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## From Combat Zones to the Classroom: Transitional Adjustment in OEF/OIF Student Veterans

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## From Combat Zones to the Classroom: Transitional Adjustment in OEF/OIF Student Veterans

### Abstract

With 600,000 veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom enrolled in higher education with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, recognizing and responding to their predictable adjustment issues is imperative. Existing qualitative research has identified some transitional issues encountered by small groups of veterans. Because of qualitative research's limited generalizability, however, themes may be viewed as more generalizable when corroborated by student veterans in different regions. In order to provide an in-depth description of the themes related to the post-deployment adjustment process, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 student veterans from a Southwestern community college who were returning to civilian life after deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq. The first author and research assistant analyzed data using the grounded theory approach (including open coding, constant comparison, and axial coding), which resulted in the emergence of seven major themes. Themes consistent with prior research include (1) bridging the gap between military and civilian life, (2) rebuilding a support system outside of the military, (3) readapting to the culture of civilian life, and (4) finding meaning in a new life perspective and purpose. Themes not indicated in previous research are (5) battling the stereotypes, (6) taming the fight-or-flight response, and (7) attitudes about mental illness carry over to civilian life. Based on the results of this review, recommendations are given for college campuses to support veterans in transition.

### Keywords

Student Veterans, Adjustment, Post-Deployment, OEF/OIF, Grounded Theory

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### Acknowledgements

Words fail to fully capture it, but we wish to thank the veterans of the OEF and OIF conflicts. Like the generations before yours, you bore the burden without fully knowing the cost. As we learn more about welcoming you home, let us help you not only to adjust but to thrive.

## **From Combat Zones to the Classroom: Transitional Adjustment in OEF/OIF Student Veterans**

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As of 2007, over 1,900,000 U.S. Armed Forces service members had deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, 2010). Over 35,000 of those deployed were National Guardsmen and Reservists, meaning that following deployment, they returned to civilian life (Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, 2010). Numerous Active Duty personnel likewise completed their service commitments after redeploying (Waterhouse & O'Bryant, 2008). Among these returning veterans, over 600,000 have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to return to higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). In at least one qualitative study, veterans found the transition from active warrior to student to be the most difficult aspect of the overall adjustment to civilian life (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). As such, recognizing and responding to their predictable adjustment issues is necessary to ensure their successful transitions as well as academic and professional success.

## **Adjustment Issues in Student Veterans**

### **Mental Health**

Although mental health problems are common among many returning veterans, there is some indication that student veterans have higher levels of psychological problems. Approximately 20% of OEF/OIF veterans report some mental health issues (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006), but that number is likely to be higher among student veterans, with 35% reporting severe anxiety and 24% reporting severe depression (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). The modal psychological issue that student veterans report is posttraumatic stress, with 46% of student veterans reporting significant PTSD symptoms (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). This rate is substantially higher than the 10-18% figure representative of non-student veterans of the OEF/OIF conflicts (Hoge et al., 2006; Hoge et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Veterans' Administration, 2009).

As to why student veterans present with higher rates of mental health issues than non-student veterans, there are several possibilities. First, the additional stressors of academic pressure and transition to the student role may contribute to psychological discomfort. Second, younger veterans (18-24 years) are at the greatest risk for mental health issues (Seal et al., 2007), and it is often this group of younger individuals that return to higher education post-deployment and/or post-separation (Buecher, 2014). Third, mental health problems are more prevalent in Reserve troops, and many student veterans are members of the Reserve or National Guard (Milliken et al., 2007; Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008; Seal et al., 2009). As such, higher education opportunities may attract individuals who are already at greater risk for psychological symptoms. More than likely, this discrepancy can be explained by a convergence of these factors.

### **University-Specific Issues**

Previous studies emphasizing qualitative methods indicate some of the unique difficulties facing veterans in the transition to (or back to) the student role (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In a study of 25 transitioning student veterans, for instance, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) found that veterans had difficulty connecting with peers, often because of differences in age, outlook, and political views. These student veterans sought out connections with other veterans and professors. Veterans often sought to blend in with their peers and not make their veteran status readily apparent. Faculty sometimes made the situation more difficult by pressing them to speak about their military experiences in class. Mental and physical health issues were also concerns for these student veterans. Participants reported that the main veteran-centered program provided on-campus was financial aid. Dissatisfaction with the campus veterans' office was common. Returning home also proved to be challenging for all of the participants. Dissolution of marriages and/or strained relationships resulted from the perception that family members and friends could not fully understand the transition period. Delays in beginning school, academic difficulties, and balancing school and work were additional stressors. Numerous participants complained of poor study habits and trouble focusing. For many, joining student veterans' groups was the best way to navigate the transition.

