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# Veteran-civilian career identity conflict: What is human resource development's role?

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## Abstract

The United States military is one of the most notable developers of civilian workforce talent. Yet, approximately one third of post 9/11 veterans retain a personal narrative of military identity that they often find conflicts with civilian society—and as a result, with a civilian career. Earlier studies on veteran career transition have emphasized the need to better understand and deconstruct this transition process for human resource development (HRD). Schlossberg's adult transition theory was used to highlight the argument that HRDs role is to reduce transitional barriers and promote transition strategies. Four heuristics are offered as a basis for organizing the HRD practitioners' role in veteran-civilian career identity conflict: (a) *you belong here*, (b) *you are valued here*, (c) *you are safe here*, and (d) *you can thrive here*. We close with a discussion for practitioners and future research.

**Keywords:** Military, veteran, identity conflict, career transition, human resource development

“The soldier is the army. No army is better than its soldiers. The soldier is also a citizen. In fact, the highest obligation and privilege of citizenship is that of bearing arms for one's country” General George S. Patton Jr. (1946)

The career transition of United States military service members into the civilian workforce is often met with interpersonal conflict and psychological distress (Ainspan, Penk, & Kearney, 2018; Kirchner, & Yelich Biniecki, 2019; Stern 2017; Wilson, 2014). Transition can be interpreted as the distinct period of reintegration into civilian society that a military service member experiences when their military career ends. Such transition may include a state of prolonged stress which can manifest into psychological distress (Gidron, 2019). Psychological distress from military disengagement has implied mental health consequences (Ainspan et al., 2018). Disengagement from the military has long been a topic of research with much of the interest on mental health (McNeil & Giffen, 1967; Wadolowski, 2019). Reintegration back into a civilian society is more difficult for military service members who have experienced a combat role and know someone that was injured or killed (Elder Jr & Clipp, 1989; Harris, Gringart, & Drake, 2013; Morin, 2011). Worse are elements of psychological morbidity—the state of psychological impairment with long term health effects—that require medical treatment and psychological rehabilitation (Harris et al., 2013). Sammons & Batten (2008) re-

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ported that psychological consequences post 9/11 Iraq war were concerning because "...for the first time in recorded warfare, psychological morbidity is likely to far outstrip physical injury associated with combat" (p. 921). Much of the morbidity research is focused on the psychological effects (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder; PTSD) of combat and the associated residuals (e.g., depression, substance abuse, suicide; Smith, Benight, & Cieslak, 2013).

Recent research has focused on yet another source of psychological distress, military identity (e.g., McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, & Perrewé, 2015). Military identity—meanings attached to a military role that fosters individual life purpose—is noted to occasionally conflict with a veteran's new role of civilian as they attempt to identify with civilian society (Ainspan et al., 2018; Grimell, 2017; Smith & True, 2014; Stern, 2017). Military identity (broadly generalized) is a term used to identify self while engaged in military service or can be interpreted as an indication of "who I was" in the military that transcends as a personal narrative of self in civilian society. Often, military identity leaves the veteran with transition identity conflict.

Up to one third of veterans continue to self-identify with military service as a dominant personal narrative; for these individuals, their military identity often conflicts with civilian society (Kelty, Woodruff, & Segal, 2017). Identity conflict can be especially difficult for veterans transitioning to a civilian career. Stern (2017) coins this phenomenon "veteran-civilian career identity conflict" (p. 66). Military culture influences a normative behavioral extension of self-identity that conflicts with civilian norms for these veterans. For example, deindividuation processes like personal grooming, removal of personal accessories (e.g., piercings) and daily rituals provide a predisposition to conformity and obedience that are predominantly absent in the civilian context. In another example, the military has its own way of communicating. The language of the military has a long history of being independent to, and distanced from, civilian society (Beckett, 2003). Park (2019) called on the need to pay special attention to the nature of words and language within a culture or society. The relationship of language to a particular society is socially constructed to reinforce localized discrimination inside the culture where it is used (Craft, Wright, Weissler, & Queen, 2020). Military culture subsumes its own language and service members are indoctrinated with operant conditioning that orients identity with "military lingo" (Wadolowski, 2019). Such examples of military standardization remain important to many veterans who endure conflict about the distinct replacement of their military role identity with the role of civilian citizen.

For many veterans, identity conflict is a limiting factor in gainful and productive employment (McAllister et al., 2015). Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, and Ren (2012) termed this phenomenon veteran identity strain (Vet-IS). The struggle that some veterans purport with identity conflict is referred to as "warring identities" (Smith & True 2014). Kukla, Rattray, & Salyers (2015) used the term "renegotiating identity" when describing a career transitioning veteran. Stern (2017) begins to introduce veteran-civilian career identity conflict to human resource development (HRD) scholarship in her article on post 9/11 veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce. Stern proposed that HRD researchers and scholarly practitioners seek to "understand and begin to deconstruct the veteran-civilian career identity conflict" (p. 66). The present study builds on Stern's (2017) proposition.

