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**Complex Psychosocial Distress post deployment in Veterans:
Reintegration Identity Disruption and Challenged Moral Integrity**

Lynne McCormack PhD¹,

Lauren Ell M ClinPsych¹

¹University of Newcastle, Australia

Address for Correspondence:

1. Lynne McCormack PhD

Senior Lecturer

School of Psychology

Faculty of Science & IT

University of Newcastle

NSW 2308 Australia

E-mail: lynne.mccormack@newcastle.edu.au; creativepsych@gmail.com

Ph: +61 413406050

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Abstract

How individuals experience reintegration post-combat and subsequent military discharge is a poorly explored phenomenon though for many service personnel it is fraught with complex psychosocial hurdles. Therefore, seeking both positive and negative interpretations of this phenomenon, semi-structured interviews explored the ‘lived’ experience of five former military personnel. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis one superordinate theme emerged: *Shaping and Breaking: Who am I now?* and overarched five subordinate themes. Four themes encapsulated the search for post war identity in these former military personnel. As such, narratives revealed that each participant grappled to understand a destabilising sense of betrayal beyond leadership malpractice. This was interpreted as an enduring organisational failure that was cumulative on core morality changes from exposure to war. Psychological injuries remained fresh and raw despite years since discharge. Memories of feeling discarded, lost, and alone rekindled the self-doubt, distrust, and depleted confidence that fostered an inability to readily re-engage with civility, with loved ones and society. Turning on self, intrinsic blame fuelled either self-loathing or retreat into silence or rage. A fifth theme revealed tenuous insights where minimal acceptance, some redefining of altruistic identity, and hope could emerge. Findings are discussed in light of these results particularly the role of organisations in providing immediate supportive validation of deployment experience where validation of moral distress and identity disruption are included in reintegration programs nurturing recovery and psychological wellbeing.

Keywords: *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Moral Injury; Betrayal trauma; Altruistic Identity Disruption; Posttraumatic Growth*

Introduction

Military personnel fit within a high risk occupational group for exposure to traumatic events (Hoge, Lesikar, Guevara, Lange, et al., 2002). In particular, involvement in combat exposes many to life threatening situations, including taking others' lives, losing comrades, and handling dead bodies (Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, et al., 2004; Thomas, Wilk, Riviere, McGurk, et al., 2001). In the post-deployment period, returnees from deployment can face an array of difficulties including high rates of physical injuries (Sayer, Chiro, Sigford, Scott, et al., 2008) mental health disorders (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006; Norris & Stone, 2013) interpersonal issues (Sayers, 2011) substance abuse (Hoge et al., 2004) and suicide (Bryan, Bryan, Morrow, Etienne, & Ray-Sannerud, 2014). However, returning to civilian life and reintegrating with society following military training and action is poorly researched. For some, the effects of combat exposure are less evident immediately after return from war, sometimes emerging decades after their exposure to war (McCormack & Joseph, 2014). Therefore, this study explored the individual's subjective interpretation of reintegration post deployment and subsequent transitioning to civilian life in ex-military personnel deployed in the last 15 years. It was interested in both positive and negative subjective interpretations and the interpreted 'lived' experience.

Historically, support for military personnel reintegration has varied over time as conceptualisations of war-related distress and societal beliefs around mental illness have changed (Fay, 2014). The catalyst for change has been dominated by a medical model approach, which focuses on the biological cause and treatment of mental illness, and periodic remodelling of diagnostic interpretations of post-traumatic stress in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM; APA, 1980, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2013). Current government support for military personnel in many countries includes mental health screening (Rona, Hyams, & Wessely, 2005), research on post-deployment issues (Barton,

Treloar, Dobson, McClintock, & McFarlane, 2008; Van Hooff, McFarlane, Davies, Searle, et al., 2014; Samele, 2013) and specific programs to target reintegration of personnel, such as the *BATTLEMIND* program (Adler, Bliese, McGurk, Hoge, & Castro, 2009). However, criticisms exist around the lack of evidence regarding the efficacy of such programs and a tendency for them to focus on mental health disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Rona et al., 2005; Samele, 2013, Sayer, Noorbaloochi, Frazier, Carlson, et al., 2010). That criticism is directed towards the absence of psychosocial and relational issues such as spiritual, employment and family issues, which appear to be poorly addressed despite their prevalence for disrupting the reintegration period post-deployment, (Sayer et al., 2010; Schnurr, Lunney, Bovin, & Marx, 2009).

However, addressing the complex picture of psychosocial distress cumulative upon traumatic distress in returning military personnel and veterans may involve acceptance that *moral injury* may complicate the psychological presentation (Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, et al., 2009). Aspects of moral injury from deployment are likely juxtaposed with an earlier need to adapt to the social military environment, where following orders, killing on command, and looking after comrades are expected responses to a threatening environment (Singer, 2004).

