

# From the Foxhole to the Ivory Tower: A Critical Analysis of Veteran Transitions from the Military to College

Christopher T. Davidson, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Research Associate  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
ASHE 2018 - Tampa, Florida

# Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the transition experiences of Post-9/11 student veterans from a military setting to college using Veteran Critical Theory to examine data collected from semi-structured interviews.

# Veteran Critical Theory

- Developed by examining other critical theories, tenets, and literature surrounding the theories using a case survey approach.
- 11 Tenets Proposed
- Philips & Lincoln (2017) discussed how this may change as additional research is completed.

# Veteran Critical Theory (VCT)

- Institutions are predominately staffed by civilians and focus on the traditionally aged 18- to 22-year-old civilian students
- Experience various forms of oppression and marginalization
- Veterans experience multiple conflicting and interacting power structures, languages, and systems
- There is value in the stories that veterans tell to explain their own reality
- Veterans experience the intersection of multiple identities other than just being a veteran

# Veteran Critical Theory (VCT)

- Stories of veterans' experiences are written typically from the perspective of a civilian
- Veterans are more appropriately positioned to inform policy and practice regarding veterans
- Veteran services may serve the interests of civilians and ultimately harm veterans
- Veterans are diverse and their experiences and services cannot be generalized to every veteran
- Veteran culture is built on a culture of respect, honor, and trust. At times institutions may not be congruent with the socially learned military culture

# Methods

- Data stemmed from a larger collective-case study of six student veterans at two- and four-year public and private institutions in Virginia
- Modified Version of Seidman's (2013) Phenomenological Interviewing
- Six Instrumental Cases Created and Analyzed
- Chronological Format
- Analyzed data using cross-case analysis

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research* (4th ed.). New York: NY: Teachers College Press.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

# Jonathan: A Composite Narrative

- 26-year-old Man
- Former Marine
- Attends University of the Mid-Atlantic (UMA)
- Studying Public Policy & Leadership
- Attended Upstate Community College (UCC)
- Serves in the National Guard

# Joining the Military & Military Life

- Joined the US Marine Corps when college didn't work out
- Joined in 2009 during the Afghanistan Troop Surge
- Became an Infantryman and later a Mortarman
- Saw joining the military as a way to serve his country
- Shocked by the extremely regimented life



# Deployment

- Afghanistan Deployment
  - Initial Job - Foot patrols, Engaging with local Afghanis, IED removal
  - Promoted - Working with intelligence to determine locations to land artillery and mortar rounds
- Mediterranean Deployment
  - Aboard naval vessel
  - Trained “local nationals” in Jordan and Kuwait
  - Conducted amphibious landing operations

# Military Culture & Relationships

- Regimented Lifestyle
  - Being a Marine is a “way of life is what it is. I mean it’s a language. It’s how to write. It’s how to speak. It’s its own little world.”
- Life as a “Boot”
  - Someone who hasn’t deployed or seen combat
  - Closest relationships
  - See the “best and worst of each other”

# Military Culture & Relationships

- Relationship with Superiors
  - “Psychological game”
  - Could protect him or make his life “a living hell”
  - Found an officer that took him under his wing
  - Earned “value” by meeting and exceeding standards
- Relationships During Deployment
  - No pretext of rank
  - Being “effective and...good at your job” was what mattered in battle
  - Focused on “who’s the person you could trust in the fight” and depend on

# Leaving the Military and Going to College

- Honorable Discharge
- Used Post-9/11 GI Bill
- Went straight to UCC
  - Prepared him to be a student, schedule time, didn't have the regimented lifestyle
- Transferred to UMA for Public Policy and Leadership

# Collegiate Culture & Relationships

- Objectives weren't given to him
- Lost his military family
- UCC did have a large military population and services
  - Student Veteran Organization (SVO)
  - Military and Student Veteran Office (MVSO)

# Collegiate Culture & Relationships

- UMA did NOT have a large military population
- Older than the average student
- Many students were uneducated about the military - “Did you kill someone?”

# Collegiate Culture & Relationships

- “I’ve never met so many 20-year-olds packed in one room that know everything about the world and are so sure of it, too. I’m 26 and I’m still trying to figure out which way is up.”
- For him, he learned what he called “intellectual humility” early in the Marines from “somebody like a squad leader or a sergeant or a staff sergeant say, ‘No, you’re not as smart as you fucking think you are, and you need to shut up and listen right now.’”
- “Intellectual humility” helped to cope

# Experiences with Institutional Faculty & Staff

- Different than with students
- Treated faculty like he did his commanding officers
- “I don’t ask for excuses. I don’t ask for my excuses to be accepted, that’s for sure. I don’t give excuses. I think a lot of professors appreciate that.”
- Working with the VA Certifying official was difficult do to institutional processes



# Resolution for the Military vs. Civilian Cultures

- Military culture is “an alien culture”
- Military and Veteran Student Offices are beneficial
- Veteran Student Organizations are beneficial
- Used the military mindset to keep things in perspective

# Critical Insights

- Veterans are Diverse Individuals
  - Age & Maturity Differences
  - Can lead to negative experiences with civilian students
- Veteran Experience Multiple Identities and Cultures
  - Lack of awareness by civilians about military identity and culture
  - Military identity can reframe perspective
  - Can lead to tension with civilian students, faculty, and staff
  - Navigating the less-regimented ambiguous life

# Critical Insights

- Institutions are predominately staffed by civilians and focus on the traditionally aged 18- to 22-year-old civilian students
  - Many certifying officials have no military experience and are housed with the registrar or financial aid
  - Not given specific objectives as in military – examine student services and how we support students to find their way
- Veterans are Positioned to Inform Policy and Practice
  - Military and veteran student offices help and are beneficial
  - Veteran Student organizations are beneficial

# Implications

- Student veterans are willing to share their experiences...so ask and listen.
- Assess and evaluate programs and engage veterans in the process.
- Continued education opportunities for faculty, staff, and students about veteran experiences.
- Need for additional research using and refining VCT and other frameworks can help broaden the knowledge and experience of student veterans to better serve them.

# From the Foxhole to the Ivory Tower: A Critical Analysis of Veteran Transitions from the Military to College

Christopher T. Davidson, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Research Associate  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
ASHE 2018 - Tampa, Florida  
All Rights Reserved

©