



Factors Influencing the Salience of Military/Veteran Identity Post Discharge: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Military/veteran identity is defined as the prominence of past military service, beliefs, and norms on an individual's post-military sense of self. The salience of this identity has been suggested to be a significant factor in how successful individuals transition to civilian life. However, the current body of research on what factors affect this identity is disparate. The aim of this scoping review was to evaluate the current research on the factors affecting the salience of military/veteran identity post discharge, i.e., the likelihood of individuals identifying as ex-military or veteran in a given situation/context. A review of the literature was conducted across PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Journals (Journal of Armed Forces & Society), and Medline using the keywords (Identit* OR Self-concept* OR "Sense of self") and (Military OR Veteran* OR Soldier OR Army OR Forces) and (Discharge* OR Reintegration OR Transition*). An evaluation of the results led to 20 articles. Thirteen factors were extracted to form a Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model. Professionals are recommended to explore military/veteran identity using these 13 factors as guides, rather than assuming that their military/veteran identity is prominent for an individual. Further, additional quantitative research is recommended to evaluate how reliable/valid these factors are across a wider ex-military demographic, such as in other NATO countries aside from the US/UK.

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Individuals from military backgrounds are known to be one of the most difficult demographics to engage in civilian organisations and services, with many struggling significantly to seek help and maintain engagement afterwards (Blais & Renshaw, 2013; Hoge et al., 2004; Kulesza et al., 2015; Maguen et al., 2012). It is already widely understood that identity is one of the key factors when working with those from military backgrounds (Ahern et al., 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017), with the development of a post-military identity correlated with a range of health, social, and economic outcomes (Ashcroft, 2014; Gordon et al., 2020). It has even been suggested that military identity can be so all consuming that it can even be understood as akin to an ethnicity, with the culture of the forces enmeshed with the individual's sense of self (Daley, 1999).

However, not everyone who leaves the military holds salient military or veteran identities post discharge. Burdett et al. (2013) highlighted how over half of people discharged from the military do not even identify as a veteran, despite meeting the criteria for its definition. For some ex-service personnel, the choice to take up this military/veteran identity may rest on an ongoing appraisal of its value, i.e., whether this identity allows a present or future need to be met, such as a need to belong or connect with other veterans (Brewster et al., 2020). Despite this, Hack et al. (2017) suggested that professionals and organisations often rely on stereotypes around military identity, with many assuming that individuals all hold significantly salient military identities post discharge, when in reality, often they do not. This lack of understanding has been specifically highlighted by ex-service personnel as one of the key reasons why they do not engage with civilian services and mental health therapists (Greendlinger & Spadoni, 2010; Hundt et al., 2018; Iverson et al., 2011) and potentially why efforts to support this demographic may not just be ineffective, but may increase the chances of treatment drop-out and further alienation from mental health therapists (Zwiebach et al., 2019). As a result it has been recommended that researchers further explore the specific factors that may impact military identity post discharge (Thompson et al., 2017).

Identity and how individuals categorise themselves is already an established concept within the wider research. Tajfel and Turner (2004) have suggested that individuals seek to maintain positive self-evaluations, and may identify with social groups that offer distinct and positive comparisons to others, something termed as Social Identity Theory. This social identity is not fixed, however, and may fluctuate both on the individual's own evaluations of themselves, and the wider social group to which they

belong. Turner et al. (1987), highlighted how individuals, like those in the military, may internalise the norms and values of the group, and increasingly act in accordance with these group values as this identity becomes more prominent. The prominence is often referred to as Identity Salience. A decade earlier, Stryker (1968) suggested that individuals have a hierarchical order of identities that become more or less salient depending on the individual and the context they find themselves in. Callero (1985) suggested that the degree of salience an identity holds within an individual may impact the individual's sense of self, and perhaps their self-worth.

The salience of past military service, and its beliefs and norms on an individual's post-military sense of self is often referred to as one's military or veteran identity (Harada et al., 2002; Hart & Lancaster, 2019). This military/veteran identity has been linked with how individuals assimilate post discharge (Kreminski et al., 2018), and how they interact with civilians (Lloyd-Jones, 2018). However, this military/veteran identity is not fixed. While many of those who have served hold military/veteran identities post discharge, the salience of this military/veteran identity differs significantly between individuals (Binks & Cambridge, 2018). It has been suggested that each individual discharging from the military must find their own way of reconceptualising their sense of identity, deciding on what is or is not meaningful for them (Adler et al., 2011). An individual's military/veteran identity may also be significantly intertwined with the culture and philosophy of the country they served for (Junbo & Yunzhu, 1996), as well as being influenced by their country's key historic events and current perceptions of the military (Burk, 1999; Smith & True, 2014). Thus, the overall concept of military/veteran identity may not just differ between countries, but also the era and social environment the individual serves within. Dentry-Travis (2013) has also highlighted how military/veteran identity may also differ depending on within military factors (e.g., trade/profession, role, deployment experiences etc), with those experiencing combat potentially perceiving a stronger connection to this identity.

Despite the ongoing research on military/veteran identity, a recent report by Thompson et al. (2017) highlighted significant issues with the research base; some examples include, it being overly convoluted, lacking a cohesive understanding of veteran identity, and what factors influence it. Lira and Chandrasekar's (2020) literature review went further, highlighting how research on veteran identity needs significant work to be taken seriously as a standalone field of study; for at present, it lacks the clarity and interdisciplinary quality of sister fields. Also, as a significant proportion of the available research

on military or veteran identity has focused primarily on discharge difficulties; considerations around the salience of this identity is often a secondary or supplementary aim. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain what the current evidence is on military/veteran identity salience, and what key areas deserve more focus.