Moral injury occurs when individuals are exposed to potentially morally injurious events, defined as “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations which may be deleterious in the long-term, emotionally, psychologically, behaviourally, spiritually, and socially” (Litz et al., 2009, p. 695). Individuals experiencing moral injury can experience negative changes in ethical attitudes and behaviours, changes in spirituality, difficulties with forgiveness, feelings of shame and guilt, and a reduced ability to trust other people (Drescher, Foy, Kelly, Leshner, et al., 2011).

A number of theories have been developed to explain the development of moral injury in military personnel. Shame and guilt are considered primary components of moral injury (Drescher et al., 2011; Gaudet, Sowers, Nugent, & Boriskin, 2015) with shame being associated with decreased psychological wellbeing and a risk factor for violence, depression and suicide in military members (Gaudet et al., 2015). The theme of betrayal of 'what's right' has also been identified in the combat experience of military personnel through self-violation of personnel ideals and values (Litz et al., 2009; McCormack & Joseph, 2014) or leadership malpractice (Shay, 2014; McCormack & Joseph, 2014). By association, leadership malpractice and betrayal by senior management, can contribute to deterioration of moral character, shattering of beliefs, and destruction of the ability to trust, resulting in lifelong psychological injury (Shay, 2014).

Complicating the recovery process following combat experience is an organisational potential to invalidate or poorly support returnees from high risk environments precipitating feelings of unworthiness and narcissistic self harming behaviours (McCormack & Joseph, 2013). Decades after exposure, McCormack and Joseph (2014) found that aging Vietnam veterans experienced multiple layers of war-related betrayal as participants struggled for moral integrity and reparative self-evaluation over time. Perceived betrayal in hierarchical organisation where staff are exposed to threatening environments, not dissimilar to that experienced by children who suffer abuse at the hands of primary caretakers, appears to play a central and complex role in war-related distress and the potential for moral injury.

Further, seeking to unpack the myriad of responses experienced in the post-deployment reintegration period, *altruistic identity/altruistic identity disruption* (McCormack, Joseph & Hagger, 2009), has been identified in personnel returning from high risk environments. This construct recognises that those who are motivated by service to society may be high in altruism yet at risk of poor reintegration following exposure to environments

of threatening traumatic events in the course of their work. Those experiencing altruistic identity disruption experience post-deployment interrelated feelings of isolation, doubt, and self-blame as a consequence of perceived invalidation or lack of support from organisation, family, or society (McCormack & Joseph, 2013; McCormack, Orenstein & Joseph, 2016). While the literature on altruistic identity in military personnel is sparse, it is possible that altruistic identity disruption may play a part along with moral injury in the plethora of possible responses felt by returning combat personnel attempting to adjust to civilian life. Similarly, Kirkland (1995) suggests that a primary factor that determines a healthy reintegration back into society for a soldier is the validation of their experiences by society and their deploying organisation. Furthermore, evidence suggests that there is a negative relationship between PTSD symptom severity and perceived organisational support (Kelley, Britt, Adler, & Bliese, 2014).

Conversely, trauma, stress and adversity has the potential to facilitate personal growth and positive life changes referred to as *stress-related growth* or *post-traumatic growth* (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Joseph, 2011). Three major areas of psychological growth are recognised: enhancements in relationships; changing views of self; and changes in life philosophy or spiritual beliefs (Joseph & Linley, 2006) and such growth is influenced by sociodemographic variables, trauma characteristics, personality characteristics, coping style and religious beliefs (Linley & Joseph, 2004; McCormack & Joseph, 2014; Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner, & Maercker, 2006). Importantly, social support and validation of experiences increases an individual's chances of obtaining positive psychological change following trauma (Forstmeier, Kuwert, Spitzer, Freyberger, & Maercker, 2009) highlighting the significance of positive support following exposure to traumatic events. Psychological growth has been observed in military personnel and has been found to be positively correlated with combat exposure (Moran, Burkner, & Schmidt, 2013; Pietrzak, Goldstein,

Malley, Rivers, et al., 2010). Post-traumatic growth therefore appears to be a relevant aim for organisations to promote during the reintegration period of military personnel following deployment.

There are three main theories which provide a theoretical explanation for the process of post-traumatic growth. First, Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) functional-descriptive model describes the way in which traumatic events shatter pretrauma belief systems, then rebuilds a new schema inclusive of the trauma information, through cognitive rumination. Second, the biopsychosocial-evolutionary theory (Christopher, 2004) posits that the traumatic stress response is normal and adaptive in facilitating growth and learning. Finally, the organismic valuing theory of growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005), proposes that individuals are intrinsically motivated towards growth and the processing of trauma for psychological wellbeing.

Resolution to trauma can thus be: a) the assimilation of new information and return to pretrauma baseline, b) negative accommodation of information resulting in psychological distress or c) positive accommodation, resulting in a deeper, more meaningful understanding of self and world, leading to positive changes and growth.

More research exploring the processes of uniquely personal integration of traumatic and morally injurious events, within a particular social context, is required. Additionally, what drives individuals to serve in the military is poorly understood. It may be that individual traits such as integral altruism may be influential in military recruits, and influence the responses in the post-deployment phase, positively or negatively. Accordingly, further research can inform organisations in improving reintegration programs and how to promote post-traumatic growth in their personnel following difficult and traumatic deployments.