In the sections that follow, we provide a brief overview of identity development as a basis for self-identity along with military culture as a basis for military identity. Next, military identity as basis for conflict on civilian career transition is considered. Then, we critically examine the conflict that military identity has on the career transitioning veterans through Schlossberg's (1995) adult career transition theory to answer the question that guided this article: (a) What is HRDs role in veteran-civilian identity conflict? We close with a discussion for practitioners and future research.

## **Identity Development as Basis for Self-Identity**

The human self temporally compares meaningful input about oneself towards one's own identity. The term identity is used to reference the self from the perspective of "Who am I?" Identity constitutes a sense of personal continuity across a life span (Erickson, 1968). Knowing oneself satisfies a nomothetic need to navigate human existence and human community (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997). Identity is also a term that represents a social role or category that contributes to an individual's social identity from the perspective of "Who are we?" According to Burke and Stets (2009):

[a]n identity is the set of meanings [emphasis added] that define who one is when one is an oc-

cupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. (p. 3)

The emergence of one's claim to identity is hypothesized to be linked to a personal life narrative of nonconscious and conscious self-relevant stimuli (Bargh, 1982; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Contrary to research that argued life stories are not cognitively created prior to mid-adolescence (i.e., around age 15; Habermas & Bluck 2000), Reese, Yan, Jack, and Hayne (2010) posited this link is already present in early life and evolutionary psychology supports this claim (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997). A child begins to talk around the age of two with the sense of past that is evaluative, emotional, and contains the notion of meaning making (Miller & Sperry, 1988; Fivush, 2001). Personal narratives continue to progress toward identity of self in middle childhood and adolescence (see Reese et al., 2011 for a review). Furthermore, new cognitive structures emerge in adolescence which supports the relevant concept and meaning of self (Harter, 2006). As individuals phase into young adults—coinciding with the time when most individuals enter the military—meaning making has more empirical significance on a person's state of being (Suh, 2002). Identity development serves to regulate state of being; namely, cognitive, affective, and behavioral regulation across a life span. Identity of self encompasses the concept of self-identity and is linked to life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2011), life purpose (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010) and psychological well-being (Iyer & Jetten, 2011). In contrast, individuals with a poor sense of self-identity are more likely to have depression, anxiety, dissociative disorders, and diminished overall mental health (Van Dijk et al., 2014).

### ***Identity Theories***

The basis of identity theory is psychologically important here because within any model of identity conflict are tenets to psychological health (Proulx & Chandler, 2009). Identity theory (Burke, 1991; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980) is influenced by Mead's (1934) interactionist view that intends to explain a person's identity in terms of self-interaction with society. The theory suggests that an individual's identity develops through the salient relevance of their self-categorizations. Identity theorists refer to the various meanings of these categorizations as role identities. McCall and Simmons (1978) defined the role of one's identity as the "... imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting" in a certain societal position (p. 65). Thus, a condition on one's identity of self is the self-relevance that an occupied role has on the subjective self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Self-identity arises from the meanings that the self—as a role occupier—relates to a role being occupied (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Burk and Reitzes (1981) suggested that role identities are "social products" of self-recognition (e.g., father, friend, soldier, etc.) that validate the sense of self (p. 84). Role identities have reflective impact on psychological well-being (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). A structured society gives names to its role occupiers that invoke meaning and behavioral expectations (McCall & Simmons 1978). If we consider the military as a structured society with such nomenclature, then meanings and expectations of the occupied role of the service member then guides military behavior as a central process component in the formation of self-identity.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1985) implies that social categorization provides the opportunity for self-identity to emerge as a result of belonging to a particular society or group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). A group can be interpreted as a social structure of individuals that view members as in-group and others as out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) claimed that a group provides an individual with a social identity that illustrates a psychological need to belong—a mental representation of identity (Ryan & Deci, 2003). The psychological need to belong can only be satisfied by a person's social environment (Maslow, 1970). This suggests that group membership acts as an affective psychological function for the psychological need to belong.

A basic psychological process underlying the act of group forming is social categorization (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The process of social categorization is enhanced by the individuals need for positive evaluation and involves self-categorizing and social comparison (Stets & Burke, 2000). Self-categorization allows the individual to identify normative expectations of the group that are salient to their occupied role in the group (Scheepers, & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel, 1978). Social comparison accentuates those dimensions of self that act as agents toward self-identity.

Identity theory and social identity theory have concomitant cognitive processes that emerge to provide an individual a more general theory of self—a congealed self-identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). This perspective fits

well within a military culture designed to shape group norms and role identity. A service member's acuity of being similar to others in the group has particular salience on their social identity whereas the role that the service member occupies within the group—and the actions that accommodate that role—serves as a role-based identity; both conflate on a personal narrative of military identity.

## **Military Culture as a Basis for Military Identity**

The ability to effectively influence identity is important for the US armed forces as they are developed into a collective fighting unit to defend a nation. Starting on the first day of boot camp, entitative principles like discipline, loyalty, unit cohesion, and obedience are contextually designed to indoctrinate service members with military culture (Grimell, 2015). The military intends for basic training to descope new members for immersion into a collective culture that reshapes their personal view of self (Morse, 2020). This view of the collective transcends differences across cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic factors towards uniformity in identity (Moss, Moore, & Selleck, 2015). Simply put, the military creates a culture in its own right for its own purpose. The culture of the military quickly marks each service members identity as unique to their military role (identity theory) and yet belonging to the family unit of military service members (social identity theory). The principle function of military culture is acceptance of group norms—for group safety and salient meaning.