In a separate study including 25 student veterans, Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell, (2009) found that veterans reported significant difficulty adjusting to an academic setting. Veterans reported that their military outprocessing included too much irrelevant debriefing. Likewise, debriefing reportedly focused on identifying individuals with significant psychological disturbance, and participants indicated that some veterans avoided answering

questions accurately to avoid being flagged. Mental health conditions including PTSD may have contributed to some of the adjustment difficulties, but the academic demands of university-level classes also seemed to play a role. The classroom environment reportedly required different skills, sleep cycles, and relationships to authority figures than that of the deployed environment. Primarily, however, veterans were dissatisfied when campuses did not have programs or centers designed to assist them, or “veteran-friendly” campuses in general (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 6). Even within campuses with veterans’ programs, satisfaction was inconsistent.

Finally, Naphan and Elliott (2015) interviewed eleven student veterans regarding their transition out of the military. That is, unlike the previously mentioned studies, National Guardsmen and Reservists were not included. These student veterans reported having an appreciation for the military structure and missing the task cohesion inherent in military missions. These veterans reported experiencing anxiety and loss of subjective meaning when no longer performing military duties. They also perceived that classmates held little respect for their prior military accomplishments. Social cohesion was also difficult, as participants felt they could minimally relate to non-veteran students. The student transition was eased when increased structure was applied to the academic setting and meaning applied to academic work. The transition was easier for individuals who served in support positions when compared to combat veterans; in part, this may be due to combat veterans’ reported hypervigilance, irritability, and beliefs that others could not understand them.

### **Need for the Present Study**

While transitions are a part of normal life, the process of adjusting from military deployments to civilian life, especially for those returning to school, is associated with several uncommon stressors. The primary investigator’s firsthand experiences working with the student veteran population in the classroom at the community college level made it readily apparent that this group brings a unique set of perspectives and needs to the classroom and college at large. In order to support the large number of transitioning student veterans, college administrators, faculty, and staff must understand the particular issues related to their adjustment process.

A review of qualitative studies in this area (i.e., Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Naphan & Elliott, 2015) reveals that themes such as difficulty adjusting to an academic setting, irrelevant military debriefing, mental health issues, dissatisfaction with campus veteran centers, lack of structure and task cohesion, and difficulties with relationships with friends, family, and peers are associated with veterans adjustment to the student role are related across studies, but are not identical. As such, it is beneficial to conduct similar interviews with student veterans on adjustment in multiple regions and types of campuses to increase theme saturation. As themes are further saturated, greater transferability may be assumed. By conducting methodologically similar open-ended interviews with student veterans at a different campus, the present study allows for further thematic saturation and the emergence of new themes. In combination with previous work (i.e., Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Naphan & Elliott, 2015), themes identified in the present study can be used to generate hypotheses regarding expected adjustment difficulty in transitioning to the student-civilian role and will be useful in supporting recommendations for appropriate campus support of student veterans. Given that the post-deployment process is complicated and poorly understood (MacDermind, 2006), such identification of consistent themes regarding the nature of the adjustment process in student veterans is needed to inform programs, scholastic and otherwise, in how these veterans can best be assisted.

The present study explores student veterans' transitional process from OEF/OIF deployments to civilian life. In particular, researchers were interested in exploring the normal (i.e., non-statistically deviant and non-pathological) adjustment process, including student veterans' thoughts and feelings about the transitional process itself as well as the meanings that emerged for these veterans about their individual transitional processes.

Regarding the researchers themselves, the primary investigator (i.e., the first author) became particularly interested with the student veterans' post-deployment transitions while teaching at a community college and interacting with veteran students. The first author undertook the current research, in part, to aid in developing faculty training on the needs of a student veteran population. The first author conducted all research design, interviewing, and completed data analysis. The research assistant was a Persian war veteran with psychological training. The second and third authors assisted in preparing this article for publication; they were not involved in the study during the data analysis phase. The fourth author assisted in research design and early editing.