This study explored the 'lived' experience of reintegration in former military personnel following overseas war/civil unrest deployment. An idiographic, interpretative study was chosen seeking to understand the phenomenon of reintegration post-deployment

and transition into civilian life. Such phenomenological enquiries can provide deeper insight into the subjective interpretative world of the individual (Osborne & Smith, 2006; Reynolds & Lim, 2007). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is recommended for investigating areas where subjective meanings, values and beliefs are important but not well understood (Smith, 1996). Thus far, prescriptive accounts of PTSD have dominated the literature and informed practice for combat distress. However, this excludes the individual perspective and unique interpretations of experiences within a social context. Therefore using IPA (Smith, 1996) this study explored the ‘lived’ experience of reintegration following deployment to war, and transition to civilian life. It sought subjective interpretations from former military personnel exploring both positive and negative interpretations of their experiences organisationally, socially and relationally.

Method

Participants

Participants of the study were five former Army military personnel, who had been on international deployment to a war zone or area of civil unrest in the last 15 years. Selection criteria included that participants be 25 or over, had been militarily deployed to combat, and were now discharged from the relevant service. The participants were aged between 25- 39 and consisted of four males and one female. Participants had varying roles within the Army, and were deployed to Timor Leste and Afghanistan on peacekeeping and combat roles (see Table 1). Three of the participants had been medically discharged due to physical injuries, and two had chosen to discharge voluntarily. Participants were recruited via private psychological services that offered therapy to former military personnel.

-Insert Table 1-

Procedure

Following university ethical clearance, this interpretative phenomenological study sought an homogenous group for whom the research questions had relevance and personal significance. Following the tenets of IPA, data was collected through semi-structured interviews that elicited reiterative enquiry, funnelling down to more specific interpretations over the course of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Participants were sourced through private trauma therapists who were asked to distribute the study information to clients who fitted the study criteria. Five potential participants who met the selection criteria contacted the researchers and were subsequently emailed further study information, a consent form, and a demographic questionnaire. An interview time was organised at a time and place of their choosing. On the day prior to the interview participants were provided with a copy of the semi-structured interview questions to familiarise themselves with the study focus. Signed consent forms were collected prior to the interviews commencing.

Interviews were conducted, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the second author, and lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours (see Notations). This resulted in approximately 7 hours of data (Smith & Osborn, 2008; see Table 2). The interview focused on the 'lived' experience of participant's reintegration experiences, both positive and negative, following overseas deployment as military personnel. Participants were asked to interpret the experiential phenomena of homecoming and reintegration from the perspective of organisational, family and social support. The semi-structured interview acted as a prompt only.

Epistemology

IPA adopts a critical realist approach, with philosophical underpinnings in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Critical realism posits that individuals are unable to directly assess reality. A hermeneutic stance suggests that interpretation of reality

occurs through an individual's perception of events within their social and personal world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As such, phenomenology seeks to understand this personal and subjective experience of 'being in the world' from a first person stance (Spinelli, 2005). The focus on individual meaning-making of a 'lived experience' requires an open curiosity, separate from predetermined or abstract categories. As such IPA is an idiographic approach, concerned with unique individual perceptions of events within their social and personal world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, IPA is informed by the theory of hermeneutics, as it strives to empathetically understand interpretations of reality through expressed language, thinking and emotion. It provides a descriptive account of individual meaning-making of an object or event, which transcends objective reality and general assumptions (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). This individual experience is embedded within a social, cultural and historical context and understood through the unique subjective meaning that individuals bring to their relationship with their social context (Smith, 1996).

Analytic Approach

IPA is recommended for investigating areas where subjective meanings, values and beliefs are important but not well understood (Smith, 1996). As such IPA promises to be a useful method for addressing the gap in the literature in understanding the subjective lived experience of reintegration for military personnel following overseas deployment. Samples in IPA are drawn from homogenous groups that are poorly researched. As such, it focuses on individual meaning-making of a 'lived' experience and requires the researcher to remain open and separate from predetermined or abstract categories. Through the process of double hermeneutics the researcher empathetically seeks to understand the unique interpretations of reality through expressed language, thinking and emotion (Smith et al., 2009). Analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted according to the iterative and inductive process of

IPA described by Smith and Osborn (2008). A step by step analytic procedure is provided in Table 2.

-Insert Table 2-

Validity and reliability

Originally, post hoc evaluation by qualitative researchers to support trustworthiness was promoted in Guba and Lincoln's (1981; 1982; 1989) early and seminal work. However, mindful of its philosophical stance and a need to define rigor (Smith, 1996), reliability and validity in an IPA qualitative research is assured through strict adherence to its analytical steps. Rigorous attention to these steps ensures trustworthiness, verification, credibility, and dependability and leads the researchers to formulate one account of the data that is internally coherent. In particular, independent auditing of themes by each researcher and interpretation of data must be applied in a self-conscious, reflexive and systematic approach (for more details on this approach, see Smith 1996) assuring quality control. Therefore, IPA in seeking subjectivity rather than external reality, a primary concern of validity in positivist research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) aims for rich thematic data that is both convergent (across all transcripts) and divergent (within one transcript) as opposed to saturation of each theme (see Smith, 2011).