The aim of this review, then, is to explore the current research on military/veteran identity; in particular, what factors have been already identified as influencing the salience of this identity, i.e., the likelihood of individuals identifying as ex-military or as a veteran in a given situation/context. Although identity is an established field both within the military and outside, the current research on what specific factors may influence its salience is disparate, both in terms of methodology and participant type (e.g., combat experience, women, trauma survivor, etc.).

A scoping review was chosen, as it may be best suited to explore topics like this one, in terms of its ability to cover a large breadth and diversity of methodologies (Anderson et al., 2020). This scoping review aimed to explore the gaps in current understanding of military/veteran identity and offer recommendations to researchers in this specific area of study. Alongside this, the authors hoped to offer some considerations to mental health professionals engaging with ex-military; in particular, the questions they should consider when assessing the importance of military norms, beliefs, and service-context on an individual's sense of self. Doing so may aid in increasing the cultural competence of professionals whilst also ensuring that the individual and their experience is placed central to the work: factors suggested to be vital for therapeutic engagement and change (Tanielian et al., 2014; Zwiebach et al., 2019).

METHODS

A scoping review was undertaken in accordance with the updated Arksey and O'Malley (2005) 6-stage framework espoused by Levac et al. (2010). This framework was chosen as it has been suggested to be ideally suited for balancing the wider exploratory lens utilised in scoping reviews against the burgeoning need to appraise the quality of included studies (Peters et al., 2015). Each of the 6 stages are detailed below.

STAGE 1: IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This scoping review aims to evaluate the research on the factors affecting the salience/importance of military identity for individuals discharged from the military. The key questions in this scoping review include:

- What factors have been indicated as influencing the salience of military identity in individuals discharged from the forces?
- What are the key gaps in the evidence base on military identity salience?

STAGE 2: IDENTIFYING RELEVANT STUDIES

A search was conducted across PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Journals (*Journal of Armed Forces & Society*), and MEDLINE journals. These databases and the associated key terms utilised in these searches were devised through a collaborative and iterative process between the first, second, and third author, as well as in consultation with a Subject Librarian within the university's psychology department. The databases were chosen specifically to try and gather a wide selection of available evidence on military identity, a term that was deemed to overlap both military, psychological, and social sciences domains. A number of initial searches were conducted with search terms (Identit*) and (Military OR Veteran*) and (Discharge), and due to the limited results, additional terms were added in an iterative manner. Terms to reflect the differences in terminology amongst different militaries were also included as required (Military OR Army OR Soldier), as this supported the scoping reviews focus on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military, rather than the UK only. The search was conducted across all languages, as this reflected the inclusion criteria of NATO forces, but filtered to only include those studies conducted since 2001 (post 9/11). This range as well as the criteria of NATO-only forces were implemented due to the understanding of the role of context, history of military interventions, and cultural impacts on the general formation of military identity (Burk, 1999; Smith & True, 2014).

The completed search was conducted using the keywords (Identit* OR Self-concept* OR "Sense of self") and (Military OR Veteran* OR Soldier OR Army OR Forces) AND (Discharge* OR Reintegration OR Transition*). A manualised search of articles from the *Journal of Veteran Studies* as well as a citation search of the most recent key articles (Garner, 2019; Hack et al., 2017) was also conducted. As a large proportion of ex-military engage with civilian services, organisations, and charities, a search of grey literature (e.g., policies, presentations, internal research) was also conducted on the leading organisations (i.e., NATO, World Veterans Federation, CombatStress, Help4Heroes, King's Centre for Military Research). Post this search, the third author carried out an additional screening of the returned results at both abstract and full article stages. The aim was to evaluate the quality and breadth of the returned results, and ensure that errors in screening were minimised.

To evaluate the quality of the search results, the first author contacted two of the leading authors in the field of veteran studies. This led to the discovery of four additional studies, which were then evaluated by the first author for inclusion. A final search was also conducted prior to the submission of this scoping review to check for additional studies published since the completed search.

STAGE 3: STUDY SELECTION

The initial search returned 975 results. An additional search was carried out on the reference list of all key articles previously identified in the formation of this scoping review. The first author also sought out and collaborated with two experts in the field of military/veteran identity alongside the database search. The rationale was to help check the quality of the included studies, as well as help to identify key gaps in the returned results. This collaboration as well as the reference-list search identified 38 additional articles for inclusion. There were 996 results once

duplicates had been removed ($n = 17$). All results were screened by abstract by the first author in accordance with the inclusion/exclusion criteria. The third author then conducted an additional screen of the returned results to ensure accuracy/quality control; no errors or omissions were identified.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) primary or secondary aim of article on military or veteran identity, (b) military participants, (c) published within the last 20 years, and (d) utilised qualitative and quantitative research. The exclusion criteria were: (a) Non-NATO forces; (2) studies not containing ex-military participants; and (c) studies focused only on reserve, non-defence, or national guard personnel. There were no language restrictions due to the focus on NATO forces, which are often multilingual militaries. Post abstract screening, 114 articles met the inclusion criteria. The full text of articles were read and assessed for eligibility. A total of 20 studies were included post this final screening.

Figure 1 highlights the full search protocol.