### **Methods**

Grounded theory procedures were utilized in this qualitative study to identify the themes related to the student veterans' thoughts, feelings, and meanings made regarding their transitions from OEF/OIF deployments to civilian life. The grounded theory approach to the analysis of qualitative data involves exploring a process by collecting empirical data (typically via interviewing), generating theory based upon that data, and refining the developed theory based upon obtained data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Procedures**

Prior to data collection, IRB approval was obtained from the researchers' institution. The interviewer used convenience sampling to select student veterans from a community college in Southern California with a student veterans' organization. IRB approval was also obtained from the community college where the students were recruited. With the college's permission, the interviewer distributed a recruitment flyer to college's veterans' organization to elicit participation. As a part of the inclusion criteria, participants were required to have served for at least three months in Iraq or Afghanistan post-2001, be at least four months post-deployment, and not be on active duty orders. Participants were also recruited via participant word of mouth (snowball sampling). Using convenience and snowball sampling can produce differences between participants and non-participants, but researchers decided that using these methods were necessary to ensure a sufficient sample size for saturation from a population that can be difficult to access (i.e., veterans).

Potential participants responded to recruitment materials by contacting the interviewer by phone. The interviewer then screened these potential participants by phone, using a standard phone script, to determine whether they met inclusion criteria and were willing to describe their experiences (See Appendix A). Willing veterans met with the interviewer in-person, where they informed their consent to participate and engaged in interviews lasting one hour. The interviewer informed participants that interviews would be audio recorded and later transcribed. The interviewer instructed participants that recordings, demographic information, and signed informed consent documentation would be stored in separate secured areas, with restricted physical access and password-protected computers. The interviewer also informed participants that data would be kept confidential and destroyed in five years. Participants chose pseudonyms, so that their stories could be shared without compromising confidentiality. They were also instructed not to use their names during the interview.

In keeping with grounded theory, the interviewer used a structured, but flexible interview format with some prompts prepared beforehand (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). With the assistance of the fourth author, the first author developed an interview script that was used consistently in each interview. It began with an introductory query asking for a description of experiences following returning from Afghanistan or Iraq. Several follow-up queries were planned and used if participants did not naturally address those areas. Follow-up prompts queried stress, coping, perspective changes, feelings regarding others' attitudes, feelings regarding treatment by others, and unexpected changes post-deployment. The full interview script is included in Appendix B. Research was conducted in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code (APA, 2002).

## Participants

Participants ( $N=19$ ) included 15 male and four female student veterans. Their ages ranged from 23 to 46. Five male participants identified as Hispanic, three as White, two as Black, one as Pacific Islander, one as Asian, and three as Mixed-Race (Hispanic Mixed, Asian/Pacific Islander/Black, and Hispanic/Irish). Two of the female participants identified as White, and three identified as Asian. Ten participants were single, six were married, one engaged, and three divorced. Participants had served in the Army ( $n=13$ ), Navy ( $n=2$ ), Air Force ( $n=1$ ), and Marine Corps ( $n=3$ ). Discharge ranks were E-4 ( $n=6$ ), E-5 ( $n=7$ ), E-6 ( $n=3$ ), E-7 ( $n=1$ ), O-3 ( $n=1$ ), O-4 ( $n=1$ ). Military occupations were Infantry (5), Medic (6), Supply, Aviation Boatswain Mate, Ornament Specialist, Health Care Specialist, Mental Health Specialist, Aviation Fueller, Avionics Technician, and Pilot.

## Data Collection and Analyses

Consistent with grounded theory procedures, the interviewer began transcribing and analyzing data following the first interview. Interview data were then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2001). First, the interviewer used an open coding procedure to label phenomena described in the interview transcripts, in which labels were written in transcript margins. All sentences were coded, and some phrases and paragraphs were additionally coded. To increase rigor, the interviewer compared codes across the interview transcripts using constant comparison. To minimize researcher bias while ensuring rigor and theme trustworthiness, a research assistant, a Persian war veteran with a Master's degree in psychology, reviewed the interviewer's coding for accuracy (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During open coding, the interviewer wrote memos regarding possible combinative categories (Lempert, 2007). The interviewer then used axial coding to combine related open codes into similar categories/themes. For trustworthiness of themes, axial coding was also corroborated by the research assistant.

As recommended in the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), follow-up phone interviews were conducted with seven of the veterans (and a third interview with one), in which participants were again presented with the prompts listed in Appendix B; these follow-up interviews increase surety of reliability of these veterans' narrative themes. Seven themes emerged and are detailed in the Results section. Researchers agreed that the seven emergent categories were related to an overall theme of student veterans' normal readjustment to civilian life following OEF/OIF deployments. The categories/themes appeared to reach theoretical sufficiency in explaining the overall theme after nineteen interviews, so the interviewer did not recruit any further participants.

## Results

### Themes

Through an analysis of the data based using the grounded theory approach, the interviewer identified the following seven themes as the primary explanatory components of an overall theme of readjustment from deployment to civilian life in these nineteen student veterans (Kato, 2010).