Authors were openly critical of their own biases and presuppositions. Each author independently analysed the transcripts arriving at their own list of emerging themes supported by the data. Robust discussion followed between the authors which resulted in one initial divergent theme and many convergent themes. An audit trail between the authors continued throughout the analysis and results, and consisted of transcripts, lists, tables, and tracking until the final results reflected the current superordinate and subordinate themes. Themes are supported by rich extracts from the transcripts.

Author's perspective

IPA and its use of double hermeneutics requires a subjective interpretation which is influenced by the authors own contextual background. The authors recognised that biases from exposure to military personnel and organisations through work and family had the potential to be either positive or negative thus debate ensued with strict adherence to the IPA protocols. Similarly, critical discussion of each other's perspective continued throughout for final emergent themes. The audit trail inclusive of a reflexive journal was also used for reflection and checking.

The first author has worked as a post-trauma therapist with military personnel, veterans and their families, and humanitarian workers. This work has led to the observation that exposure to adversity, trauma and distress does not always lead to chronic psychopathology and that positive outcomes often emerge concurrently with psychological distress. The second author has limited experience in working with military personnel in a clinical setting, however brought an understanding of the positive social and cultural aspects of military lifestyle, through family connections in the defence service.

Results

One superordinate theme emerged: *Shaping and breaking: Who am I now?* that encapsulates the imposed shift in sense of self to perform military duties. This overarched five subordinate themes. *Organisational 'family' betrayal* encapsulates the search for post war identity in these former military personnel, as they retreat into embarrassed silence and feelings of disillusionment, or rage at sensed organisational betrayal and abandonment *Onto the rubbish pile* recognises that the warrior skillset, no longer of value post war, is seen as unsustainable in civil society and organisationally disregarded. *Turning inward on self*, occurs as simmering rage gives way to explicit rage, risking harm to self and others for one participant in particular. All speak of feeling discarded, lost, and alone as their post-deployment, redundant role in the organisation unravels. Chronic physical injury is redefined

as damaged goods. Self-doubt and depleted confidence ensue. *Dehumanisation* defines their inability to readily re-engage with civility, as a wedge of distrust and confusion permeates their post-deployment relationships with loved ones and society. *Seeds of growth* speak to valuing the youth within who could confront and overcome the extremities of war. For others, encountering inexplicable moral challenges witnessed within other cultures brings self-questioning and a re-emergence of altruistic self. Reassembling their lives and identity becomes a protracted struggle to belong and reconnect with hope of further growth.

Organisational ‘Family’ Betrayal

Organisational ‘family’ betrayal describes the multi-layered feelings of disillusionment, abandonment, and betrayal that is a slow awakening for these participants in response to post-deployment treatment from the deploying organisation. For these participants, layers of confusion continually bubble to the surface over worth as an individual, and worth as a committed soldier. Unable to reconcile former beliefs of trust in the organisation, they now see lack of reciprocal commitment from the organisation, as a betrayal by ‘family’. There is visible hurt and cynical distrust throughout the interviews.

The participants struggle over the perception of ‘mateship’ and valued teamwork, once the core values of their military ‘family’. Perhaps this was fabricated for organisational purposes? As such, there is unease and a sense of having been betrayed and hoodwinked. Anger simmers close to the surface:

After Afghanistan, I started to know this is just a fucking... set up.

Defined as duplicity, the participants experience grief and loss of self-respect that positions them as disenfranchised from ‘the family’; “*I can’t be a part of this. I can’t be proud of who I work for*”. Similarly, an earlier naïve trust in a protective patriarch is cynically redefined as ambitious leaders aspiring to great heights at the cost of those at the bottom of the pyramid:

Like it's all about the next link going up in the line, and rank higher. All they care about is themselves... we were last, they didn't care about us.

The growing seeds of disillusionment and sensed abandonment post-deployment provide a catalyst for reflecting on inconsistencies during their deployment. The interviews are alive with memories of feeling "*really exposed*" or being deployed with "*absolutely no, no instruction whatsoever*". There emerges a barrage of questions around safety and speculation as to whether at times, safety was minimised. A disquiet is evident as those questions heighten the possibility that caretakers were less than vigilant with their safety. For one, a light bulb moment erupts with awkwardness and confusion:

We pretty much came below any locals, any buildings, any mosques, any building that sort of importance, any livestock, anything else... we were pretty much the last in. **We were last** - they didn't care about us.

Sensing that safety was intermittently prioritised, these participants redefined the cracks and crevices of a large and often disparate organisation, as one that is fractured and dishonest:

Very hypocritical when someone was absolutely in need and hung out to dry... that kind of thing I can't make sense of.