Military culture has deep tenets in the collective—an anti-individualistic perspective—which places others above self and security in solidarity (Devries, Hughes, Watson, & Moore, 2012). A soldier—a generic name given for a person who is in the military—learns to suppress individual needs in favor of the group. Military culture enhances social structure with defined boundaries for in-group homogeneity. In-group homogeneity is enhanced when the culture serves to deindividualize its members to increase the perception of entitativity and homogeneity (Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). To amplify conformity, service members are surrounded by hierarchical chains of command and are supervised on virtually every part of their life. Military service members develop a strong sense of group identity with highly specialized in-group functions that are perceived as entitative for the dominant narrative of military identity (Grimell, 2017).

Military culture emphasizes distinctiveness from the outside world which enhances the service members connection with other service members and fosters an “us” mentality (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The context of operating in the military coerces swift orthodoxy and the desire to demonstrate group behavior. Key concepts like elitism, intensity, camaraderie, and uniqueness from the ordinary public amplify what becomes a dominant self-perspective (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006). Such concepts are linked to behaviors like adherence, sacrifice, loyalty, and a fighting spirit that manifest psychological stability and identity consistency (Simons, 2008; Suh, 2002).

A unified and consistent self-identity—encompassed in a context of structure and discipline—serves to protect psychological health during transition (Morse, 2020). This is important because theories of psychological well-being are critically dependent on an individual preserving a unified and consistent self-identity (Suh, 2002). A compelling illustration of this is a large-scale national study of adult participants who were asked to compare themselves to who they were five years earlier. Keyes and Ryff (2000) found that those adults who perceived greater change along several well-being dimensions (e.g., social relationships, physical health, and life satisfaction) reported higher decrements in psychological well-being. Burrow, Sumner, & Ong (2014) corroborate this by demonstrating the perception of self-stability reduces stress compared to self-change. Keyes (2000) acknowledged that what is potentially the phenomenon at work here is the violation of the coveted sense of self-stability and self-constancy. From the view of identity theory and social identity theory this is a logical development. Perceiving any type of change in who one distinguishes one is—regardless of valence—can violate the salient relevance of self from the social and self-categorization(s) that contributed to one's self-identity; whether that is role identity or social identity. For some veterans, these identities become a key consideration as they separate from active duty and engage in civilian society (Morse, 2020).

## **Military Identity as Basis for Conflict on Civilian Career Transition**

Upon entering the military, a service member's identity is deconstructed and reconstructed for adherence to collectivist norms. Separation from the military is a life disruption that is often debilitating to the veteran and often invisible to the public, including civilian employers (Semaan, Britton, & Dosono, 2016). Following separation from the military—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—veterans often have difficulty during transition

based upon identity conflict between military and civilian roles (Smith & True, 2014). This conflict has even greater relevance when considering that most military service members undergo the construction of their military identity in the formative years of young adulthood—when executive control over cognitive function is at its most vulnerable for sense of meaning (Sayer et al., 2010). In the course of the formative years there is also a more youthful, idealist notion of having impact on the world and the energy to pursue such impact that becomes identifiable for self-image (Gendron, 2006). Self-image can act as a dominant self-concept toward a psychological state of self-identity even after a service member transitions back to civilian society (Ryan et al., 2011). Junger (2016) aptly captures this in a quote from his book *Tribes*: “[t]oday’s veterans often come home to find that, although they’re willing to die for their country, they’re not sure how to live for it” (p. 124). Edelman (2018) theorized this internal discord to be a byproduct of insufficient acculturation of the veteran back into the cultural expectations of civilian society. Stern (2017) reports this psychological state has particular significance for veterans transitioning from the military work environment to the civilian work environment.

Demers (2011) explored the psychological state of post 9/11 veterans returning home and noted that high levels of distress were present in the midst of veteran career reintegration. Reintegration distress was primarily due to a psychological state of conflict between military and civilian culture which led to a sense of alienation and a struggle to reconnect with civilian society. The military is a mission oriented organization that uses specialized units (e.g. work groups) composed of individuals trained to perform specific work roles for exclusive objectives. Military members have reported feeling a sense of loss when leaving a military work role that had status and elitism; leading them to miss the impact of military on role identity (Harris, 2015). This sense of loss contributes to the conflict between the expectations once held with a military role and the new experience of a civilian role. The review of identity theory and social identity theory coupled with the normative philosophy of military culture supports this position. The implications of this position become evident when considering that an estimated 33% of service members that separate from the military continue to maintain a primary view of self that embraces a military identity (Keltz et al., 2017). An example of how military identity effects a veteran’s work view can be found in the contrasting perspective of military work versus civilian work. The role of military work is foundationally based in collectivism, protection of others above self, and sacrifice for the greater good of the group; whereas the role of civilian work is individualistic, self before others, and sacrifice for the greater good of self. A potentially important aspect of military-to-civilian role identity conflict during career transition is the degree of normative distress the veteran sustains from this contrast (Burrow, Hill, Ratner, & Fuller-Rowell, 2020).

