

Identity, Masculinity, and Military Life

Narrative identity reconstruction and embodied sense-making: Transitioning from military to civilian life

Abstract

This article explores the process of transitioning from military to civilian life, drawing on the concepts provided by Dialogical Self Theory. It examines how individuals navigate the acquisition of new civilian identities by integrating a range of sometimes conflicting cultural I-positions. The study also delves into how this narrative process is reflected in embodied experiences of becoming civilian. Through an in-depth analysis of two case studies—former Lieutenant Peter, who fully transitions to civilian life, and Sergeant Emma, who opts for a hybrid outcome, combining a civilian job with work as a military instructor—the article highlights the intertwined nature of narrative and embodied processes in self-identity work. The findings suggest that understanding this complex entanglement can be valuable for professionals who provide counseling to military personnel during their transition to civilian life.

Methodology

- Longitudinal case study (3-year period)
- 19 Swedish veterans (men and women)
- In-depth qualitative interviews, conducted at multiple points
- Analysis through Narrative Psychology and Dialogical Self Theory (focus on “I-positions”)

Interview Methodology

- Semi-structured interview protocol used across three cycles (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; van den Brand et al., 2014).
- Interview Design: Open-ended questions allowing participants to construct meaningful answers; topics included military story, transition, relationships, identity, and existential concerns.
- Interview Duration: Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes.
- Transcription: All interviews transcribed verbatim.
- Researcher Background: Interviews conducted by the first author, a former military officer, with shared military background acknowledged to facilitate dialogue (Brunger et al., 2013).
- Researcher-Participant Relationship: The researcher’s military background deemed crucial for establishing rapport and promoting insightful dialogue (Mishler, 1991, 2004).

Conclusion

Participants revealed deep internal negotiations between their past military identities and their emerging civilian roles. Many experienced tension, role confusion, and even loss of self. However, others developed hybrid identities, integrating military discipline or values into civilian life. Embodied habits—such as posture, routines, or responses to stress—played a central role in shaping how they experienced this transition. Identity was not just narrated, but lived in and through the body.

Reference

Grimell, J., & van den Berg, M. (2020). Advancing an understanding of the body amid transition from a military life. *Culture & Psychology*, 26(2), 187–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19861054>

Abstract

In military culture, there exists a protected form of masculinity. The theory of symbolic resources (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003) posits that individuals are positioned within various symbolic streams in the socio-cultural world, where they have the potential to either be displaced or reposition themselves (Benson, 2001; Duveen, 2001). For an individual joining the military, this process involves transitioning from a civilian socio-cultural environment to a military one. The study conducted 29 semi-structured individual interviews and three focus groups (each consisting of two or three individuals) with male and female British military personnel. The participants included members of the Royal Marines, Army, and Royal Air Force, across a range of ranks. Following the theory of symbolic resources, the unit of analysis for psychological development is the unit of rupture—irruption of certainty—transition. This suggests a process that culminates in a new form of stability. The process military personnel undergo is one where what is initially uncertain and unfamiliar during training eventually becomes certain and familiar. By focusing on the rupture that occurs during the training phase of an individual's military career, one can examine how military masculinities are shaped and evolve through symbolic resources.

Methodology

- Qualitative study using symbolic interactionism
- 29 semi-structured interviews with service members
- 3 focus groups with instructors and trainees
- Thematic coding with attention to cultural symbols, rituals, and discursive practices

Conclusion

- Uniforms, discipline, and ritual reinforce dominant masculine norms
- Emotional control and physical endurance are rewarded; vulnerability is punished
- Civilians are viewed as morally or physically inferior
- Training constitutes a symbolic break from civilian life — recruits undergo identity remaking

Reference

Hale, H. C. (2008). The development of British military masculinities through symbolic resources. *Culture & Psychology*, 14(3), 305–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X08092636>



Heroism & Cultural Critiques of Militarism

Research Question

The article questions the cultural psychology of heroism in the U.S., asking: Why is heroism so often tied to military valor, and how can we culturally redefine what counts as heroic?

Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on culture, militarism, and the concept of the heroic. It calls for a more nuanced focus on militarism and a re-evaluation of heroism within cultural research. The heroic is not limited to extraordinary physical feats but also involves moral courage—acting to end injustices, support human rights, and foster societal development toward a fully realized or "actualized" democracy. Achieving this requires the intersection of psychological science and the American military to include critical assessments of the global role and impact of the U.S. military. Central to this reassessment is a critical examination of "evidence-based" interventions in general.

Methodology

- Theoretical critique supported by:
- U.S. media analysis
- National survey data
- Heroic Imagination Project (Zimbardo)
- Draws from narrative identity theory and political psychology

Conclusion

- U.S. heroism = military sacrifice, violence, masculinity
- Nonviolent heroism (activism, caregiving, moral resistance) is neglected
- Psychology often reinforces these narratives by remaining silent on structural militarism
- Proposes expanding heroism to include civic and moral courage

Reference

Zimbardo, P. G., Breckenridge, J. N., & Moghaddam, F. M. (2015). Culture, militarism, and America's heroic future. *Culture & Psychology*, 21(4), 505-514.

Research Question

This article critiques the failure of "cultural theory" to fully engage with militarism and violence. The key question: Why is war often left out of cultural analyses — and what happens when we treat it as a cultural system?

Abstract

This article begins by discussing some theoretical and methodological issues that run through Nancy Spalding's account of the civil war in Nigeria (Spalding, 2000), providing an opportunity to reflect on how social scientists approach military conflict. I challenge certain understandings of 'culture' and 'social order' in the interpretation of military conflicts. Instead of imposing a cultural theory, I argue for engaging in cultural description, remaining open to the various ways in which members of society produce social order, rather than viewing social order as an ideal state that can break down. By doing so, the historical institutions involved in war become visible as cultural phenomena. This approach results in an analysis of war grounded in available evidence, while also strengthening the reflexive and critical responsibilities of social sciences. I illustrate these points through a brief analysis of the public discourse that preceded the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Methodology

- Critical theoretical commentary
- Discourse analysis of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia (1999)
- Influenced by postcolonial theory and ethnomethodology

Conclusion

Militarism is rationalized through cultural discourse (e.g. "peacekeeping", "moral duty") War is presented as orderly, not violent — sanitizing its reality Cultural theory fails when it treats culture as neutral or apolitical Militarism is global and institutional — it must be included in any serious cultural analysis

Reference

Martínez, Fè. Dì. (2000). Culture at All Points, Including Militarism. *Culture & Psychology*, 6(3), 333-352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0063004>





From “The Colonel” to Cultural Insight: A Personal Reflection on Militarism and Identity



I had to create this poster on militarism and cultural identity because, for me, it is not an academic topic, it is personal. My grandfather is a veteran colonel. Military life was never theoretical for us as a family; it was present in the manner in which he speaks, how he organizes his day, the subtle confidence with which he enters every room. When I was a child, I simply considered it as "who he is." But as time passed, and specifically during the course of this project, I have started to understand that what I was observing was something much more deeper, a cultural identity formed by institution, repetition, and inheritance.

Reading through these articles helped me see that culture is not just external, it's in our bodies, our habits, and the ways in which we relate to others. The military, in particular, is not just an occupation or a place it's a system that rebuilds identity from top to the bottom. It controls posture, language, emotional control, and those lessons don't stop after someone retires. They remain. I've seen that in my grandfather's life, and only now do I see it as a form of embodied culture. This process also pushed me to investigate assumptions I'd never questioned before, like what it is to be a "hero," or how masculinity is constructed and rewarded. I was raised hearing that my grandfather was a hero, and I still believe he was. But I've come to see how limited our cultural constructions of heroism can be. They are usually about sacrifice, discipline, and strength, admirable values, to be sure, but not usually balanced with empathy, resistance, or nurturance. It doesn't detract from my grandfather's story it expands how I think about it.

What I have gained from this experience is not just knowledge about the psychology of militarism but a deeper sense of how institutions mold people, how culture gets close, and how the narratives we inherit are worth examining with both curiosity and respect. In discovering more about military identity, I feel that I've come to know my grandfather not just as "the colonel," but as a man whose life is the complex intersection of self, society, and history.