Onto the Rubbish Pile

This theme reveals the experience of feeling organisationally discarded, rejected and unsupported, often due to medical discharge, during post-deployment reintegration. Despite being career driven, physical injury brings an abrupt exit to military life: "*Being told... your ankles stuffed, see you later, get out*". Future uncertainty is never far from their presentation of self as they struggle to put the pieces together and "*find our new normal*":

It feels a bit late to do the things that I wanted to do, like the age that I was in the army... I was expecting to do it long term.

Once able to fulfil the high expectations and goals of the army, futility and disconnect from civilian career options is evident. Querying what to do next keeps emerging. Specialist

skills no longer needed leave these individuals with a depleting sense of self-worth and value.

Experiences I gained I can't really pass on because I'm not in the military anymore... it's all useless skills that I have now.

The challenging role of starting afresh with ongoing physical and psychological injuries, is not only personally experienced but is mused upon as common to many returnees. Organisational neglect permeates the narratives of transitioning to civilian life: *"like there's no aftercare...I've had mates ringing like pretty much going to do themselves in"*. These participants tell of feeling used and abused, thrown on the heap, no longer important, and poorly followed up on return. Slipping through the cracks after deployment was a common unease in these participants:

They had screening and everything just before you left (Afghanistan)... but I think that's too early to be doing something... I didn't really notice any changes until like a few months after coming back home.

Post-deployment, loss, disconnect and rejection extends beyond the organisation. Without organisational care for reintegration between returnees and families, misunderstandings grind negatively with family and civilian encounters. Emotional reactivity often erupts exacerbating efforts to re-engage with intimate relationships and family. The war continues at home:

(My wife) tell me I'm like emotionless, heartless beast and shit like that. I just say fuck off I'm going out to the shed.

One participant reflects on felt stigma and minimization during the process of being medically discharged, as *"a lot of people look at you differently"*. Social networks outside the military are no longer relevant or felt to be welcoming, intensifying perceived invalidation, lack of genuine interest, and understanding of their experiences. Disconnected from former

military social networks, reintegration post-deployment is described as an isolated and lonely journey:

You come home and there's not anyone here that you can share it with... there's not really anyone that understands... you're just, you're even more introverted.

Turning Inward on Self

"Not having a voice", is the silent side of reintegration. *"Character"* and *"confidence"* from challenging deployment experiences are destabilised by a lumbering disinterest in their skills on return. Unable to narrate their experiences, they succumb to moral self-doubt:

Just having that self-doubt of am I doing this right, am I this kind of person?

Thinking back, they remember that silence extended to emotional responses to death. They feel disenfranchised in grief:

Just told to focus on your job, think about it later. Like that's what we did. Just kept going.

"Army mentality" and tough masculine image, extends to silence around injuries. The threat of shame and judgement forces them into silence fearful of collegial judgement:

Well if people are injured they get called malingerers. They make out like they're making it up or something but I'm living proof. I pushed through my injuries and it led to me being medically discharged.

With an earlier faith in the organisation now juxtaposed with a sense of betrayal, layers of bullying and scapegoating within the organisation come to conscious memory during the interviews. For one, without protective and professional support through the reintegration period, venting is a sudden and quick escalation to violent retaliation:

I noticed I was getting bad, like threatening lives, threatening even my own blokes, sort of like beat them, knock their teeth out sort of thing.

Highly trained and competent performers on a threatening international stage, at homecoming they feel gutted by purposelessness, others' disinterest, and lack of cohesion.

With confidence eroding, retreating into silence becomes self-protective to deflect the rage that is never far from the surface:

I went and like grabbed a pair of scissors and I was about to go stab him at work
(laughs).

Ultimately these participants learn to think twice before speaking out against perceived invalidation post-deployment. Unsure as to why they are so disregarded, mistrust, isolation, and sense of invalidation heightens indignity:

I've become jaded with the army... you've been over there fighting and then they forget like what you need... you are nothing, sort of thing.

Purpose trained to defend life violently is a transformation out of civility that is not, for some, easily relinquished nor able to be spoken about with civilians post-deployment. Similarly, to speak of their military work in warzones as creating job satisfaction is likely to distance them further from non-military members of society who may judge them and their 'job' negatively. Self appraisal is shockingly and aggressively honest in one participant and years after deployment engaging without aggression when conflict arises, is unfathomable:

I liked it, being right in someone's face using my own fists, or bloody head-butting them or kicking them... perfect.

Without being able to turn off the warrior within, these participants have difficulty distilling right from wrong, civil from uncivil. Am I the problem, is an effortful puzzle to solve: "*You really start having second thoughts of your own workings*".

Dehumanisation

This divergent but powerful theme describes the torrent of extreme emotions that can emerge for some following extreme high risk and violent exposure to war. Additionally, it recognises that when civil boundaries are stripped from behavioural protocols, the risk of a young soldier losing civility and becoming dehumanized, is real. For one participant, "*primal*" rage and total disregard for personal safety occurs in response to morally

questionable events on deployment: *“It was a girls’ school... they don’t want them to be educated... I sort of turned half evil”*. During reintegration post-war, this uncontrollable and explosive rage dwells within a moral void of self-distain: *“I can be casual as fuck like that, and then go into full rage”*.