The veteran is expected to emerge from the military where work role identity is expressly defined with a sense of purpose and pride to form a new identity—a civilian career identity—that is absent the sustenance of military culture. Erickson (1968) acknowledged that new identity formation can contribute to normative distress and declared this process an identity crisis. Demers (2011) examined reintegration challenges of post 9/11 veterans and recognized those participants in her qualitative study as having experienced three important thematic impressions when returning home: 1) disconnection with civilians; 2) no one understands us; and 3) crisis of identity. These impressions emphasize the prominence that the military, as a work group, can have on a member’s identity and supports why disengagement from the military can have psychological impact on self-identity as the veteran transitions to a civilian work role.

## **Transition Theory as a Basis for Understanding HRD’s Role**

We have outlined in the previous sections that a military career can lead to a military identity being the salient narrative of self in a significant number of service members who separate from the military and become veterans. Moreover, this carry over of military identity to civilian society has the potential to pose identity conflict, especially when the veteran seeks new civilian career opportunities (Stern, 2017). Identity conflict can lead to a psychological state of distress; often compounded by the overlay of mental health concomitants (e.g., PTSD) of many post 9/11 veterans (Ainspan et al., 2018). Successfully transitioning veterans (including veterans with identity conflict) into the workplace is a relevant topic for HRD given HRD practitioners are charged with onboarding and developing this cohort productively for career transition (Hughes, Lusk & Strause, 2016; Minnis, 2017). This narrative provides support to translate extant transition research on this cohort of veterans into recommendations for HRD. For this, we use Schlossberg’s (1981, 1984) adult transition theory—hereinafter Schlossberg’s theory—to offer a heuristic (cf. Mousavi & Gigerenzer, 2017) model to support veterans during military-to-civilian career transition—especially those with identity conflict.

Schlossberg's theory indicates that "...transitions of all kinds...can be analyzed, and possible interventions formulated" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3). In fact, Schlossberg's theory has been applied with success to study veterans' collegiate transition (e.g., DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). Military-to-college research describes this phenomenon as important for transitional initiatives at the institutions educating them. Schlossberg's theory suggests that adult transition involves changes in relationships, roles, routines, and expectations. This theory creates an acceptable framework for considering veterans' career transition given the act involves a change in work relationships, work role, work routines, and work expectations.

Two components (stages then factors) of Schlossberg's theory are used to organize the heuristics. The first component indicates that adults experience transition through a progression of three stages: (a) moving in; (b) moving through; and (c) moving out. Here, the moving in stage reflects the time when a service member transfers from active duty to veteran—at the time of separation from military service. At this stage the veteran is learning how to navigate civilian society and begins to delineate civilian expectations (Wheeler, 2012). The moving through phase is when the veteran becomes engaged in the daily navigation of their new civilian environment. This can include educational or vocational pursuits and even the medical care needed for residual injuries. This stage is often met with identity conflict and psychological impairments that have the veteran questioning life decisions (Ainspan et al., 2018; Schlossberg & Waters, 1995). The last stage of Schlossberg's theory can serve as an ending or a beginning. This stage marks the knowing that one particular transition ends (e.g., civilian identity conflict) and becomes the starting point for a new life transition (e.g., civilian career identity).

The second component of Schlossberg's theory contains four factors that frame an individual's ability to cope (having the capacity to deal with something disruptive and stressful) during periods of transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. These factors—known in the literature as “the 4 S's”—act as coping skills and can exist as assets or liabilities. Importantly, specific resources can be applied to help an individual cope during transition (Lipshits-Braziler & Gati, 2019). This position allows us to explore the 4 S's as a basis for answering the question: What is HRDs role on veteran-civilian career identity conflict?

## **4 S's as a Basis for HRDs Role in Veteran-Civilian Career Identity Conflict**

The US military is an organization that develops notable talent for the civilian workforce (Ainspan et al., 2019). Veterans are conditioned with abilities congruent to the needs of many organizations, skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership. Hiring a veteran conditionally presents the opportunity to secure an individual who is disciplined to mission, comprehends team success, and appreciates hierarchy. The HRD practice (within organizations) is uniquely positioned to provide the personal and professional resources needed to encompass this cohort. It is, however, imperative for HRD scholarship to seek understanding of the phenomenon of military-to-civilian career transition (Stern, 2017). We now explore this phenomenon through Schlossberg's 4 S's (i.e., situation, self, support and strategies).