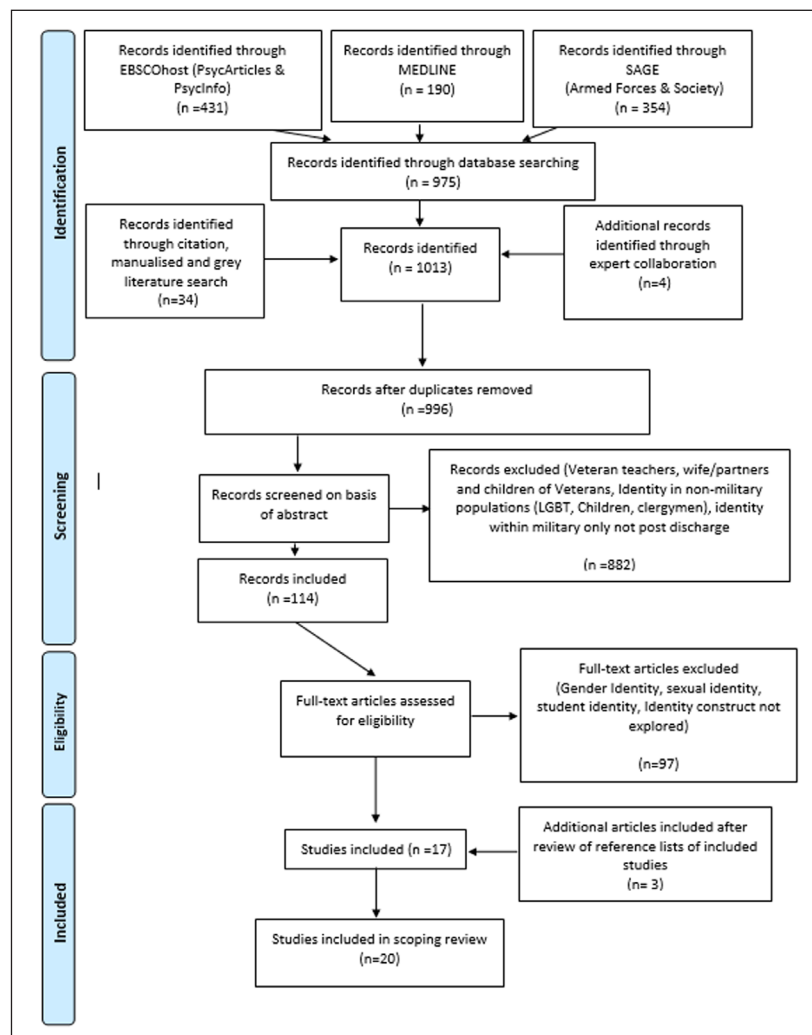


Figure 1 PRISMA-ScR.

The protocol was created using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR). The protocol was registered with the Open Science Framework on the 22nd April 2021 (Dolan et al., 2021).

STAGE 4: CHARTING THE DATA

All identified articles were assessed through Mendeley Reference Manager, a web and desktop based tool used to collect, combine, and analyse database search results from a diverse range of sources. Articles were then charted using the Joanna Briggs methodology for scoping reviews

(Peters et al., 2015). Data points were author, year, country, aim, population, methodology, participants, and findings. All extracted results were reviewed by both the first and second authors. An extract of the charted results are in Table 1 (below), with full extraction tables in appendix A.

STAGE 5: COLLATING, SUMMARISING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

While a quality control is not mandatory for a scoping review, it is recommended to increase the rigour and overall applicability of the review (Levac et al., 2010). However, rather than using quality control to exclude or include

AUTHOR	YEAR	COUNTRY	AIM	POPULATION	METHODOLOGY	PARTICIPANTS	FINDINGS
Burdett et al.,	2012	UK	Investigations into factors influencing identification as a Veteran	Veterans	Quantitative (Survey)	174 male, 26 female	Those with lower education history more significantly more likely to identify as a Veteran. Being a male and serving for longer were also indicated as influencing whether someone identified as a Veteran.
Grimell & van den Berg	2020	Sweden	Exploration of role of body and self-narrative in identity formation in transition from military	Veterans	Qualitative (Narrative)	1 male, 1 female	Gender may play key role in military identity more salient or prominent post service, with women who had to fight to gain acceptance in military potentially struggling more to give up this identity post discharge. Some indication of role post service reinforcing military identity, such as in uniformed or similar roles, like fitness instinct or.
Grimell	2020	Sweden	Exploration of identity in a difficult transition from military to civilian life.	Veteran	Qualitative (Narrative)	1 male	Experiences of receiving negative views to military or previous role from civilians may reinforce military identity, creating contrast between military and civilian worlds/identities.
Hammond	2016	US	Exploration of identity in combat veterans engaging in community college	Veteran	Qualitative (Comparative)	17 male, 2 female	Veterans who experience combat may have significantly salient/prominent military identities. Perception of civilians may be related to prominence of individual's military identity, with more negative views of civilians related to increased military identity.

Table 1 Extract from Data Extraction table.

studies, this review utilised it as a method of appraising the evidence base and supporting recommendations for future research. This approach to quality control may help to increase the power and value of the results (Pham et al., 2014), balancing the increased scope of these types of reviews against the burgeoning need to standardise and quality check results.

STAGE 6: CONSULTATION

Prior to undertaking this scoping review, the first author carried out a search via the Open Sciences Framework to ascertain if any scoping reviews had been conducted on military identity, or if any were ongoing at that time. A secondary aim was to publish this scoping review protocol, thus potentially increasing the chances of contact and feedback from within the existing field. Despite this, no collaboration was gained through this approach. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first scoping review carried out on military/veteran identity salience.

Additionally, in accordance with gold standard recommendations (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010), the first author consulted with two key authors in the field of veteran's identity research: Eve Binks and Tyson Smith. These authors were identified by a combination of their inclusion in the final included study list, their number of citations identified via Web Of Science, as well as their professional contact details being readily accessible via a trusted organisation or university. The rationale of contacting these authors was that they could offer a quality check of the returned search results (data extraction table) as well as identify gaps in the results. Each author assessed the data extraction results and offered feedback, both on the breadth of included studies as well as the quality of the returned results. This consultation led to four additional studies being identified and considered for inclusion.