Eluding to psychological strategies for easing distress, this participant’s sense of moral abode is inconsequential, self and other respect is shattered, civility is meaningless:

My happy place is fucking machine gunning down fucking women and children - stuff like that. I don’t have a happy fucking place.

Indelibly changed, how to undo a sense of disenfranchisement from civilian life, seems insurmountable: *“there’s just too many rules now”*. This has consequences for this participant’s wider support framework where his distorted psyche and current view of the world has brought a high risk disconnect from family and community. Experiencing the violence of war, complicated by sense organisational invalidation in the reintegration period, has disengaged this participant’s moral compass. He turns inwards with self-loathing and moral indifference: *“I just don’t give a fuck about anything now, like I don’t care what anyone thinks”*.

Contributing to isolation, are experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation. Lying becomes a front-line defense at self- protection from others’ loathing and naivety:

People have no idea, like they think it’s just a casual like walk around. I used to tell them that we used to go around cuddling kids and handing out lollies (sweets).

To combat moral self-doubt, self-destructive and high risk narcissistic coping behaviours persist to shield negative self-beliefs from others: *“I played one game of Russian roulette alone”*. There is a moment of clarity, perhaps even regret:

I’ve done enough evil things sort of like, the devil doesn’t want me down in hell I don’t think.

The warrior self-image was maintained for years after discharge from the military. Civilian life is experienced as “*boring*”, meaningless and without value. Life and death for this former warrior has no reprieve from the battlefield:

I wanted to go to war... I'd go again and best off I'd die there sort of thing... or just keep fighting.

Incrementally, moments of connect appear for this participant as he contemplates ways to belong again in civilian life. It is nebulous and short lived during the interview. He readily reverts to seeking meaning in cultures that embrace the warrior:

I've been looking into... like the Japanese culture, like the warrior culture, like Bushido, like the **way of the warrior** sort of thing.

Seeds of Growth

This theme describes how for some participants, a sense of having reality shaken through deployment experiences and discharge, can ignite positive changes from war adversity: “*I don't think there's anything like loss to shake you and your reality*”. Exposure to death, cultural confrontation and morally injurious events by people and international organisations continues to be an unresolvable dilemma for these participants. Despite their powerlessness to change the world stage, by degrees they recognise that what is not acceptable in other cultures is an external impact for reformulating their own future:

You can see a bit of a direction of how you think life is now... seeing different cultures... how they live, work, how they're being treated and bringing that back... you're starting to have a bit of deep thought about yourself... who do I want to be as a person?

Most participants describe an experience of strengthened or “*enhanced*” values, beliefs, “*strong opinions*” and understanding of the world, with a sense of realisation emerging from their military experiences around what is important in life:

Massive growth... you just grow up a lot, very quickly, work out what's important in life.

For one participant the deployment experience is described as bringing her closer to "*real life*". She speaks with clarity around understanding what it means to be human and identify with an altruistic identity:

I've always said from that moment that I wanted to just track my life so I could stay in that kind of line of work... that's where I'm most happy... when you're doing stuff for other people.

For others exposure to loss and trauma, reignited an appreciation and value in family:

I felt more of need to spend more time with my family... especially after people lost the chance to see their families again... just cherish as much time as you can.

Over time, some found a new understanding of the fragility and precious nature of life: "*You don't know how long you're going to live it... fucking enjoy it*". Exposure to trauma, loss and poverty creates a feeling of gratitude for most: "*We should all be pretty proud, pretty happy with what we have over here*".

Though psychological wellbeing is a struggle too far for most of these participants at the time of the interviews, there is a sense of looking inward, in an attempt to grow, "*trying to be a bit of a better person*" and move forward from often dehumanising and negative experiences:

I can't... change what has happened, I've just got to change myself as a person.

These participants have taken many years to find a level of acceptance, healing and moving forward. Anger is variably across the participants and is still problematic in their lives but they recognise the source of its negative power to derail them. Reflecting on reconnecting, responsible self is being redefined for adjustment to civilian life. Change is welcomed through adaptive pragmatic coping that seeks a future beyond the military: "*I'm like OK, that parts all over and done with so what's next?*"

Discussion

This study describes the gargantuan struggle for these former military personnel to reassemble their lives and humane identity post war. What emerged as the central theme for these participants was identity disturbance and shattering of core integrity. Overshadowing distress from traumatic and stressful deployment experiences was a destabilising sense of betrayal that supported previous research on moral injury (Shay, 2014). However, sense of betrayal extended far beyond that of leadership malpractice. Perceived organisational invalidation, rejection and indifference permeated their interpreted experiences of homecoming, fuelling either self-loathing or retreat into silence or rage. Enduring and systemic organisational factors were cumulative on core morality changes from exposure to war. This resulted in the shaping and breaking of their fundamental sense of self, their ability to successfully integrate with society post discharge, and psychologically heal.