### ***Situation***

Schlossberg's first S is situation. Situation reflects in what way an individual considers their transition and their sense of control over the manner in which the transition occurs (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Situation asks the question “What is happening?” The consequence of transition is largely reliant upon the occupiers' perception of their situation in this moving in stage. For many individuals an identity crisis is triggered (Schlossberg, 1984). Veterans—especially those with retained military identity—may experience transitional challenges because they identify poorly with their new civilian situation. Loss of control, confusion, and situational stress are common veteran emotional states; even worse for veterans who served in dangerous areas and experience combat (Harris et al., 2013). Transitioning from a highly structured environment to a civilian career, where individuals are more often identified as self-centered, may cause veterans to reassess their personal circumstance, and can pose situational challenges. For example, a display of insolence in the civilian work environment is confusing to the veteran whose identity is framed by discipline and structure (Redmond et al., 2015). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) indicated that veterans may need to renegotiate their identities in such situations. During their military service veterans may have earned accolades, medals, and awards that were contributory to a sense of pride, prestige, and honor. However, many veterans are required to start without such recognition in the civilian career context.

The transition effects of voluntary military separation can be different than an involuntarily military separa-

tion. Each form of separation has diverse situational factors that may affect the veteran's sense of what is happening to them (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Veterans who have experienced an involuntary separation are more likely to need greater resources for their situational distress during career transition (Ryan et al., 2011). A better understanding of the way a veteran considers their situation—and the sense of control a veteran feels over their transition—provides the HRD practitioner a basis for understanding their role in the situation phase.

### ***Self***

Schlossberg's second S is self. Self asks the question "To who is this happening?" The concept of self emphasizes cognitive properties and personal characteristics that act as coping strategies during transition. Coping strategies are a key component to transition success during this moving through phase. Evans et al (2009) described two dimensions of self in the transition context: (a) personal characteristics; and (b) psychological resources. Personal characteristics include a person's age, gender, race, marital status, and socioeconomic status that may endorse or inhibit an individual's ability to navigate transition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). For example, women adapt to transition differently than men and often experience more psychological complications during transition (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Reintegration challenges are unique for women veterans as they often view their self with added obstacles (e.g., sexual trauma, single motherhood, mental and physical health challenges) over their male counterparts (Gunter-Hunt, Feldman, Gendron, Bonney, & Unger, 2013).

Psychological resources are cognitive characteristics that confer one's ability to manage one's transition. For example, optimism and pessimism are expectancy characteristics that reflect an individual's affective perspective. Optimism is the general belief that good will happen over bad. Optimism is an important resource in the context of self because it encourages flexible coping strategies; whereas pessimism imparts rigidity. Optimism is considered a coping resource that can buffer the impact of transitional distress and is associated with psychological well-being (Ramírez-Maestre, Esteve, & López, 2012). Having a generally positive viewpoint about future expectations supplements resilience and self-efficacy in stressful situations and can lead to a healthier progression of self during transition (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Souri & Hasanirad, 2011). Conversely, the characteristic of pessimism prompts situational avoidance and passive coping strategies that can be harmful to a transition process and are linked to health-damaging behaviors (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Sachs (2008) noted psychosocial distress has a high potential to negatively impact a veterans' transition. This argument is supported by Ford, Northrup, and Wiley (2009) who indicated help for mental and social distress is likely the veterans' most pressing need during transition from military to civilian society. A veteran's expectancy viewpoint is a relevant example for understanding coping resources (emotional regulation) of self. Such decompositions provide the HRD practitioner a basis for understanding their role in Schlossberg's self phase.

### ***Support***

Schlossberg's third S is support. Support asks the question "What assistance is available?" Support, particularly social support, is a key environmental resource for transition success and a predictor of positive change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). A support system can include family, friends, fellow veterans, coworkers, and mental health care providers. How a veteran perceives such support is crucial to their career transition success. Shaefer and Moos (1998) claim social support—generally referred to as resources provided by others (Cohen & Syme, 1985)—fosters a more favorable appraisal of transition and better coping abilities. A support system affirms well-being effects like self-confidence and self-reliance; an unhealthy support system endorses negative effects like distress and depression (Uchino, Bowen, Carlisle, & Birmingham, 2012). Cutrona and Russell (1990) contended that a controllable transition (e.g., voluntary military separation) is better fostered with support that is problem focused; whereas an uncontrolled transition (e.g., involuntary military separation) is better addressed with support that is emotion focused. Social support attenuates distressful experiences by enhancing the coping ability of the individual being supported (Thoits, 2012). Females tend to seek support as a coping strategy more so than do males. In contrast, males tend to avoid seeking support to deal with situational distress (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992).

Individuals who sustain meaningful relationships have better coping mechanisms and are safer from the harmful effects of stress (Berkman, 2000). As veterans transition to civilian society they should be met with a cohesive support system to assist them during transition (Thompson 2011). A critical time for a veteran to seek support is when they first separate from duty (Ahern et al., 2015). The earlier an individual can begin to make meaning of their transition the more successful the moving through stage will be for new role identity

(Schwarzer, Luszczynska, Boehmer, Taubert, & Knoll, 2006). A veteran who perceives meaningful congruence with a support system is better equipped for career transition—and more likely to display psychological well-being at work (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Wang & Gruenewald, 2019).

