactions with others, it was due to a misinterpretation of his fellow students intentions. Once he opened up to them he realized that they were not only interested to hear about his life and get to know him, but to support him as well. MB was able to regain a sense of social support by being open with his family. He states

“Like actually talk to people and be like hey, I was doing with my life, I was going in this direction the last time you saw me, and then I decided to do this and this influenced me. That way people have a better idea as to what happened while they were gone”.

By catching up with family members and being able to reconnect and understand what everyone had been doing while he was gone, MB was able to foster that strong support system he so desperately needed at that time.

Though many veterans stated they at first felt as though they lost much support by leaving the people they had spent so many years in close quarters working with, they all felt as though they were able to find a new support system in some part of their life.

Emerging Theme: Advice

In addition to the identified themes of resiliency, the process of coding elicited several clear emerging themes consistent across participants. The following sections will address the most significant themes that emerged through their stories. One of the questions I began asking the participant was if they had any words of advice. I left this question open for interpretation because I wanted the veterans to feel free to answer that question at whatever depth or generality they wished to. Some answered the question by giving advice to future student veterans who would be attending JMU, such as MD. Others gave advice to the families of veterans and military personal who would be preparing to re-enter civilian life.

AC talked about his own experience with combat stress, and how his father who is also a veteran was able to help support and comfort him as he readjusted to civilian life. This was a great example of social support, one of the main aspects of resiliency being examined. AC gave advice to other families who may not be sure how to help their loved one who is returning home from war or who may be dealing with some sort of post traumatic stress. AC says, “so yeah just be patient. Understand they're probably not going to be the same person as when they left. Umm, so just be understanding, be patient”. The idea that the person returning home is not the same person who left was a common theme throughout the interviews. Another veteran, MB also opened up about his struggles upon returning home. He gave advice to the families of returning veterans, and in addition gave advice to fellow veterans as well. MB emphasized that not only have the veterans changed in the years they spent away from home, but so has each family member. MB explained that upon returning home he made the discovery that the family he left was not the family he returned to. Because of this he struggled with anger and violent thoughts. This psychosocial difficulty threatened his ability to transition successfully back into civilian

life. MB speaks about the feeling of loss he felt upon his arrival home. This feeling came from realizing that everyone continued to grow and change in his absence. He explained, “when you first come out [of the military], like I said, there’s this sense of loss. And the worse part is, is that no one really explains to you what that’s going to be like”. His advice to the families of veterans returning home was, “I would say first things first, don’t try to treat it like everything is back. Like you pick up and everything is normal, because for the most part everything is not normal”. He also had advice for veterans on how to help protect themselves from that sense of loss he experienced. He advised that by having actual deep conversations with those back at home, a veteran could remain more in tuned with the family they would be rejoining one day. MB tells families members that during their loved ones absence they should talk not only frequently, but also in depth about that is going on in their lives. MB says, “Like actually talk to people and be like hey, I was doing this with my life, I was going in this direction the last time you saw me, and then I decided to do this, and this influenced me. That way people have a better idea as to what happened while they were gone.” MB strongly advises both veterans and the family members of veterans to remain open in honest in their conversations with each other.

Emerging Theme: Pride

Besides veterans giving advice to the families of those returning home and explaining how social support can help ease that transition, a lot of the interviews touched upon the subject of pride. Both MD and CR advised veterans to swallow their pride, but for two very different reasons. CR explained that sometimes veterans feel as though the GI Bill is a hand out, and they have a hard time accepting the money and becoming a full time student without working. However, his piece of advice was to use the bill, and pursue an education. AA agreed with CR by saying, “Go to school. Yeah, it’s a lot less stressful than getting a mediocre job and trying to

work your way up.” When MD spoke of veterans putting away their pride he meant it from the angle of asking for help when in need. MD revealed something near to him was the prevention of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) induced suicide. Having lost a friend to PTSD, MD makes a beautiful analogy between the strength of a veteran to that of a steel bridge.

“A concept I use is that even if you’re a bridge made out of steel, after getting hit so many times for so many years by water, you will eventually fall. And then you have to rely on like the other people to help pick you up”.