RESULTS

CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES

Of the 20 studies included in this scoping review, 14 were qualitative methodologies, primarily using Thematic Content Analysis, Grounded Theory, or Interpretative Phenomenological approaches. Most relied on small samples of around 8 people, although the true range was from 1 to 100. There were 5 quantitative articles included, many of which utilised large scale surveys, with an average sample of around 200, although the range was from 100 to 3227. Also included, was 1 review that evaluated current understanding around military to civilian transition, focused on expert views as well as case studies. All of the included studies focused on veterans rather than serving military, although 4 studies

focused specifically on combat/active duty veterans only. Despite this scoping review including all NATO militaries, the vast majority of articles (17) focused on US/UK forces, with the rest from Sweden (1) and Canada (2). The range of study publication date was from 2002 to 2020, although over half of the studies ($n = 11$) were conducted within the last 4 years.

Women made up 5.6% of the included results. However, this low ratio of women to men was not representative across the study samples. Indeed, women were significantly represented across all the studies aside from the largest quantitative study ($n = 3,227$), which contained no women. This large sample represented 78% of the total participant sample, and thus skewed the gender ratio significantly. When adjusted, women made up 26% of the scoping sample, above the NATO force composition levels of 10.9% (NATO, 2016), but similar to US gender ratios (US Department of Defense, 2019). This potential overrepresentation of women within the sample reflects the increasing focus of female veterans within the research base; in particular, the existing understanding that women may be significantly affected by the transition from military to civilian identities (Dodds & Kieran, 2019).

QUALITY APPRAISAL

Quality was assessed using the updated 2018 Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) designed by Hong et al. (2019; see Appendix B). This tool was chosen as it has been uniquely designed to encompass all methodologies (Pace et al., 2012), in line with the breadth of methodologies often found in scoping reviews searches. Also, as the MMAT is focused on qualitative descriptors rather than numerical scoring; it may be particularly suited to the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, where the focus is already on a qualitative overview of the evidence (Levac et al., 2010).

Of the 20 studies included in this review, the majority ($n = 14$) displayed methodology that was suitable to the research question, the analysis and the interpretation of findings, as well as presenting sufficient evidence to substantiate the results. Six of the studies displayed some methodological limitations that may have impacted the quality of the overall results. In particular, due to the reliance on small sample sizes present in many of these studies, there often appeared to be a lack of sufficient respondent data to substantiate findings. A significant proportion of included studies relied on less than 2 data points or quotes to illustrate key themes (Albertson, 2019; Grimell, 2020; Grimell & van den Berg, 2020; Zarecky, 2014). Seven studies also undertook purposeful recruitment strategies that may not be representative of the general military demographic, focused on things like women, combat, or those with trauma post service (Cormack & Ell,

2016; Harada et al., 2002; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2003; Libin et al., 2017; Smith-Macdonald et al., 2020; Smith & True, 2014; Strong et al., 2018). Also, in one case, the process of recruitment may have led to a skewed sample, unintentionally excluding younger, white, male, and lower rank respondents (Burdett et al., 2013).

IDENTIFIED FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SALIENCE OF MILITARY/VETERAN IDENTITY

Thirteen factors were identified in the included studies. Each factor varied in terms of evidence quality and quantity, ranging from 1 data point (quote) in an individual study, up to multiple data points across 6 studies. A factor-based military/veteran identity model is illustrated below (Figure 2), referred to as the Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model. The quantity of studies evidencing each factor is detailed in brackets.

Psychological Problems

Lancaster and Hart's (2015) regression-based analysis of 90 ex-service personnel highlighted how the salience of military/veteran identity may be related to level of

psychological problems post discharge. They highlighted how individuals who may be the most attached to the military (e.g., seeing it as a family) were also the most likely to be experiencing symptoms of depression or PTSD. They also suggested that the level or frequency of an individual's trauma had no clear impact on their identity. Their findings suggest a key link between military/veteran identity and psychological functioning; however, as noted in the study, attachment-based identity may only be one aspect of overall identity; thus, they recommend further exploratory work.

Engagement with Veteran Services/Organisations/Peers

A number of studies highlighted a possible link between the salience of military/veteran identity and the individuals' degree of engagement with veteran-specific services, organisations, or peers. Albertson (2019) conducted a qualitative study with 6 ex-servicemen, and their grounded theory analysis suggested that by reengaging with military peers, individuals may subconsciously reinforce their past military identity. They proposed that by doing so individuals