### ***Strategies***

Schlossberg's fourth S is strategies. Strategies ask the question "How does the person cope?" Strategies refer to an individual's capability to cope with and manage through a transition by utilizing one's own behavioral indices (Brammer & Abrego, 1981). Coping strategies can be simply defined as an adaptive response to a specific stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). The sense of control over a stressor is the primer for different coping strategies. Coping strategies are a key component of any individual's perception of psychological well-being (Parsons, Frydenberg, & Poole, 1996). Coping with transition implies psychological changes on role identity; along with role adjustment stemming from the transition context. Military veterans have been shown to navigate their transition differently based upon their perceived role identity. A veteran's coping strategies may also vary based upon what triggered the transition (i.e., voluntary or involuntary discharge). In all cases, however, veterans must develop effective strategies to cope with any distress encountered during their transition to a civilian role. Individuals who remain positive, flexible, and optimistic typically cope best during transition (Anderson, et al., 2012).

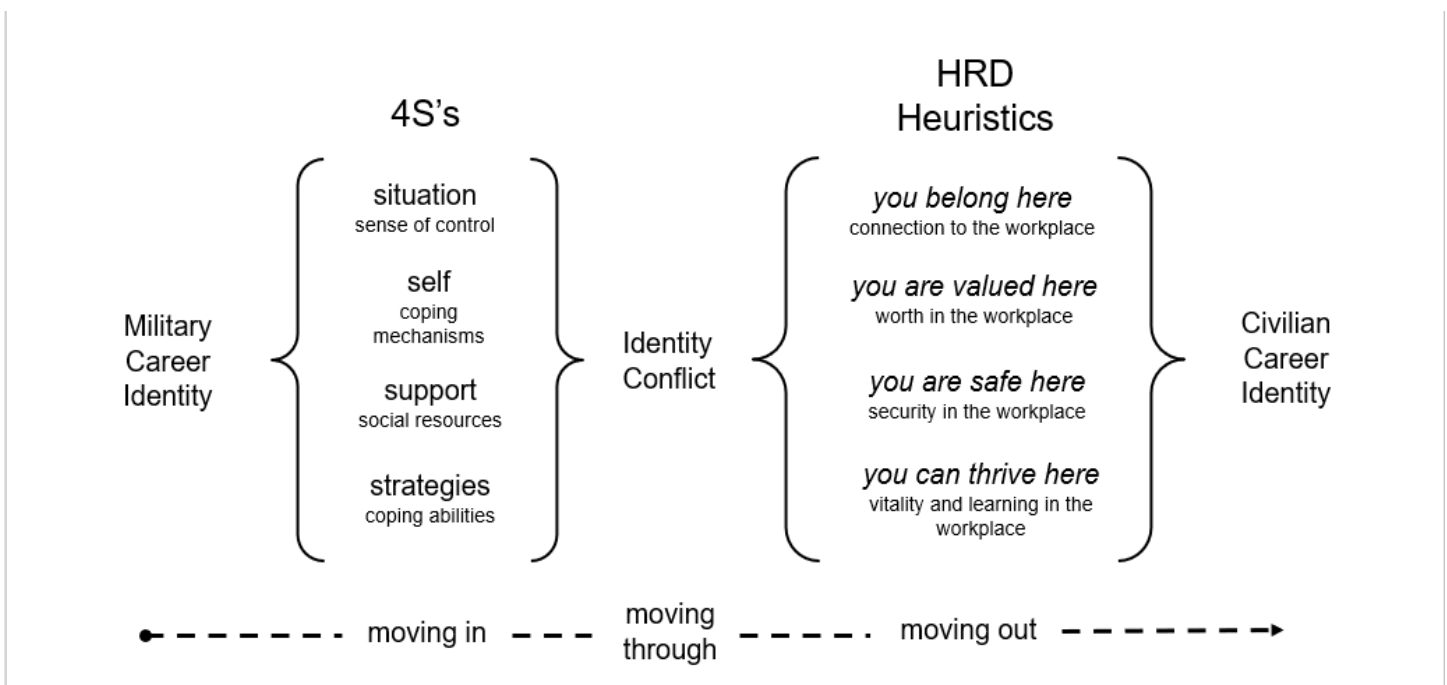
Notably, effective coping strategies include an operant component for both external and internal elements. Lazarus and Folkman (1986) recognized two distinct coping functions: the external objective function and the internal subjective function. The external coping function is focused on the objective demand or task and is primarily intended for problem solving. The internal coping function targets the individual's psychological well-being by reducing stress, tension, emotional reaction. Insights into veteran coping strategies provide the HRD practitioner an escort for salient efforts in the strategies phase.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Understanding elements of military identity helps provide insight into the veteran's perception of self when military identity is retained as a salient personal narrative post military service; and highlights where the current article can contribute to the field of HRD. Figure 1 offers four heuristics grounded in Schlossberg's 4 S's as a basis for organizing the HRD practitioners' role in veteran-civilian career identity conflict: (a) you belong here (situation), (b) you are valued here (self), (c) you are safe here (support), and (d) you can thrive here (strategies). Randall's (2010) work in educational psychology, specifically secure attachment strategies for educators, was the inspiration for these heuristics. Randall recognized it was significant for student attachment if educators could embed sustainable messages (heuristics)—implicitly or explicitly—into their teaching like "you belong here" and "you are safe here" (p. 90). We borrowed from Randall's work these embedded heuristics (with some modification) for HRDs consideration on career transition. We consider Randall's work relevant to this context because of its transition implications, tenets in psychology, and because veterans with sustained military identity continue to foster military attachment (Lancaster & Hart, 2015).