This quote came up when he explained that often times veterans have this sense of pride and feel as though they should be able to handle things on their own without the help of others. Things like combat stress, nightmares, and depression, and other PTSD symptoms are commonly experienced by combat veterans, and can have a terrible impact on any person, no matter how strong. Just like a steel bridge will eventually begin to corrode from water no matter how strong it originally was, a soldier will eventually be worn down by trauma, no matter how brave and resilient they are. The point MD was trying to make is that it is okay to ask for help. Often times asking for help shows more strength than bearing struggles on your own. MD also states,

“I feel like the veteran community, sometimes they isolate, each individual isolates themselves, and it could be for certain reasons. Could be for family, could be the feeling that they don’t fit in with other veterans. But you know, at the end of the day there’s always that sense that you can rely on your brother to your left or your right, or sister. It’s one of those things; pride is one of the major factors in like why people take their own life due to PTSD. And I feel like it does not show weakness that they want to talk to someone about it.”

This feeling of isolation that MD talked about can occur for a number of reasons. By relying on the social support of others, veterans can dissipate that feeling of isolation, and even regain a sense of control over their lives. PF had his own bout of isolation due to pride. When I asked PF what he wish had known prior to getting out of the military his response was “The other big thing, and I guess this is probably the hardest one, and is really what’s the most important, is I needed to swallow my pride.” With pride being a common thread throughout the interviews, I believe future research should focus on this topic, and how to break down those feeling of isolation that often accompany pride within the student veteran community.

Emerging Theme: Desired Knowledge

Another question I asked during the interviews was what these student veterans wish they had known prior to getting out of the military. AC’s answer was “looking back I guess I would just do it all the same way, cause I’ve developed such a large variety of skills, and like a lot of different view points through my experiences. So, I don't know. I don't think there’s anything.” AC was not the only one who felt that through his military experience he gained more than he had ever imagined, and that taking the course he did once he left the military guided him to where he happily is today. MB said,

“I mean there’s nothing I would really change, because I really didn’t see myself doing all this stuff, or having all these opportunities, and yet here I am doing them. Here I am a sophomore, and I’m looking at becoming the president of a student organization.”

Other veterans said they wish they had pursued an education right out of the military instead of bouncing from job to job beforehand. And others said they wish they had spent more time familiarizing themselves with the logistics of getting out of the military and with the veteran association. This meant thoroughly going through paper work, understanding how the GI Bill

worked, and benefits came along with being a veteran. What I found surprising was many of the veterans spoke about things that were very relatable to other students. MD said he wished he has invested in a meal plan, while MB said if he could do it again he wouldn't have taken astronomy 120, a general education class known to threaten a freshman's GPA.

Emerging Theme: Obstacles

A third question I asked during my interview was what they saw as the biggest obstacle when transitioning back into civilian life. For those who went straight to university after their military career, they found they age gap to be a challenge. Though they might have not felt totally isolated by their age, the bigger issue was the gap in references, experience, and beliefs between themselves and their peers. Some student veterans also found themselves lumped into the masses by their professors. As MB explains when I asked him what his biggest challenge was in reference to coming to school,

“I kind of feel with some of the classes I had to take that you're considered a freshman. You're considered a sophomore, and they [professors] kind of lump everybody into this mindset of 'Oh, you must be 18, you don't really know anything'. So, different perspective than other students and working with teachers who lump the whole”.

In addition, other people struggled with the change in routine after having followed such strict guidelines for so many years. As already said, AA felt a lack of routine challenged him in the beginning. Many veterans mentioned after the difficulty in losing a routine school helped them regain that sense of purpose and create a new structure. By having to attend class and finish papers and projects by deadlines, many of the student veterans were able to find a sense of purpose and routine. Beyond struggling with a lack of routine, the leaving of friends was also difficult for many interviewed, as already stated. BS stated that after working on a submarine for

four years, being surrounded by the same people in close proximity for months on end, he felt a sense of absence once he returned to civilian life. BS states that what he found most difficult was

“Being with the same people everyday then coming out and not having those people around anymore. And so it took a little getting use to that. You don’t always have someone behind you, backing you up. Like you have to learn to do things on your own”.

For many, having to learn how to reach out to people, and make a new set of friends and create new social networks was what was most difficult. MD explained it took a while for him to make a good set of friends and wean out the people who were holding him back.

For PF, he was faced with many obstacles, seemingly all at once. First falling into revolving debt due to his early medical dismissal from the military. This hindered his financial stability, as he no longer would receive his pension. Soon he lost his wife, and home, and struggled with sustaining a job due to an opioid addiction he developed due to his multiple prescriptions after his injury on a submarine. For PF, life entirely seemed to be an obstacle, however he never stopped chasing the dream of a steady job, and setting an example for his children. This is what pushed him to pursue college.

