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Effects of Mechanical Institutionalization of Veteran Post-Service Re-Entry

By: Deidra Hubay

Overview

Channeling the concepts of Emile Durkheim, this research will seek to explore the causes of post-service veteran anomie, with a specific focus on suicide. However, anomic dysfunction can also be displayed in other dysfunctions common to returning veterans such as mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, criminal activity, and more. During basic military training, recruits undergo an institutional identity reconstruction process that I will refer to as Mechanical Institutionalization. In Mechanical Institutionalization, a recruit's individual prior-service identity is replaced with an institutionalized group identity that is maintained by mechanical solidarity. Because of this, the beliefs, values, norms, and ethos of the individual have been fundamentally altered to conform to those of the institutional group. As a result, many veterans often struggle to effectively adapt to life after military service, because the values and norms a veteran previously relied upon during service are no longer personally relevant causing the veteran to feel hopeless and alienated. "Even among those veterans who report doing well economically, many do not feel adequately connected to their communities after service," (Carter and Kidder, 1). This paper suggests that the effects of mechanical institutionalization and the resulting anomic dysfunction will occur on a spectrum pursuant to psychological, environmental, cultural, and historical factors individuals may have experienced prior to entering the service.

Just as Durkheim theorized that traditional society would crash when introduced to a modern society, so too will individuals, (Durkheim, 232). The likelihood of experiencing those struggles is independent of a veteran's number of deployments, length of deployments, or whether the veteran has experienced combat. It is then the disruption of this identity maintenance

offers a systemic explanation and contributes to the alarming rate of veteran suicide. As pointed out in a publication by Mastroianni and Scott, “Durkheim’s analysis of suicide illustrates that there are clear associations between structural variables and rates of suicide,” (5). Thus, it is not the effects of deployment or combat that cause difficulties in veteran reintegration, but rather it is the institution's manifestation of mechanical solidarity. That is to say: it is the institution itself that contributes to the alarming rates of veteran anomic dysfunction.

Veteran Suicide: The Data

Non-deployed veterans are 61% more likely to commit suicide than the general population whereas deployed veterans are 41% more likely to commit suicide than the general population, (Kang, et. al, nih.gov). In other words, non-deployed veterans are 20% more likely to commit suicide than deployed veterans. However, even though both deployed and non-deployed veterans have astronomical suicide risks, both groups are about 25% less likely to die of any other causes, (nih.gov). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), several studies have shown that being deployed (including combat experience, length of deployment, and number of deployments) is not associated with suicide risk among service members, (va.gov).

Additionally, “of the Service members who died by suicide in CY [calendar year] 2018, 47.1% of Active Component and 66.1% of Reserve Component suicide decedents, respectively, had no history of deployment,” (Under Secretary of Defense, 37). For reservists, they still go through the same intense breakdown of personal identity and reinstitution of a group identity during basic training but are then subjected to a much more abrupt return to modern society than those on active duty. As Mastroianni and Scott wrote, “Reserve Component and National Guard soldiers may be especially vulnerable to this kind of disruption: they are more likely to return to

an environment in which opportunities to participate in military culture are fewer and less intense than active component soldiers,” (8).

This, again, points to anomic thoughts and behaviors being a result of the institution and not the experiences of war or combat. Further still, the Department of Veteran Affairs reports that all veterans are mostly likely to commit suicide within zero to three years following their return to modern society. In other words, as time away from the institution increases, risk of suicide decreases.

Emile Durkheim: Anomie and Solidarity

In 1897, French Sociologist Emile Durkheim proposed four types of suicide: altruistic suicide, fatalistic suicide, egotistic suicide, and anomic suicide, (Durkheim, 264). One example of altruistic suicide is “the war hero,” who sacrifices oneself for the good of the group. Fatalistic suicide can be thought of as “the war prisoner” who is so hopeless for relief of their situation that they instead take their own life. Both altruistic and fatalistic types of suicides are seen within traditional societies. The other two types of suicide are seen in modern societies. Egoistic suicide could be thought about as the “loner teen” who is bullied at school. Anomic suicide, as defined by the American Psychological Association as, “involving the perception that one’s relationship to society has changed so radically that its values and norms are no longer personally relevant. Feeling bereft of the societal standards upon which he or she had relied, the individual becomes frustrated, disillusioned, and disappointed,” (VandenBos, dictionary.apa.org).

Modern society overwhelmingly accounts for the dominant type of societies today globally; it operates under organic solidarity. Organic solidarity operates under a high division of

labor, in a complex system of interrelated parts that work diligently to maintain stability. On the other hand, there are few examples of traditional societies left today, but was the norm for premodern/preindustrial societies. In Mechanical Solidarity, members of the society view themselves as first part of the group and secondly as an individual, prioritizing the collective conscience over the individual conscience.

Mechanical Solidarity can be broken down into five main indicators: (1) prioritization of the collective conscience that dominates over the individual conscience, (2) absolute restriction on individuality, (3) reaffirmation of the collective consciousness of the group through performance of group rituals, (4) strict, mandatory adherence to the shared ethos or “one right way to live”, and (5) collective punishment of deviance, (Durkheim, 225-229).

Authoritarianism and Conservative Values

Since Mastroianni and Scott explain that “conservative political -and religious beliefs may be overrepresented in the military in comparison to society as a whole,” it is important to understand how authoritarianism and conservative values frequently align with military culture, (11). The Merriam-Webster definition of conservatism is, “a political philosophy [ideology] based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions, and preferring gradual development to abrupt change.” Though conservatism has varying degrees, certain themes remain central for the definition across conservative thought, including realism, tradition, hierarchy, and authority, (Heywood, 68). Adherents of conservatism often oppose modernism and seek a return to “the way things were,” (McLean and McMillan, oxfordreference.com). Conservatism fosters authoritarian values.