Figure 1



### *You Belong Here (Situation)*

Belonging is a powerful human feeling of connection to a social location. Belonging has long been a topic of study in various human interactionist research fields (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, sociology, sports science, ethology, etc.). This includes substantive inquiry on human interaction in the work context (Estlund, 2003). The way people experience belonging at work is of particular interest to HRD scholarship (McClure & Brown, 2008). The discipline of HRD has supported the psychological need to belong (Maslow, 1970) as evidenced in many employee work concepts. Pathak and Srivastava (2020) reported that employees that have a greater sense of belonging at work experienced greater job satisfaction. Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky (2002) described affective commitment as an individual's feeling of belonging to an organization. Good job fit has been demonstrated to contribute to a sense of belonging (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). People who have a greater sense of belonging are more likely to engage at work (Shuck, Reio Jr, & Rocco, 2011).

Veterans who experience identity conflict often do not feel a sense of belonging to their civilian career (Stern, 2017). An important role of HRD is to help create a work environment that is supportive for the sense of belonging (e.g., job satisfaction, affective commitment, job fit, and work engagement). The HRD practitioner may consider opportunities to ease veteran identity conflict by endorsing a sense of belonging. For example, recognizing all veteran holidays (i.e., Veterans Day and Memorial Day) and actively participating in veteran-centric outreach programs. An organization that does not recognize such military sacrifice could encourage more situational frustration from their veteran employees. Employee development opportunities should provide operant conditions to promote belonging. The HRD practitioner should be keen to understand reintegration challenges are unique for women veterans as they often view their situation with added obstacles (e.g., sexual trauma, single motherhood, mental and physical health challenges) over their men counterparts (Gunter-Hunt et al., 2013). Likewise, the HRD practitioner should appreciate that veterans who have experienced an involuntary separation from the military are more likely to need greater HRD resources for their sense of belonging during career transition (Ryan et al., 2011).

Veterans that transition to a civilian career are met with an array of conditions that affect their sense of belonging. It is often within career transition when identity is conflicted. The HRD practitioner can help train and develop career transitioning veterans and posture organizational development initiatives to mitigate transitional conflict and create bridging directives for this cohort under the heuristic: you belong here.

### ***You are Valued Here (Self)***

Personal value—the value of self—is a human condition of worth. Personal value can be interpreted as a subjective judgment of one's self-worth and has been embodied as a central need for quality of life (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Much of the psychological literature has reflected personal value as a state of esteem (i.e., self-esteem) that influences a positive affect (Pelham & Swann, 1989) and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). A central theme of these works is that self-esteem is an effective resource for feeling valued. Other relevant work discusses personal value in the context of mattering—a feeling of importance (Prilleltensky, 2014). Feeling important and valued incorporates the need to belong and implies a social structure for its derivative. Thus, feeling valued is a product of reciprocal esteeming human exchanges (cf. Eriksson & Villeval, 2012). Feeling valued at work encourages the psychological states of employee engagement and well-being (Shuck & Rose, 2013; Wood, & De Menezes, 2011).

The HRD literature has brought to relevance that an element of feeling valued at work is related to the extent that congruency of personal values aligns with an organization's value system (Chew & Chan, 2008). Veterans often transition to a civilian career with a sense of value nurtured under a system of service. The sense of value found from military service may frequently be misinterpreted as transitionally relevant. Providing frequent opportunities to create personal value is important to veteran well-being. Personal value can be achieved in the work environment through goal directed behavior (Razak, Zakaria, & Mat, 2017; Vardi, 2000). Goal directed behavior can be strategically applied to workplace competencies to build self-confidence—a precursor to self-esteem and personal value (Bunker, 1991).

Robertson and Eschenauer (2020) recently reported that self-confidence is the strongest correlate for veteran life satisfaction; a confident veteran is more likely to feel valued. By extension, a valued veteran is more likely to be a valued employee. The HRD practitioner has an important role here because a major source of veteran devaluation comes from the notion that military skills are not transferable for civilian careers (Adler, Britt, Castro, McGurk, & Bliese, 2011). Identifying transferable skills contributes to overall psychological well-being and value creation for the transitioning veteran (Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019). A veteran who feels valued at work may learn to move beyond any identity conflict and aspire for a greater sense of value that could give meaning and purpose to their work-life under the heuristic: you are valued here.