Additional Reflections

Another topic discussed in the interviews was overarching themes, or themes that have been a constant throughout the lives of the student veterans. I expected the answers to this question to vary; however I mainly expected answers such as religion, or hobbies like fishing or personal fitness. However, those were not the answers I received. In fact, not one person mentioned religion in their answer. For AC, something that has driven him throughout his life is feeling perceived as the underdog. He explained that since high school his capabilities had been doubted. After deciding he wanted to be a hurdler on the track team, he was met with skepticism

from coaches due to his height. This skepticism went on to push him to become one of the top five hurdlers in his state for high school. He brought this passion with him to the Air force, and still implements this determination and dedication to all aspects of his life today. BS had a similar drive when entering the military, that of competition between himself and his older brother. His brother had applied to become a submariner, but was not accepted into the program. This competition drove Bryan to apply and eventually become a submariner. Competition is not the only thing that has driven Bryan throughout his life. His answer also included family, like many of the other student veterans who answered.

MB said that throughout his life he has always been able to lean on family, and that his family has been his motivation and rock throughout life. CR also answered family, especially his wife who has been so supportive of him pursuing an education. For PF, his kids have driven him each step of the way, even when he felt as though the road to education was not meant for him. In addition to his family, anger has also driven him. As someone in the military for 15 years, 22 year-old recent college and ROTC graduates constantly undermined his seniority as they stepped onto the ship holding officer positions. This feeling of being undermined due to his lack of having a degree followed him from military to civilian life. Time and time again he was passed over for high paying jobs due to his lack of higher education and formal educational resume. However, this anger is what drove him to pursue an education and set an example for his children. PF says

“What drives me and has for the last 13 years, whatever I’m doing, is to be a good example for my kids. I mean that’s, at the end of the day right, I look at it and I know that the only way my kids won’t have to deal with the stuff that I dealt with is to do what

you're doing, right? Is to go that, that path. If I don't pave the way for them, then how are they going to do it on their own".

By setting an example for his children, PF is demonstrating purpose. He has a purpose to finish school. If not for the degree, then to show his children that they can accomplish whatever they put their minds to, because he has been able to accomplish obtaining a degree despite the countless obstacles he has been faced with. Though PF may have encountered several psychosocial difficulties, other aspects of resiliency such as social support found in the veteran association, and a sense of purpose have driven him to overcome what he has not been able to control.

Implications

This study has several implications. This study shows that upon re-entering the civilian world, veterans each experience a very unique, and no matter how well prepared, turbulent journey. In addition, reasons for not re-enlisting or leaving the military impact the directions of the veteran's path and the difficulties they would come to face. By learning what exactly veterans found most difficult upon returning to school, universities, colleges, and veteran associations nationally can implement programs to help prepare veterans for what they may experience on campus, as well as foster a sense of community on campus, which many of the participants mentioned they felt lacking.

Further, this research could be used to help create a curriculum or lesson plan for the Soldier for Life Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP), which each soldier goes through while still enlisted before they re-enter civilian life. This program helps soldiers write resumes, prepare for interviews, and set up financial budgets. This research could be used to set up a lesson plan on what to expect when re-entering civilian life and specifically college life. Many of

the veterans in this study experienced similar difficulties, and by using these participants as examples, those soldiers getting ready to transition can learn how to avoid experiencing the difficulties these veterans did, or if they do experience they same feeling, they can at least be reassured that they are not alone and other experience many of the same feelings they are.

Future research should focus on the issue of pride that many of the veterans discussed earlier. In addition, all participants in this study were male. Future research should try to vary the gender of the participants in order to include females.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study helped shed light on the multi-faceted experience of transitioning from soldier to student. The key aspects of resiliency; being in a relationship, have few psychosocial difficulties, a sense of purpose and control, and social support were demonstrated throughout each of the interviews. For those who experienced a lack of characteristics in one of these domains, they later were able to overcome that obstacle, such as a sense of lack of social support by reaching out to others. As explained by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014), resilience looks different in different people. For some, resilience is planning ahead to help prepare for turbulence and diminish the negative consequences of a traumatic event. For others, resilience is taking the full brunt of a traumatic experience, and then slowly and consistently working to repair their mental and emotional health. Psychosocial difficulties and lack of social support were the two aspects of resiliency that were most difficult for the student veterans. The shift from working with, and being around the same people everyday was a source of psychological difficulty for a majority of the veterans. With this difficulty came a sense of loss. The participants then explained they needed to find a new place of support, and figure out how to once again communicate and trust in the family they had been estranged from for years.