#### **Bridging the Gap between the Military and Civilian World**

Participants unanimously indicated that the transition from military to civilian life is challenging. Military separation brought feelings of uncertainty and fear related to losing the military's taking care of one's day-to-day needs (i.e., housing, rent, food, financial well-being, and health care). A primary stressor was learning self-sufficiency, including finding means of financial support. "Chano" indicated that "simple" things become significant concerns once leaving the military, stating that in the military,

You don't have to worry about being fed or clothed or work...I had no worries because I knew that these other common things in life...were basically taken care of. Once I got out and all of that stopped, I had to worry about a medical, dental, a pay check, a place to live, clothes, the most simplest of things. It seems like those were the biggest worries. (Kato, 2010, p. 73)

Financial concerns and job-seeking were common frustrations for many participants. Veterans also indicated that the information given inside the military about the transportability of their skills was overly optimistic. Several veterans explained that employers looked for civilian experience and advanced degrees. As "Ethan" put it, "They don't care about your military experience" (Kato, 2010 p. 74). He applied to a number of unskilled jobs, was not hired, and then became homeless and anxious about the future (Kato, 2010). Finding employment was especially difficult for combat medics, possessing skills that cannot be used by non-credentialed individuals in civilian society. Even veterans with immediately applicable skills (i.e., "Jake" the pilot) had difficulty securing employment.

For many of the veterans, returning to school and collecting Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits provided much-needed financial support in the still-recovering economy. For instance, Ethan was able to move out of his car and return to college. However, veterans found that community college did not provide all of the supports available in the military. As "Joe" explained,

"It's not like in the military where things are handed to you. No one is going to help you. When I got out, ...they basically said, "Here's a flyer... and here's the VA number"" (Kato, 2010, p. 76). Joe went on to state that the process becomes "easy" after talking to other veterans who had navigated the system.

#### **Rebuilding a Support System outside the Military**

Returning to civilian society also meant that student veterans had to leave behind the close military support groups they cherished. Maddon described the military "family" as "the ultimate support group. Everybody's vested in everyone's health, mental, family, [and] societal well-being" (Kato, 2010, p. 76). All participants described a sense of loss when leaving their military families. As Maddon stated, "You come back, and you are on your own. It's a very empty feeling; it takes some time to get used to" (Kato, 2010, p. 76).



Many participants also reported feeling guilty about leaving their military families. “Joe,” for instance, stated,

I felt that I was turning my back on my buddies because we’d been deployed, ...and some of them kinda gave me that look like, “You’re leaving? You’re getting out?” (Kato, 2010, p. 77)

Having the military family experience made transitioning to a civilian support network more important. Returning to family homes was comforting to some participants. Transitioning was more challenging for those whose civilian support systems were weak or non-existent, and participants who experienced less support described coping with alcohol. “Ramrod,” for instance, explained that he had difficulty relating to his old friends and family and stated, “so I think that’s one reason I started drinking a lot” (Kato, 2010, p. 78). Ramrod later married, and with his wife’s support, stopped drinking.

Despite support from family and friends, all the participants believed that civilians could not relate to them. Veterans felt different from civilians, so they had difficulty experiencing comfort or feeling understood, even from their families and pre-deployment close friends. Participants described a sense that their pre-deployment friends had moved on to new friendships and life stages. As Audrey described, “My friends had their own lives now, they were married, had kids, nice houses, and prestigious jobs... and here I was like a kid again in school” (Kato, 2010, p. 80).

Many of the student veterans perceived that they “stood out” when compared to traditional students, feeling older with different perspectives (Kato, 2010). As “Joe” described, “I felt so much older than everyone even though I was only 25. ...I felt that I stood out, even though I probably really didn’t” (Kato, 2010, p. 80).

Many participants mentioned an automatic bond that they shared with others veterans; they viewed this bond as providing authentic comfort. This is because, as Jake stated, “If I talk to someone who went on patrol, they understand; they already understand the things you leave out” (Kato, 2010, p. 79). For many, this automatic bond led to the support that veterans were seeking. Participants frequently identified locating a veteran mentor to be one of their most important and helpful connections post-deployment. Maddon, for instance, expressed that

Everyone needs a mentor. A mentor just needs to be around, someone to listen that they can trust. You’ll find that anyone that wears a uniform is someone you can trust. A civilian can’t understand. Even just talking to another man in uniform, it’s comforting; there is an immediate gap that’s closed. (Kato, 2010, p. 81)

Joining a Reserve unit was viewed as another way to be around others who understand the veteran experience. Some veterans engaged in careers in law enforcement partially because law enforcement offices employed a large number of ex-military personnel, so the offices maintained military-style cohesion.