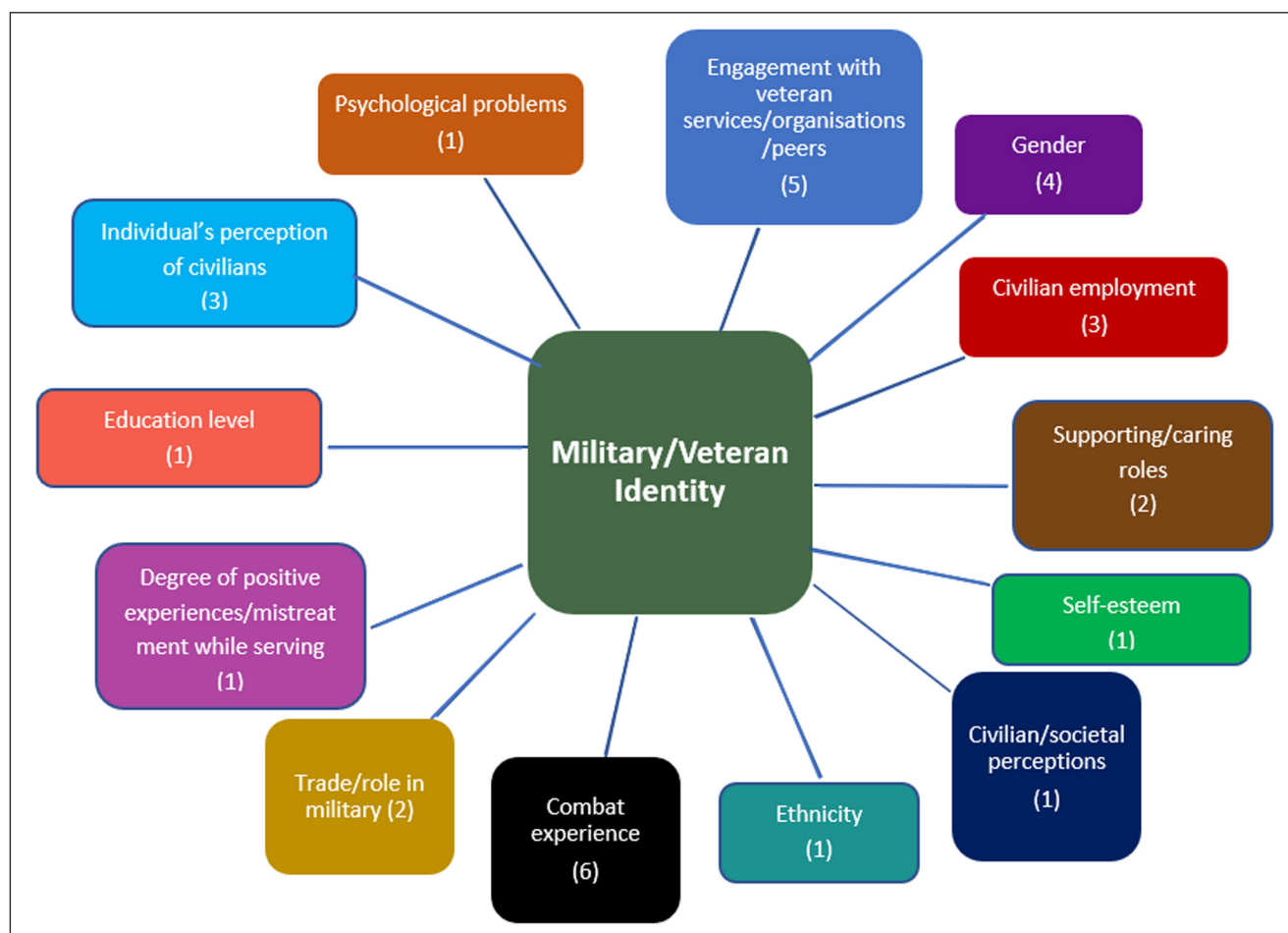


Figure 2 Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model.

may be socialised back into the values, beliefs, and norms that were intrinsic to the maintenance of the previous military identity.

A thematic analysis of interviews with 27 ex-service personnel by Herman and Yarwood (2014) backs this assertion as well, highlighting how engagement with ex-military peers may lead to individuals reinforcing their military identity, with engagement leading to constant comparison between being military and being a civilian. Binks and Cambridge's (2018) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of 6 participant interviews also highlighted a bidirectional relationship between engagement and the salience of military/veteran identity, with those who engaged less with ex-military peers, also appearing to have less salient military/veteran identities. They suggested that these individuals may see the military as a job instead of something that was a significant part of their sense of self.

The influence of engagement on military/veteran identity salience may also operate at the service level. Thompson et al.'s (2017) review of research on veteran identity highlighted how the salience of military/veteran identity appeared to predict engagement with veteran-specific services. Their review noted how there appeared to be a general theme in the research that those with more prominent military identities were also more likely to use Veteran Affairs (VA) services, with engagement a sign of their continued identification as military. However, although engagement with veteran-specific services does appear to relate to the salience of military/veteran identity, it may not be the determining factor. Harada et al.'s (2002) bivariate analysis of 3,227 ex-servicemen highlighted how although veteran identity was strongly related to an individual's engagement with veteran-specific organisations, such as the VA, it was not the main factor. Their research instead suggested that when adjusted for ethnicity, veteran identity did not appear to significantly influence or be influenced by engagement with VA usage.

Gender

Grimell and van den Berg's (2020) narrative analysis of interviews with 2 ex-service personnel suggested that gender is a key factor in the creation and subsequent maintenance of military identity. Their case studies suggested that men may initially hold more salient military identities while serving, perhaps due to fitting the normative template of what it means to serve, such as possessing masculine features and body types. However, they proposed that those who struggle initially to gain acceptance into this military identity, such as women, may then experience more difficulties relinquishing this identity after discharge (Grimell & van den Berg, 2020).

However, while being female was linked with military/veteran identity salience in other studies, the opposite relationship was also suggested. Huynh-Hohnbaum et al.'s (2003) thematic analysis with 24 ex-servicewomen highlighted how women appeared less likely to hold salient military identities than their male peers post discharge. Their case studies suggested this relationship may be due to the historic treatment of female veterans by organisations and society, with many wrongly classifying only men as veterans, or women being treated differently/negatively while serving. Strong et al. (2017) utilised a one person fictional case study to propose that women may hold less salient veteran identities due to not believing this identity fits them like it may their male peers, with a veteran/military identity conflicting with their view of what a woman should or should not be like. However, a survey by Burdett et al. (2013) suggested that although gender may be a factor in military/veteran identity salience, it may not be an independent variable. In their sample of 200 ex-service personnel, 55% of men were likely to identify as a veteran compared to just 31% of women. However, when a further covariate adjusted analysis of gender and veteran identity was undertaken, gender did not appear to be significant. Their data proposes that other mediating factors may be in effect.