Previous research describes the military as a moral construction which alters identity and moral compass (Brinn & Auerback, 2015; Singer, 2004). In support of this, participants described this shaping of self as a military member through a welcoming process into the army ‘family’ which in turn developed the warrior self-image as dependent on teamwork and accepting leadership. With this self-image came a build-up of confidence, trust, specialised skill set, and ‘*character*’. However this reshaping of self and identification with the military ‘family’ and warrior self-image became problematic during reintegration in two distinct ways.

For some, identification with the *warrior identity* persisted into civilian life. The *warrior identity* is partly defined by the returnee’s continuing perception of self as a strong defender but also reflects adjustment difficulties from warrior to post-warrior persona in civilian life. This struggle for combat personnel to negotiate a post-combat identity has been recently identified (Brinn & Auerback, 2015) and recognised as problematic in readjustment

following psychological and physical adaptation to a high risk environment (Bryant, 2006; Shay, 2014). For one participant there was a sense of clinging to his warrior self-image, while experiencing well researched symptoms of moral injury including difficulties with forgiveness, changes in ethical attitudes and behaviour, shame, and trust (Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009). Maintenance of the warrior self-image is seen as laudable to preserve meaning and purpose in atrocious events be they witnessed or perpetrated. As such, our results suggest that soldiers may hold onto this warrior identity in an attempt to integrate moral self-doubt.

Although protective for these participants sense of moral integrity during war, this warrior identity became redundant and problematic during reintegration. Loss of civility and total disconnect from family, friends and society was described. High risk narcissistic coping behaviours occurred in response to moral self-doubt for one participant, leading to social dislocation. Such behaviours may develop to hide a wounded sense of self and shield negative self-beliefs from others (McCormack & Joseph, 2013, 2014; Wurmser, 1987). Persistence of dehumanisation, explosive rage and self-distain in civilian life, is seen in previous research as contributing to further alienation of the wounded soldier (McCormack & Joseph, 2014; Shay, 2014). Overall the absence of purpose and sense of belonging for the warrior in civilian life, resulted in a desire to escape and return to 'home', the battlefield.

For others, the disintegration of their military identity through organisational disillusionment, invalidation and discharge, led to feelings of loss, personal self-doubt, social isolation and the shattering of confidence. There was a sense of being built up and torn down, as previous skills and competencies were met with indifference and disregard. An overwhelming loss of self was felt by most. This constellation of responses, isolation, doubt and self-blame following perceived invalidation and lack of support, are characteristic of *altruistic identity disruption*, identified in the reintegration of humanitarian workers post-

mission (McCormack & Joseph, 2013; McCormack et al., 2009; McCormack, Orenstein & Joseph, in press). While a prior sense of altruism was not expressed as a willingness to serve in all participants' narratives, the psychosocial distress and identity disturbance described mirrors the characteristics of this construct. A centrality of *identity disturbance* in psychological distress post-mission, is not currently considered when reviewing a returnee's psychological profile post-deployment. Yet for all of these participants, the question emerged: 'Who am I now?'

These participants responded to identity disruption and moral injury, through retreat into embarrassed silence, or they raged. Organisational expectations both during deployment and post-deployment contributed to a sense of being silenced in their distress, through a culture which values the tough 'masculine' warrior image. Stigma around mental illness has previously been identified as a barrier to support seeking (Van Hooff et al., 2014) with the masculine warrior identity deeply embedded in the history of warfare (Agostino, 1998). Unable to speak out about bullying on return, self-doubt and simmering anger festered in these participants. Previous research suggests that in response to betrayal, shame may be internalised through self-doubt and blame, or externalised through explosive rage and the 'berserk' state in former soldiers (McCormack & Joseph, 2014; Shay, 2002). This was observed and described in our study.

Thwarting efforts to reconnect with self and facilitate growth was the ongoing sense of social isolation and invalidation post-deployment. Increased social support has been linked with reduced PTSD symptomatology (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008), increased psychological growth (Forstmeier et al., 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2006) and more recently with increased meaning-making of combat stressors and post combat identity (Brinn & Auerback, 2015). However, participants experienced themselves as if in a social vacuum. Upon discharge, disconnect occurred further from former military

colleagues and civilians were perceived as unable to understand their experience. Though these participants were unable to actively engage with a future life free of their current distress, there were seeds of psychological change: hope, some acceptance, a redefining of altruistic identities for some, and cognitive ruminations about new meanings and a future different to their current experiences of life. For most however, these interviews captured the beginning of new insights only, as psychological injuries remained fresh and raw.