### **Readapting to the Culture of Civilian Life**

Leaving the military’s rigid structure for a generally unstructured civilian life was a shock for most of the participants. The loss of structured military culture made “simple” civilian decisions more complicated, leaving many participants feeling lost and anxious. “Rock” described the common experience of feeling overloaded by all of the civilian choices when returning from the military’s limited choice culture. He stated,

The first thing that I did when I came off deployment from Afghanistan was go to McDonalds. I went in and looked at the menu and felt overloaded. We didn't have that in Afghanistan or in the military. (Kato, 2010, p. 84)

Some veterans compensated for the limited structure by attempting to keep busy; however, busyness was difficult without clear goals and motivators. Several veterans described becoming overweight and lazy due to lack of direction. Veterans found they needed to create their own structure within the civilian setting. Those who developed plans before redeployment were most successful. Enrolling in school was viewed as a means of reclaiming some structure and goal orientation; it also decreased feelings of anxiety and laziness.

The "sink or swim" civilian culture was difficult for many of the participants to accept, as they were more familiar with the cooperative, interdependent style of the military. As "Dan" stated,

In the military, you take care of ...the others around you. That's how we work, that's how we live. ...When you come out, you see too many people living for themselves. (Kato, 2010, p. 86)

All participants perceived that civilians were ignorant about life outside of their immediate context. As a result, participants were "irritated" from interacting with civilians (especially other students), especially when they first returned. Regarding her perception of ignorant civilian materialism, "Angel" stated, "It makes you feel like people don't appreciate what you have. There's another world out there" (Kato, 2010, p. 87). Participants also described irritation with civilians for living unstructured lives and for "whining" about issues the veterans considered to be ultimately unimportant.

Additionally, veterans discussed the difficulty of adjustment from the military's "blunt" form of communication to the "politically correct" speech of civilian culture. They complained of having to be verbally cautious when talking to civilians, or as Maddon put it, to "walk[ing] on egg shells" (Kato, 2010, p. 87).

Veterans found the perceived lack of discipline in the civilian work culture difficult to adapt to. Ramrod, for instance, noticed a marked difference between the veterans he worked with and other co-workers, stating, "[Veterans] try to get things done right away, but the other staff members act like 'Why are you bugging us?'" (Kato, 2010, p. 89). Veterans expressed views that civilian employees believed that some tasks were beneath them. Finally, "Wisteria" reported frustration with her school's lack of discipline, as the college reportedly lost her GI Bill paperwork several times. She stated,

We don't make excuses in the military. You can't. You say something is going to be done, and it gets done... No one has discipline out here (Kato, 2010, p. 88).

### **Battling the Stereotypes**

The return to civilian culture also meant that veterans were forced to learn how to respond to veteran stereotypes and unsolicited comments about the wars. Participants believed that California was minimally receptive to veterans, so they were cautious about revealing veteran status. Reported stereotypes included thinking that "We are real aggressive and that as soon as we get back we want to choke people out" (Joe) that "We're all dumb or lack common sense" (Angel), and that "All we do is kill... that we're warmongers" (Jake) (Kato, 2010, p. 89). Veterans described trying to educate others that stereotypes are often a mistaken. As

“Trevor” stated, “I was in the military..., and I got my ass kicked more than I’ve beaten somebody up” (Kato, 2010, p. 89).

Participants all met civilians who believed that all veterans return from deployments with PTSD; even family members and friends believed this stereotype. Ethan explained that “I react to things differently from most people, but I’m not crazy” (Kato, 2010, p. 91). Joe also noted that deployment brings growth experiences, stating that, “Yeah, you’re going to come back changed, but not in the negative” (Kato, 2010, p. 91). Participants also reported that actions considered normal before deployment (e.g., getting angry) were now often viewed as PTSD symptoms.

Participants were also often confronted with civilians’ unsolicited and often negative war commentary. Kyle explained,

You hear people say, “We shouldn’t be there; it’s an illegal war” ... You think that’s what I risked my life for? That’s what you think? (Kato, 2010, p. 92)

In spite of the diversity of opinions on the Middle East conflicts found among military members and veterans, participants reported that civilians they interacted with generally believed that all veterans held the same views regarding OEF/OIF. Some participants reported that they had even been verbally and physically attacked by civilians. Despite their negative treatment, participants agreed that Vietnam veterans had been treated much worse. Many participants credited the efforts of Vietnam veterans for the relative improved treatment in OEF/OIF veterans.