### ***You are Safe Here (Support)***

The feeling of being safe is a basic human need. Humans seek structured opportunities for the salient need to feel safe—a state of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety (generally) describes an individual's perception of interpersonal risk from a specified context, like the workplace (e.g., Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety has been identified in organization research as an important factor for supporting how employees collaborate, learn, and perform (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Schein and Bennis (1965) introduced the need for organizations to provide psychological safety which gave insight on why employees need to feel safe and secure about behavior change. Schein (1992) argued psychological safety mitigated anxiety and promoted freedom for individuals to explore collective goals. Kahn's (1990) engagement research provided the support for the idea that an individual's comfort with expressing themselves is associated to their feelings of safety. Dollard and Bakker (2010) indicated in their workplace model that psychological safety is a precursor for conducive work environments and a predictor of employee engagement.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) demonstrated that veterans benefit more from the safety of support groups, orientation sessions, and classes that are specially designed for them. Organizations may consider offering settings that are tailored to specific veteran needs (e.g., mental health benefits; reserve benefits, time off work for doctor's appointments). Companies that focus on military talent to fill positions (e.g., Boeing, Boston Scientific, Walgreens) may consider a dedicated HRD professional, HRD liaison, or mentor with a military background to serve as benefactor for supporting the veteran during transition (Darcy, Swagger, & Ferreira, 2018; Kirchner, 2015).

The HRD practitioner should be keen to the unseen challenges of the veteran who has left a combat zone and now finds themselves in a "safe" civilian work environment. External safety does not necessarily transfer to psychological safety. Veterans must feel they are psychologically, emotionally, and behaviorally safe and secure during transition (Barclay, Stoltz, & Chung, 2011). Psychological safety can be a rescuing condition for a career transitioning veteran who is constrained by threats to their emotional and physical safety in an unfa-

miliar civilian society (Yanchus, Derickson, Moore, Bologna, & Osatuke, 2014). The HRD practitioner should act as a meaningful source of safety and security. They are uniquely positioned to engage here through supportive interventions that foster a sense of safety under the heuristic: you are safe here.

### ***You Can Thrive Here (Strategies)***

Human beings have a natural desire to improve and grow (Maslow, 1970). Human growth and improvement is often represented in the literature as a psychological state of thriving—the experience of vitality and learning—and has been a long-time interest in anthropological, healthcare, social, and behavioral research (Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Tsui and Ashfor (1994) related the coping strategy of self-adaptation to an individual's ability to thrive. Spreitzer et al (2005) argued that thriving serves to facilitate self-adaptation in the work context. The holistic experience of thriving implies a sense of well-being or a state of doing well. An important state for thriving, well-being demonstrates the psychosocial functioning needed for progressive improvement (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2001). Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, and Garnett (2012) linked thriving to job performance and found that thriving at work was dynamically dependent upon changes in a person's work environment. Important to the thriving dynamic at work is that personal stress (e.g., identity conflict), work stress (e.g., work exhaustion), and stress about one's role at work (e.g., role ambiguity) impact an employee's experience of vitality and learning (Kleine, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2019). An employee's need for coping strategies to manage these stressors may impact their ability to thrive in a work environment.

Effective coping strategies endorse a positive reappraisal of identity. A positive reappraisal of identity evolves into a counter narrative for thriving in a civilian role (cf. Lyle, 2016). The HRD practitioner can present counter narratives that allow the veteran to categorize themselves in a civilian work role. Identifying and acknowledging that a veteran's military skillset is transferable to their civilian career is one salient opportunity. For example, allowing a veteran to be involved in their work design (Torraco, 2005) may be an excellent opportunity to trigger external coping mechanisms to improve job performance. Identifying transferable skills also contributes to internal coping strategies, like self-confidence, and asserts an overall sense of psychological well-being for thriving. Veterans that evolve through career transition with an internal sense that they can cope psychologically, emotionally, and behaviorally are more likely to thrive at work (Porath et al., 2012). The career transitioning veteran must be encouraged to advance their potential and be given repeated opportunities to thrive. The HRD practitioner can appoint operant strategies that promote the veteran's sense of vitality at work under the heuristic: you can thrive here.

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

Approximately one third of post 9/11 veterans retain a personal narrative of military identity that they often find conflicts with civilian society—and as a result, with a civilian career. Earlier studies on veteran career transition have emphasized the need to better understand and deconstruct this transition process for HRD (Stern, 2017). The transition from military to civilian career is a complex event with multiple variables and uncertainties. We used Schlossberg's theory to focus the argument that HRDs role is to reduce transitional barriers and promote transition strategies on this complex phenomenon. To do this, we offer HRD practitioners four heuristics for military to civilian career transition (see Figure 1). Future research needs to develop this heuristic framework further. While we connect this work with Stern's (2017) call for deconstructing veteran-civilian career identity conflict we have not completed this ask. There is a need for phenomenological inquiry on veterans who retain military identity as a salient narrative that conflicts with their sense of belonging, value, and safety in the civilian workplace. On the flip side, what HRD interventions endorse a veteran's sense of belonging, value, and safety in the workplace? Although military identity conflict has been well studied in collegiate venues (e.g., Kirchner, 2015; Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015), the phenomenon is underappreciated and under researched in HRD scholarship (Stern, 2017). From an organizational perspective, more empirical studies on the various coping strategies of veterans with military identity conflict would be helpful to address possible HRD interventions. We hope the reader finds we have provided insight that is helpful for veteran career transition scholarship and organizations that hire veterans. We thank each veteran for their service.

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