Civilian Employment

The role of civilian employment was also suggested to be a significant factor in the salience of military/veteran identity. An IPA analysis of 11 interviews by Brunger et al. (2013) highlight how the salience of military/veteran identity may be reinforced by an individual's employment decisions post discharge. The authors noted how participants appeared to seek out roles that offered them continuity with their previous military experiences/identity, such as jobs in security or as fitness instructors. For many participants, these roles offered them a potential way of returning to the norms and values that military service may have imbued, such as discipline or the chance to return to uniformed service. This assertion was backed by Grimell and van den Berg's (2020) two-person narrative analysis. In their study, they observed how individuals often sought out roles that complemented their military identities, such as engaging with weekend work such as a military or fitness instructor. By doing so they argued that individuals may be trying to connect in with the norms and values that their service has developed, such as camaraderie and physical fitness. Herman and Yarwood's (2014) thematic analysis of interviews with 27 ex-service personnel suggested that some roles like the security services may offer individuals a chance to maintain their military identity, with the role similar to previous military

jobs, as well as enabling individuals to reconnect with a workforce that is significantly ex-military in composition. For some individuals, this may even lead to the belief that they have never actually left the military, with this military identity still significantly salient despite them being discharged.

Supporting/Caring roles

Smith and True's (2014) thematic analysis of interviews with 26 ex-service personnel highlighted how a lack of caring/support roles may increase the salience of military identity, with these roles offering an alternate way of individuals conceptualising themselves. They proposed that individuals who leave the military without these existing roles or family responsibilities may have significantly more salient military identities post discharge. Strong et al. (2018) backed this idea through their one-person fictional case study, proposing that the reason why women may have less salient military/veteran identities may be due to the difference in caring and family responsibilities between the genders. Strong et al. (2018) highlighted how women may be more likely to already have existing and potentially competing identities prior to serving and after discharge, such as mother, wife, or caretaker, and these may reduce the salience of Military/Veteran identities.

Self-Esteem

Zarecky (2014) highlighted how military/veteran identity may be maintained by an individual's confidence and self-esteem. Their thematic analysis of interviews with 6 ex-service personnel highlighted how individuals lacking in self-belief and understanding of their own strengths may hold more salient military/veteran identities, with the self and military values intrinsically linked post discharge. They proposed that if individuals are to successfully separate from the collective military identity, they may have to realise their own strengths and what defines them outside of military norms, values, and experiences.

Civilian/Societal Perceptions

Grimell (2020) suggested that the salience of military/veteran identity may be significantly influenced by factors like societal perceptions. Their narrative analysis of an interview with 1 serviceman highlighted how factors such as negative attitudes or lack of appreciation of the individual's military experience appeared to increase the amount of distance/disconnection they felt from civilian life. Grimell (2020) proposed that this distance may lead to individuals feeling more enmeshed with military norms, values, and experiences.

Ethnicity

Harada et al. (2002) proposed a possible link between ethnicity and military/veteran identity. A univariate analysis of survey responses from 3,227 ex-servicemen highlighted how individuals from minorities such as Black or Hispanic were more than twice as likely to engage with veteran-specific providers when compared to white veterans. As a result, these individuals were also significantly more likely to disclose that being a veteran influenced their daily life. Thus, Harada et al.'s (2002) study highlighted how there may be a correlation between the ethnicity of the individual and the salience of veteran identity.

Combat Experience

An individual's exposure to combat or active duty was also highlighted as a factor in the salience of military/veteran identity. Libin et al.'s (2017) thematic analysis with 8 ex-service personnel highlighted how combat may lead to individuals doing things that may be in contradiction to their own sense of morality, and as a result, they may experience a type of moral injury. This moral injury may then lead to a sense of alienation from civilians, with the individual perceiving their past actions in direct defiance of moral codes and norms expected in society. Libin et al. (2017) have suggested that as a result, an individual's military identity may become more salient, as doing so may allow them to maintain some sense of being a moral person and having worth. A grounded theory analysis of 18 ex-service personnel by Smith-Macdonald et al. (2020) also noted how an individual's sense of self appeared to be superseded by a military identity when they were faced with having to repress their own morals and beliefs in favour of the mission. These experiences appeared to lead to a significant dissonance for individuals, with the individual's identity being effectively relegated in favour of the norms, beliefs, and behaviours often expected by a military identity. McCormack and Ell's (2017) IPA analysis with 5 ex-service personnel proposed that maintaining a more prominent military identity may allow individuals to overcome the shame, pain, and dissonance of witnessing or perpetrating acts that may not fit with their own individual sense of self and moral behaviour. Their study noted how moral injury often appeared to lead to further isolation for these individuals, and thus significantly impacting their chance of relinquishing their service identity and assimilating back into civilian life.

Smith and True (2014) proposed that individuals who have not served in combat may feel unable to claim a veteran identity post discharge, with combat serving as a mark of "true" veteran status. Their thematic analysis with 26 ex-service personnel suggested that those who serve in

combat may develop a more prominent military/veteran identity, with the intense experience of combat reinforcing the values, norms, and beliefs intrinsic to military experience/life, something also backed by Hammond (2016). However, Burdett et al.'s (2013) survey with 200 ex-service personnel highlighted how military/veteran identity salience may not be related to combat, with individuals in their sample no more likely to identify as a veteran if they had served in a combat role, compared to when they had not. However, serving in a combat role is not necessarily the same as experiencing combat or being exposed to morally injurious experiences, and Burdett et al.'s (2013) study does not make any further distinctions or explorations around this variable.