The female veterans reported having to work “twice as hard” as male counterparts to receive respect while in the military and that civilian life was similar. All the female veterans indicated that people were “surprised” to learn they were veterans. “Tammy” stated, “Just because I’m a woman they don’t think that I was in the military, or they say, ‘What? Was it your husband in the military?’” (Kato, 2010, p. 90). Female veterans reported being the most upset by the stereotype “Female soldiers don’t do anything or face danger” (Kato, 2010, p. 90). Participants described experiences inconsistent with this stereotype, including watching friends die and serving as field medics.

### **Taming the Fight-or-Flight Response**

Many participants reported experiencing combat, injury, surprise attacks, loss of friends, and the sights of injury and/or death for months at a time while deployed. The acute stress response and ensuing hypervigilance, which were adaptive in the combat theater, lingered for many once post-deployment. For instance, veterans reported being “jumpy” when in crowds, hearing loud noises, or seeing/hearing fireworks. Participants also experienced driving anxiety, including scanning roads for IEDs. Most participants reported difficulty controlling aggressive impulses, so they tended to isolate from others. Some veterans also reported violent nightmares and flashbacks. Veterans discussed difficulty distinguishing allies from enemies while in the deployed setting, which translated to mistrust of civilian strangers post-deployment. Participants, like Chano, expressed difficulty

“breaking the habits”...such as constantly grabbing for a weapon..., reacting in a defensive manner when you are surprised, or driving slowly or in the middle of the lane to avoid IEDs. (Kato, 2010, p. 95)

Many of the veterans were concerned that their symptoms might indicate PTSD, although all of their physiological symptoms dissipated within one year. Unlike these primary

physiological symptoms, participants complained of concentration issues, short-term memory problems, and difficulty focusing several years post-deployment. Ethan articulated the most common complaints described by the veterans:

When I came back to school after Iraq, I had trouble remembering things in school. It was much harder to focus. ...I'd have to read the same paragraph over and over again and I still didn't know what I read. It has gotten better, but it's still not as easy as it was before. (Kato, 2010, p. 99)

### **Attitudes about Mental Illness in the Military Carry Over**

All the participating student veterans agreed that addressing mental illness was important. They conveyed, however, that discussing mental issues was taboo in the military, as having mental illness was interpreted as weakness. Within the military, participants were concerned that PTSD diagnoses would have negative career impact, and this fear translated to the civilian world. Wisteria, for example stated,

We called it the wizard in Iraq. You don't go see the wizard in Iraq because if you do, you get your rifle taken away, you'll have somebody watching you, they think you are going to commit suicide, and bad things happen for the unit. (Kato, 2010, p. 101)

There was a consensus amongst all of the veterans that there is a need to talk to someone about combat-related experiences and the difficulties adjusting to civilian life. As Anthony said, "You shouldn't talk about it right away; you need time. But once you're settled, you need to talk to someone about it" (Kato, 2010, p. 92). Each participant relayed stories of friends from deployments that needed mental health treatment post-deployment, but did not seek it. Wisteria, for instance, "had a buddy who committed suicide shortly after completing service in Iraq" (Kato, 2010, p. 103). Even so, most of the veterans felt afraid of seeking mental health care for fear of diagnostic stigma or negative career implications.

### **Finding Meaning in a New Life Perspective and Purpose**

Participants reported that in the military, and especially in deployed settings, they felt their daily lives held importance and gratification. Brian stated, "When you're deployed, they kinda build you up while you're doing your job, and there's a sense of pride in doing that work" (Kato, 2010, p. 104). As Kyle described, "Everything is important," because the smallest tasks can make large mission impacts (Kato, 2010, p. 106). Participants found that the respect earned in military settings did not immediately transfer into civilian life, so many were faced with trying to re-establish this sense of meaning. Participants who obtained employment often expressed a sense that civilian jobs do not "matter."

This loss of respect and status was the greatest frustration for some participants. Participants described holding leadership positions within the military in which orders were followed, and respect was afforded to them as rank/rate demanded. These customs do not translate to the civilian world. Far from being respected for their histories, some veterans were disregarded by civilians and other students. Kyle, for instance, reported perceiving that he was viewed as "just that jobless guy" (Kato, 2010, p. 105).

Many participants reported believing that they could not achieve the same gratification in civilian life that was achieved in combat zones. Joe, for instance described receiving a "pat

on the back” for completing missions, but few individuals offered such reinforcement in the civilian world (Kato, 2010, p. 108).