For those who were able to build back that bond and relationship with their new social circle, the transitions back to civilian life was eased, and that sense of loss diminished.

Sense of purpose and control was also very important for participants, and was one of the aspects of resilience that most helped the participants with their transition. The participants explained that while in the military each day they woke up with a purpose, knowing what they had to get done that day. All hours of the day were planned. When that routine is no longer there, many of the men interviewed came up with a way to keep themselves busy and implement a purpose or end goal. This sense of purpose ranged from meal prepping and rigorous work out routines, to late nights in libraries in order to get the grades and GPA need in order to pursue the goal of returning to a government or public policy job. Control was a weaker aspect when it came to resiliency. As many of us know, life can be filled with unforeseeable events and adversities. An adversity, and something I was not expecting in these narratives, was that many of the veterans in the study were medically discharged from their service. This is a huge uncontrollable, and often devastating event. Most of the participants who were medically discharged tried to obtain a job rather than pursue an education. Unfortunately this added to that feeling of lack of control, as their lack of professional resume and higher education cut back their job field and occupational opportunities. These veterans later came to pursue an education in hopes of being able to find not only a more stable occupation, but also a career in which they could implement change and find fulfillment, while also being able to support their families. This helped them regain that purpose and control which is so important for resiliency.

All together, though each story was distinct, the adversities faced by the student veterans often overlapped, specifically the difficulty with engaging and feeling a part of the college campus community. The age gap, as well as the gap in references and life experiences repeatedly

brought about feelings of aggravation and isolation for the veterans on campus. However, each participant stated that as time went on they learned to adjust to the annoying habits of college student, (such as loud conversations in libraries and texting in class), as well as gain a sense of belonging through the veteran association, and other associations on campus.

Personal Reflection

Throughout the processes of interviewing, and learning about the lives of the participants, I found myself discovering a passion for the veteran community, and a fascination with their unique perspective due to their life experiences. Often times after the interviews reached their conclusions I was asked if I would like to stay and just continue to talk. This was the best, and honestly most life changing part of the study. These men opened up so readily about their experiences, and shared stories and words of advice. One participant, after the conclusion of their interview, began telling me about his deployment in Afghanistan. This conversation in particular stood out to me. This participant looked barely older than I, having enlisted for his four-year tour of service right out of high school. He explained what it was like missing his little sister's soccer games, and not being able to be there as she grew up. I could physically see the joy in his body language as he explained how much she looked up to him, and what it was like skyping her for the first time in months during his deployment. He also opened up about how difficult his job was, as he was in charge of directing and coordinating the different flights and service planes in and out of Afghanistan. He broke down in tears while he reminisced about the difficulty of having to inform his fellow service members that they were unable to coordinate a plane ride home in order for them to say good-bye to a dying mother, to be at their siblings graduation, to witness the birth of their child. Many of the planes at this time were needed as back up support for those on the front lines, thus they were not available to bring

members home for those important and difficult life events. After disclosing how hard this was, he cracked a bit of a smile, saying he had managed not to shed a tear his entire deployment, yet here he was sitting in TDU on a college campus crying in front of a person he just met. It was moments like this that made this study truly life changing. I have probably passed by this man on campus hundreds of times in the past three years. I had never known his story, and he was just a face like the rest of the 20,000 students who roam the James Madison campus. Yet now he had a story, and a significant impact on me.

He is not the only one who disclosed personal information. Another participant told me about the suicide of his friend due to PTSD, and how that loss had impacted him and changed the direction of his life. Another participant told me about his homicidal thoughts and feeling upon returning home and how he dealt with them. After the conclusion of that interview he asked if I would like to hear some stories about the different missions and deployments he had been on. Of course I told him I would love to hear about some of the places he had been to. Over the course of the next 90 minutes he told me all about Thailand, and the trouble him and his squad repetitively found themselves in during their escapades on their weekends off.