Trade/Role in Military

Binks and Cambridge's (2018) IPA study with 7 ex-service personnel highlighted a possible link between the salience of military/veteran identity and the roles individuals are employed in while serving. In their study, individuals who had served in the infantry appeared to hold significantly salient military/veteran identities, with the norms of military service apparently internalised into their identity. This was in contrast to individuals who had served in trades (e.g., engineer, air traffic, etc), who often reported seeing the military as a "job" rather than a core part of their identity. A thematic analysis of 8 interviews with ex-service personnel by Libin et al., (2017) also highlighted how participants who undertook roles in the military that had direct civilian equivalents, such as medic or photographer, may have had less prominent military identities post discharge when compared with those joining the infantry.

Degree of Positive Experience/Mistreatment while Serving

Hart and Lancaster's (2019) regression based analysis of survey responses by 246 ex-service personnel suggested that military/veteran identity may be significantly impacted by the degree of positive experiences while serving. Participants who remembered their service as positive overall appeared to hold more salient military identities post discharge, something displayed in significant promilitary normed behaviours such as supporting ex-military peers.

Education

A survey with 200 ex-service personnel by Burdett et al. (2013), identified how education level was significantly related to an individual self-identifying as a veteran. They found that individuals who had less educational attainment (not progressing to college) were significantly more likely to see themselves as a veteran than those who achieved at least a college-level qualification (63.5% versus

45.4%). Also, a further logistic regression based analysis highlighted how education appeared to be independent of other covariables, thus highlighting how education level may mediate the salience of military/veteran identity.

Individual's Perception of Civilians

A comparative based analysis by Hammond (2016) with 19 ex-service personnel suggested that the salience of military/veteran identity may be related to how individuals perceive civilian peers. Participants who identified strongly with the veteran identity appeared to infer or perceive key differences between themselves and civilians, effectively distancing themselves from their peers due to a belief that they could not relate. Ozarem et al.'s (2017) thematic analysis with 100 ex-service personnel highlighted how participants who appeared to have significantly internalised the norms, beliefs, and values intrinsic to military service, such as discipline, hard work, and camaraderie, reported seeing civilians as behaving in contradiction to these values. Participants who held these beliefs described seeing those from the military as positive and civilians as lazy or selfish, effectively a type of *othering* with both identities in contrast and thus potentially being an either-or choice for individuals. Smith and True (2014) suggested that negative appraisals of civilians and their likelihood of judging ex-military may lead to a strengthening of military/veteran identities. Their thematic analysis with 26 ex-service people highlighted how individuals who fear the negative judgement of civilians, including loved ones, may respond by hiding their military/veteran identities away. However, rather than reducing the salience of this identity, it may lead to it increasing, with the lack of open dialogue not allowing individuals to reconceptualise and thus not assimilate into a new civilian identity post discharge.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this review was to explore the current research on military/veteran identity. In particular, what factors have been indicated as increasing the salience of this identity, i.e., the likelihood of individuals identifying as ex-military or veteran in a given situation/context. This scoping review utilised an updated Arksey and O'Malley (2005) 6-stage framework to formulate, identify, assess, and synthesize 20 studies on military/veteran identity salience. Through an iterative process, 13 factors were identified: engagement with veteran/organisations/peers, gender, civilian employment, supporting/care roles, self-esteem, civilian/societal perceptions, ethnicity, combat experience, military trade/role, degree of positive experiences/mistreatment while serving, education, perception of civilians, and psychological problems. The level

and quality of evidence within each factor varied significantly, with many factors often relying on minimal data points and lacking cohesive agreement across the included studies.

This review, through the use of charting, quality control, and data synthesis has highlighted the current understandings of the factors influencing the salience of military/veteran identity, and where possible, the key methodological and evidence gaps that are present. The culmination of this scoping review has been in the presentation of the Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model. The hope is that this model may aid further research into Military/Veteran identity, by offering a clear, cohesive, and visual representation of what researchers know at present and where further research may be more beneficial. The secondary aim of this MIS model is to help mental health professionals who are working directly with ex-military, offering them a conceptual model that may aid in their understanding around the complexities of military/veteran identity and what factors they might think about when undertaking this work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The results of this scoping review support the idea that an individual's identity may be significantly impacted during the transition process from leaving the military (Ahern et al., 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017), with the formation of a new identity related to the degree of isolation and connectedness individuals may experience post discharge (Grimell, 2020; Smith-Macdonald et al., 2020; Smith & True, 2014). However, rather than military/veteran identity impacting all ex-service personnel equally, this review highlights how the salience of this identity may differ significantly, depending on both intra and inter military factors.

Specifically, through a systematic scoping of the available evidence, this review has identified 13 factors implicated in influencing the salience of military/veteran identity in individuals discharged from the military: engagement with veteran/organisations/peers, gender, civilian employment, supporting/care roles, self-esteem, civilian/societal perceptions, ethnicity, combat experience, military trade/role, degree of positive experiences/mistreatment while serving, education, perception of civilians, and psychological problems. This understanding fits with Thompson et al.'s (2017) review that highlighted how there may be specific factors impacting identity salience in ex-service personnel, and that researchers should try and explore these in more detail. These findings also correlate both with Burdett et al. (2013), who suggested that military/veteran identity may not be an automatic identity for ex-service personnel, and also Binks and Cambridge (2018), who highlighted how the

salience of this identity may be dependent on the unique decisions that individuals make as well as their experience of military service.