Although not providing the same fulfillment as military service, participants reported that returning to school and/or finding a career provided some life meaning, which helped the overall adjustment process. Jobs that were connected to the military in some way or demanded discipline and leadership skills were especially valued as providing new purpose. Maddon said,

I’ve adjusted. I found a sense of importance... I’m still tied to the Army in some ways, still helping, not fighting, but helping them get ready for it. I’ve adjusted, but I needed a job where I was the boss, I was important, I’m valued. (Kato, 2010, p. 107)

Finding the meaning within military experiences was another important part of the participants’ adjustment process. Nearly all of the student veterans described their military experiences and deployments as positive and “life changing.” Many veterans reported personal growth from their combat experiences and returned with a renewed appreciation of the “little things in life,” including electricity, paved roads, hot water, running water, and general safety (Kato, 2010, p. 108). Audrey reported that her experience helped her to appreciate “all aspects of life, even doing the things you don’t want to in order to meet a goal” (Kato, 2010, p. 109). Participants indicated that combat experiences bred maturity through raising self-discipline and confidence. When these areas of personal growth could be applied and valued in a civilian society and/or academic settings, veterans found subjective meaning, which facilitated overall adjustment.

## Discussion

This study investigated the normal adjustment process from military life to student veteran status after redeployment from Iraq/Afghanistan. Nineteen veterans discussed their thoughts and feelings about this process in in-depth interviews. Like prior research, participants indicated significant transitional difficulty, reporting that they found themselves directionless and separated from their military families (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Participants also had difficulty interacting with civilians, whom some found irritating. All of the study’s participants experienced some psychological symptoms, including hypervigilance and hyperarousal; however, these symptoms dissipated within the first year after redeployment. Participants experienced the double-bind of battling the stereotypes that all veterans have PTSD (and all psychological symptoms can be construed as PTSD) and believing that if they sought help for posttraumatic symptoms, that it would have negative career implications (a belief that had carried over from the military). Nevertheless, some participants affirmed having several cognitive symptoms, including difficulty concentrating and short-term memory problems, which negatively impacted academic performance. Consistent with previous qualitative research, participants reported significant financial difficulty, feeling like life’s meaning had been lost after military separation, and perceiving that their accomplishments no longer generated respect in others (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The veterans who were most successful adjusting to civilian/student life found meaning in scholastic and occupational achievement.

Relative to prior studies, the present work corroborated several content themes in student veterans including difficulties bridging the gap between military and civilian life, the importance of building a support system outside of the military, difficulties readapting to civilian culture, and the need to find meaning for successful adjustment. New themes included

battling veteran stereotypes, taming the fight-or-flight response, and the stigma surrounding mental health treatment.

### **Limitations / Delimitations**

The present study used a small sample to gather information regarding the personal experiences of student veterans. Participants were enrolled in one community college, and several participants referred additional participants. Therefore, there may be qualitative differences between participants and non-participants. Findings generated from this sample are not necessarily representative of the broad population of student veterans, although they are generally consistent with adjustment difficulties identified in prior research. Because the majority of the present qualitative themes are consistent with previously identified themes in re-adjusting student veterans, they are likely to have generalizability outside of the present sample. Specifically, the themes consistent with previous research (i.e., bridging military and civilian life, rebuilding a support system, readapting to civilian culture, and finding new meaning) are likely to be transferable to student veterans transitioning to civilian life in general and student veterans transitioning to community colleges in particular. Transferability of the remaining three themes is unknown, but would be improved with replication. Because, however, the transitions and stressors described by the participants were not related to school policy or local culture issues, transferability to veterans at other community colleges is likely.

As to the findings' reliability, the interviewer used the same interview script consistently across-participants, so reliability may be inferred. Researcher bias was minimized and dependability increased by having a research assistant review the primary coder's work. Researcher bias was also minimized by having the research assistant review and corroborate the content categories/themes identified during axial coding.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the present study and prior qualitative inquiry into the psychological adjustment process of student veterans, it is possible to offer several scholastic recommendations for ensuring successful transitions for student veterans. The single most important thing that universities can do is to establish and maintain connections with veterans (Buechner, 2014; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Across the literature, it appears that the best way to do that may be to have an on-campus Veterans' Service Officer (VSO) who is in active, personal communication with the student veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). The VSO serves as a point of contact between the student veterans, the university, and all services that the student veteran may need to access. In coordination with the VSO, university leadership seeks to educate faculty on veterans' issues and how to recognize student veterans who are struggling through transitions. If possible, faculty in each department should be specially trained to interact with veterans, and they can assist with academic problems that arise in other classes (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Ideally, the VSO will be a veteran himself/herself, as that will ensure that student veterans afford that person a modicum of immediate trust. It is imperative, however, that the VSO be exceedingly well-versed in the student veteran transition process. Beyond the VSO, it is important that student veterans be able to form a community that provides a support system much akin to the military family (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In the present study, the student veterans' organization was key to student veterans being able to connect with each other and veteran-friendly faculty. Such groups need to be visible, and it is preferable if they can hold a permanent location on-campus,

which requires institutional and financial support (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012).