Limitations

Qualitative research often generates large data sets from a small homogenous sample, limiting the generalisation of findings to other populations. IPA does not explain cause and effect relationships, seeking to describe rather than explain. As such IPA provides in depth and expanded understandings of experienced phenomena in an effort to uncover the unique experience of the individual and contribute to theoretical insights and guide further research. Therefore, time since event, other life events, or theatre of war are unique aspects of their personal narrative impacting interpretation which in turn may have been influenced by therapeutic experiences and trauma recovery. Importantly, IPA researchers are at risk of biases and presuppositions through the double hermeneutic process and these must be rigorously challenged through adherence to neutrality and reflexivity by all IPA researchers.

Implications and Recommendations

As there is no consistent care of military personnel worldwide, research tends to focus on western military organisations who have many good and worthwhile care programs (Adler, Bliese, McGurk, Hoge, & Castro, 2009). However, there are gaps in that care mainly due to the culture of military organisations, their focus on warrior skills, and a moral realignment around killing that is not acceptable in civil society. A medical-model focus on mental illness symptomatology is largely utilised in support programs, despite criticisms of its limitations in answering the psychosocial impacts on wellbeing (Joseph et al., 2009;

McCormack & Adams, 2015). However, the moral, social, and identity disturbances experienced by personnel within the current study, highlight the complex psychosocial distress that individuals can endure as they attempt to integrate within their society following combat/peace keeping service.

For clinicians, awareness of the complexity that encapsulates psychosocial distress in returnees from war, may be of great benefit. With such knowledge, clinicians can assist clients to find a voice that frees the silenced soldier and collaboratively work to re-establish moral boundaries, and empathic personal identity. Creating a safe and trusting space for personnel to be heard, following any sense of betrayal and disregard of their specialised skill set, may take time and patience. Advocacy with government organisations adds to that support. Additionally, it is important to facilitate opportunities for psychological growth out of the adversity of war providing hope that a future in civil life is possible (see Joseph, 2011; McCormack & Joseph, 2013, 2014).

In terms of support for young soldiers, our research highlights that a potentially problematic military ‘environment’ can impact on personnel’s ability to seek support and feel heard and validated. It is hoped that by shedding light on the experiences of leadership malpractice, bullying, and disregard for safety experienced by these participants, future research hypotheses can be developed for larger studies and contribute to theory. Additionally, the problematic culture of silence and masculinity, and stigma around physical and psychological illness are ongoing challenges to be addressed internally through education and commitment by governments and military leaders. Ultimately however, addressing the moral dilemma that young soldiers are mostly left to attempt to reassemble their lives and identity in isolation, is an ethical issue for all societies.

Conclusion

This study provides an insight into the challenging experience of reintegration post-deployment for these former military personnel. It highlights the identity disturbance which occurred for these participants through organizational devaluing, and the inability to redefine the warrior self-image within civilian life. It is therefore suggested that concepts of moral injury and altruistic identity disruption, provide a conceptualisation of complex psychosocial distress that likely complicates any traumatic distress from exposure to traumatic events, within the experiential challenge of extreme environments. These previously unexplored concepts of psychosocial distress may give understanding to the unique suffering felt when an individual's moral values are threatened in the context of war/civil unrest and have little opportunity for reparation within deploying organisations. Psychological distress post military deployment would seem far more complex than post-traumatic stress, with a number of factors impacting on psychological wellbeing, integration into civilian life, and reconnection with family and society. Recognizing this complexity and subsequently working to shift cultural attitudes within the military is encouraged. Such changes are important for reducing the psychopathological and lone journey experienced by many individual soldiers and veterans. On a practical level, service organisations could develop pre-discharge training in civilian professions and engage in managing transition to future civilian employment. This is likely to enhance the wellbeing of transitioning service individuals impacting positively on family life through a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.

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Transcript Extract Notations

— A pause in speech.

... Removal of nonessential material.

Table 1.

Participants Location and Year of Deployment

Participant	Year of Deployment	Place of Deployment
1	1999-2000	Timor Leste
2	2010-2011	Afghanistan
	2008-2009	Timor Leste
3	2012	Afghanistan
4	2011-2012	Afghanistan
5	2008-2009	Timor Leste
	2010	Timor Leste

Table 2.

Stages of interpretative phenomenological analytic (IPA) process

Stage	Process
1	Listening to and verbatim transcription of first transcript
2	Interpretation of transcript by paraphrasing and summarising semantic content and language
3	Fresh readings of the transcript, allowed thematic analysis to identify emerging themes around organisational betrayal and identity disturbance
4	Stages 1, 2 and 3 were repeated for each transcript, with a search for convergent and divergent themes
5	A comparison of themes across the transcripts was conducted and themes listed chronologically for connectedness
6	The first author conducted an independent audit of the data to establish validity of themes as required by IPA
7	A final set of themes was then developed by combining the two independent audits
8	Emergent higher order theme of ‘Shaping and Breaking: Who am I now?’
9	Subjective analysis of interpretation of themes representing the phenomenon of the lived experience within the context of post-deployment organisational abandonment, betrayal, moral injury, invalidation and identity disturbance
10	Narrative accounts to link theory to themes generated through verbatim extracts from transcripts
11	Final revisions made to analysis following continued reflection and robust discussion between the first and second author