The culmination of this scoping review is in the presentation of the Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model. The MIS model highlights how while many factors have been identified as influencing the salience of military/veteran identity, the quality and quantity of available evidence varies significantly. In particular, this review has identified how there appears to be an overreliance on small samples or specific subgroups of ex-service personnel (e.g., women, those with trauma, lower service ranks), and many studies offer limited data to substantiate their findings. This scoping review recommends researchers focus on incorporating some or all of these individual factors into future research. As combat and morally injurious experiences was one of the most studied and evidenced factors identified (Hammond, 2016; Libin et al., 2017; McCormack & Ell, 2017; Smith-Macdonald et al., 2020), this review suggests researchers prioritise this factor in their studies. Also, as the majority of studies on military/veteran identity salience utilise small scale qualitative studies, this review suggests researchers focus specifically on quantitative methods like surveys to assess how generalisable and important these factors are across the wider ex-military population. This recommendation fits with Lira and Chandrasekar (2020), whose own review also highlighted a lack of quantitative-based research, with the majority of veteran research focused on interviews and exploratory questions. Thus, the skew of methodology observed in this present review may highlight a broader problem within the existing field.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

All of the studies included in this review identified how the salience of military/veteran identity may differ significantly depending on the individual. In particular, this review backs assertions that individuals may not hold equally prominent military/veteran identities post discharge (Burdett et al., 2013), despite many professionals assuming that they do (Hack et al., 2017). This review backs the assertion by Strong et al. (2018), which suggests that health and social care professionals should not ask if the individual is a veteran or not, as doing so may discount a large proportion of ex-military. While this review has identified 13 key factors in the MIS model, mental health professionals or therapists are recommended not to assume that these are generalisable to all ex-service personnel. Instead, this review recommends that these professionals use the factors to inform their questions when working with ex-military clients, thus enabling them to better explore the

individual's sense of military/veteran, identity rather than assuming that it may or not be salient. Doing so may prevent an over or an under-focus on military/veteran identity, something already highlighted by ex-military service personnel as vital to supporting their engagement with services (Iverson et al., 2011; Zwiebach et al., 2019). It may also aid in increasing the cultural competence of mental health professionals and therapists, something suggested to be significantly lacking and urgently requiring additional focus (Meyer & Wynn, 2018; Ritchie, 2015; Tanielian et al., 2014;). Lastly, this review backs the assertion that identity may play a significant role in ex-service personnel's post-discharge wellbeing (Ahern et al., 2015; Ashcroft, 2014; Gordon et al., 2020; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017). Therefore, those working therapeutically with ex-service personnel are recommended to incorporate identity focused work into the overall intervention if suitable.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This scoping review is to the knowledge of its authors, the first to offer an overview and synthesis on military/veteran identity salience. Research on the salience of military/veteran identity is a newer area of exploration within the existing military and veteran research base. Thus, the data on what factors impact this identity salience is limited at present. The majority (55%) of the included studies in this scoping review often relied on qualitative studies with small samples of less than 11 participants, and there often appeared a lack of respondent data to substantiate findings.

While all of the studies included in this review focused on identity, the factors that influenced its salience were often secondary or tertiary focuses within some studies. This compounded data quantity issues, with some studies offering valuable but significantly less evidenced data than others. A key strength of this review was through its use of a Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to help evaluate the research. However, the quality control was not used to exclude studies but instead add a further way to identify key gaps in the evidence base, thus maintaining the breadth of studies intrinsic to scoping reviews whilst also increasing its ability to directly impact researchers and clinicians working in this area (Levac et al., 2010; Pham et al., 2014).

Another key strength of this present review was the systematic nature of its search strategy. Although military/veteran identity salience is an emerging field within internationally published sources, it is already significantly represented in governmental channels and through charitable organisations and military affiliated bodies. To fully represent these diverse sources, this

review incorporated direct searches to organisations, charities, NATO sources, and contacted experts in the field, alongside searches through peer-reviewed databases. By doing this, this review aimed to reflect the diverse nature of the field, thus potentially increasing the accuracy of the returned results.

CONCLUSION

Military/veteran identity salience is a newer development within the existing research on identity variance in ex-military individuals. As such, this scoping review has highlighted how there remains significant gaps and limitations in this area of study. In particular, the majority of the research relies on small samples and interview-based methods, and as a consequence, there is often a lack of data to substantiate findings. However, these results are not unexpected considering this field is developing and the majority of existing research primarily focuses on identity difficulties rather than the underlying factors that may impact the prominence of an individual's military/veteran identity.

Despite these limitations, this review has identified 13 key factors that are suggested to influence the salience of an individual's military/veteran identity: engagement with veteran/organisations/peers, gender, civilian employment, supporting/care roles, self-esteem, civilian/societal perceptions, ethnicity, combat experience, military trade/role, degree of positive experiences/mistreatment while serving, education, perception of civilians, and psychological problems. This review has combined these factors to form a Military/Veteran Identity Salience (MIS) model. The hope is that the MIS model may aid researchers by highlighting the current evidence, both in terms of quantity and quality, thus supporting further exploratory and confirmatory work. Alongside this, this review presents some key recommendations for mental health professionals working or therapists, or hoping to work with ex-service personnel. This review suggests that mental health professionals or therapists should resist assuming that all ex-service personnel hold salient military/veteran identities, and instead use the MIS model to explore the individual's past and current experiences. By doing so, mental health professionals or therapists may be able to balance the existing recommendations to prioritise identity when working with ex-service personnel (Ahern et al., 2015; Herman & Yarwood, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017), whilst also adopting an individually tailored approach. The possible effect of this approach may be to increase engagement in this hard to reach demographic (Blais & Renshaw, 2013;

Hoge et al., 2004; Maguen et al., 2012), something of vital importance throughout the difficult military to civilian transition (Ashcroft, 2014; Gordon et al., 2020).

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix A and B. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.333.s1>

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author was the principal investigator in this scoping review. The second and third authors helped to shape the research question, the inclusion criteria, and also by reviewing the search strategy, data extraction, and the final write-up.

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