Our participants believed that mentorship from another veteran is necessary to successfully navigate the transition. A mentor is able to connect the transitioning veteran to all the necessary services available including financial aid, the veterans' organization, counseling, academic advising, veteran-friendly faculty, and healthcare. That mentor may be the VSO himself/herself. Ideally, however, a thriving student veterans' organization is able to provide formal and informal mentorship to newly transitioning students (Buechner, 2014; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

It is also important that quality, appropriate mental health services be available, including (if possible) services from veterans and providers well-versed in veteran and military issues (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Because of the significant rates of psychopathology in student veterans (and pathology reported by our participants), it is imperative that University Counseling Center providers be prepared to respond to these problems among student veterans, which may entail receiving additional training in military culture and evidence-based treatments. Alternatively, it may be possible to integrate VA clinics on-campus (Herbst, 2013). Within the student veterans' organization, it is helpful to set a norm of de-stigmatizing mental health issues while maintaining a healthy veteran perspective. This may be accomplished by more senior student veterans speaking openly about their experiences with mental health care, psychological symptoms, and/or their own struggles in adjusting.

Finally, since searching for meaning in life is tantamount not only to transitioning student veterans but to all people, it should follow that finding ways to imbue the academic experience with meaning will positively impact veteran adjustment. Some ways to do that include enlisting student veterans' help in making policies and procedures veteran-friendly, allowing student veterans to hold leadership roles, and providing recognition for academic and community accomplishments.

In conclusion, the transition from active warrior to student veteran carries with it predictable adjustment difficulty and loss – the loss of military family, structure, camaraderie, and meaning. It is not possible to recreate the military atmosphere on the civilian campus, nor is that a laudable goal. But a portion of the significance that student veterans experienced while serving on the battlefield can be re-created. They may find strong support among other student veterans, structure in the academic and occupational day, and meaning through academic and professional achievement. By easing veterans' adjustment into our nation's universities and colleges, we will enable them to again grow through adversity, achieve new meaning, and contribute their unique skills and perspectives to society.

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## Appendix A

### Phone Screening Script

*I would like to start by thanking you for your interest in this study. This is a study regarding the psychological adjustment process of soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. The information from the study might prove to be beneficial to the psychological health of veterans returning from these operations and may also be used to inform programs facilitating the adjustment process for these individuals. Before we continue, I want to confirm that you meet the criteria for participation in this study by asking you a few questions:*

1. *Were you recently on active duty in the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts between 2001 and 2010?*
2. *Have you had at least 4 months since return from active duty?*
3. *Are you between the ages of 18 – 50?*
4. *Are you willing and able to describe your experiences related to the adjustment process since your return from duty?*
5. *Are you currently on active duty? (Kato, 2010, p. 59-60).*

If potential participants responded affirmatively, the interviewer invited them to make in-person interview appointments. If participants responded otherwise, they were informed that they did not meet study inclusion criteria and were thanked for their interest.

## Appendix B

### Interview Script

The interview began with the following statement:

*I am interested in knowing about your adjustment process from warrior to civilian post-deployment from Afghanistan or Iraq. I am interested in learning about your experiences during this time in your life and your related thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Perhaps the best way for you to start is to describe your experiences upon return from Afghanistan or Iraq. (Author, p. 61).*

If participants did not naturally address the following areas, the investigator used these additional probes:

1. *What are/were some of the main stress areas in your life since you returned?*
  - a. *What things helped you cope when you returned?*
  - b. *What got in the way of coping?*
2. *How have you changed? How might others say you have changed?*
3. *What were the best and worst parts of the whole return experience?*
4. *Did your worldview change when you got back from when you first went over; if so, how?*
5. *How do you feel about the attitudes of others about the war?*
6. *How do you feel about any changes in how you are treated now?*
7. *Did you experience any unexpected changes upon your return?*
8. *What would you want those still serving in Afghanistan/Iraq to know about the return stateside?* (Kato, 2010, p. 62)

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This research is based on the first author's Doctoral dissertation (Kato, 2010), for which she owns the copyright. Portions of dissertation text are included in the present article and are cited.

Words fail to fully capture it, but we wish to thank the veterans of the OEF and OIF conflicts. Like the generations before yours, you bore the burden without fully knowing the cost. As we learn more about welcoming you home, let us help you not only to adjust but to thrive.

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