Through learning about others, I learned about myself. I realized I have a passion for this population of men and women. This study also helped instill in me a sense of confidence. Prior to this study, I never considered myself as a socially graceful person. However, after talking to these participants and seeing how willing they were to open up, as well as how comfortable they were with me, I began to gain a sense of confidence and comfort with myself and the interviewing process. I also gained a sense of perspective from this study. As a college student it is easy to get pulled into the bubble of a college campus. Stress about upcoming deadlines, getting upset about a poor grade, and spilling your coffee before an 8am all seem like the end of

the world catastrophes. I believe that each life has its own sense of relevance, and one must be cautious when comparing their life, and their story to that of another. Yes, college deadlines are stressful, final exams are stressful, and it is upsetting when you spill your coffee when you're half asleep and driving to your first class of the day. However, perspective and realizing that there will be no permanent damage or harm done because of these events is so important to remember. These men had real stressful and terrifying days. Days that resulted in physical harm and permanent loss, and these events, these stressful days would come back to haunt them months later, and to mentally, emotionally, and physically harm them for years. It reminded me that though it is okay to be stressed about a mid-term, it is important to remember that a month from now that mid-term will not even be a thought in my head, while these men still struggle with memories of stressful events from five years ago. The world is so much bigger than college, and this campus, and grades and GPAs. This study helped me remember that.

Further, these interviews reminded me why the field of psychology is so important, and why I chose to pursue a career in the field. Psychological difficulties can be crippling, and cause distress to more people than just the person struggling, such as family members, friends and even strangers. Psychology, and psychologist matter, and are needed for men and women like those in the military who serve our country and defend the lives of U.S citizens and now are home and feel estranged from the civilians and people around them. These people deserve help, and deserve to be happy and lead productive fulfilling lives.

Moving forward I hope to continue to do research on veterans and even posttraumatic growth. I believe the transition process, college campuses, the civilian world, and the Veteran Association all lack the necessary components to allow soldiers to transition back to civilian life comfortably and with the support and knowledge they need. Further, I would like to study how

female soldier's transitional experience difference from that of men, especially in respect to the aspects of resilience. The few woman I know, and my experience with woman enlisted in the Army is very limited, have enlisted due to feeling as though they lacked other options. Many came from difficult family homes, and once they realized college was not an option they enlisted. I wonder if this would impact their lives once they got out of military. They may lack the family support so many of these veterans relied on once they became civilians again. In addition, I am sure many of these women hope to start a family if they have not done so already. I question how going from full time soldier, a very physically intensive job, to becoming a mother, which sometimes requires rest during pregnancy, would affect these women, especially if after the birth of the child they are put in a position of becoming a full time care taker and stay at home mother. This is another area of research that could be extremely interesting. Even if these women get out of the military and choose not to become mothers, their role as a female in civilian society versus a military society I believe would be incredibly different. To go from possibly being a male's superior and being promoted based on very rigorous standards that often are blind to gender, to entering back into a society where women do not make as much as men and are often put into subordinate roles to men could be psychologically difficult for these women, and cause even more stress during that transitional time than men have to deal with.

Another area of research that could stem from that which I have done is to see if soldiers who completed college prior to joining the military, or who came into the military as an officer after completing training during their college career, experience a different transition back into civilian life post military. The research I have done has sparked an interest in me concerning how other veteran demographics may adapt differently to the transition from soldier to civilian.

The last year and a half of my life spent working on this study has taught me how to work hard, as well as how to be grateful. Many mornings were spent in coffee shops making edits to this thesis, and hours were spent transcribing audio recordings to paper. Yet I found myself smiling, remembering the kind faces of the men who made time to sit down with me and answer my questions without reservations, and with honesty and enthusiasm. These men all lead very busy and full lives, however they never made me feel as though I was taking up their time or a burden. I am grateful for this experience and the wonderful participants who made it possible, as well as personally impactful.

Work Cited

About Student Veterans of America. (n.d.). Retrieved October 05, 2016, from

<http://studentveterans.org/aboutus>

Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice*. Routledge.

Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Mental Health Strategic Healthcare Group. (n.d.). VA Campus Toolkit. Retrieved October 05, 2016, from www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student_veteran/studentvets.asp

Herman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, Yuen (2011). What is Resilience? *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 56(5), 258-265.

Pietrzak, R. H., & Cook, J. M. (2013). Psychological resilience in older US veterans: results from the national health and resilience in veterans study. *Depression and anxiety*, 30(5), 432-443.

Pietrzak R.H., & Southwick, S.M. (2011, May 31). *Psychological resilience in OEF-OIF Veterans: application of a novel classification approach and examination of demographic and psychosocial correlates*. Retrieved October 05, 2016, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21624683>

Student Veteran Fast Facts - November 2011. (2014). Retrieved October 05, 2016, from <http://www.operationpromiseforservicemembers.com/FastFacts.html>

Tsai, J., El-Gabalawy, R., Sledge, W. H., Southwick, S. M., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2015). Post-traumatic growth among veterans in the USA: results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study. *Psychological medicine*, 45(1), 165-179.