Sociologist Melvin Kohn also had insight about authoritarian values. After studying how class differences affect parental values, Melvin Kohn suggested that social class can give us insights on judgements about authority, and that occupational experiences shape general value orientations. In particular, Kohn noted that: (1) "authoritarian attitudes" stressing "conformance to the dictates of authority and intolerance of nonconformity" and, (2) that values of "obedience" became more frequent at lower class levels, (Kohn, 79). In addition, lower-class parents "who focus on obedience, neatness, and good manners are instilling behavioral conformity," while higher classes tended to emphasize "happiness, curiosity, and consideration" that are necessary for individuality and "self-directed values", (Gilbert, 92). Kohn observed that "the essence of higher-class position is the expectation that one's decisions and actions can be consequential; the essence of lower-class position is the belief that one is at the mercy of forces people control," (Gilbert, 93).

Most individuals in the military have been recruited from the lower-middle class, "with the lowest income quintile being slightly underrepresented, and the highest quartile being even less represented, with about 17% of enlisted personnel coming from the top 20% of neighborhoods by income," (DeVore, Forbes.com). In addition, the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness titled "The Population Representation in the Military Services" indicated that there a close statistical link to recruiting and unemployment rates; the higher the unemployment rate, the more likely one will be to enlist, (DeVore, Forbes.com).

As time since WWII continues to pass, "military service is increasingly concentrated in families and in communities which host large military bases," (DeVore, Forbes.com). After taking this and the above-mentioned economic factors into account, Texas Public Policy Foundation Vice President and former California legislator, Chuck Devore concludes the

following three factors to be most predictive of whether a State's military age population will be inclined to join the armed services: "the percentage of all-volunteer-era veterans in a state (1975 and later), the share of active duty personnel in a state and, not surprisingly, the share of the state's population with a hunting license, with higher percentages of each being positively correlated to a higher enlistment rate," (Devore, Forbes.com).

Also in his research, Kohn explains that education does provide some independent influence on value orientations, stating that it appears to "provide the intellectual flexibility and breadth of perspective that are essential for self-directed values," but notes that "the effect of occupational conditions is substantially stronger," (Gilbert, 93). However, the further down the economic strata one is, the less likely they are to have a secondary or post-secondary degree. A national 2004 study by Carnevale and Rose strongly demonstrated a link between class and college admissions by dividing up first-year college students into four socioeconomic quartiles by family income, education, and occupation. (Gilbert, 143). "They found that students from the top 25 percent of families make up three quarters of the freshman class and selective institutions, while students from the bottom 50% of families account for only 10%," (Gilbert, 143). In other words, those who are most likely to join the military are also less likely to have an education beyond high school.

A 2019 New York Times article titled "The Army, in Need of Recruits, Turns Focus to Liberal-Leaning Cities" read, "In Los Angeles, a region defined by liberal politics where many families are suspicious of the military, the Army has struggled to even gain access to high schools," (Phillips, nytimes.com). This shows that the military itself has identified its lack of liberal accessions (recruits). In fact, so much so that the Army is making wide and public pushes to increase recruiting efforts in 22-liberal leaning cities. Additionally, many military accessions

hail from Southern States such as South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and Florida. Since high exposure to the military and/or its members is a strong motivator for military service, the lower northern recruitment rates may be, in part, attributed to the fact that many northern bases have closed or moved due to extreme inclement weather conditions that inhibited training. This makes recruiters, again, turn to states in the South to meet their recruitment goals. Southern States are overwhelmingly more likely to hold conservative values rather than liberal values.

Basic Training: The United States Marine Corps

Basic military training - focusing primarily on the United States' Marine Corps - is designed to create a vacuum of identity within its recruits, manufacturing a void that allows agents of the institution to instill a new and institutionalized group identity that is maintained by the institutional structure; this process is referred to as Mechanical Institutionalization. Put simply, during the process of mechanical institutionalization, an individual's prior-service identity is replaced with a new identity pursuant to the will of the institution. This new identity replaces the individual identity with the group identity—stressing conformity with the dense moral system of the new collective conscience in Durkheim's sense. This has authoritarian implications and can be further simplified to just three words: institution before self. As Erich Fromm writes in *The Authoritarian Personality*,

“The authoritarian character has not reached maturity; he can neither love nor make use of reason. As a result, he is extremely alone which means that he is gripped by a deeply rooted fear. He needs to feel a bond, which requires neither love nor reason — and he finds it in the symbiotic relationship, in feeling-one with others; *not by reserving his own identity, but rather by fusing, by destroying his own identity,*” (2).

Erich Fromm goes on to describe “the essence of authoritarian personality” as “the inability to rely on oneself, to be independent, to put it in other words: *to endure freedom*,” (1). And so is introduced to us the first paradox of military culture wherein the supposed “bringers of freedom” are unable to endure freedom themselves. All forms of individuality and individual expression are removed. All service members will conform to their branches specified, universal standards. They will wear the same clothes. Have the same hairstyles. Hold the same values. Be held to the same standards. Perform the same tests. Have the same schedules. Adhere to the same norms. Relinquish authority to the same people. Live in the same quarters. They will eat together. Celebrate together. Mourn together. Learn together. Idolize together. Fail and succeed together.

They will be forced to get dressed and undressed together, “by the numbers,” under instruction from an authoritarian personality. They will be forced to bathe together, use the restroom together, go to bed at the same time, wake at the same time. All recruits will be forced to relinquish even the most private and foundational aspects of individuality. Thus, any sense of a recruit’s individualistic identity is effectively, and intentionally, removed. In its place lies a new identity: the group collective conscience.

While the collective conscience might serve a purpose during combat or other related military functions, this lack of individuality does not translate well to civilian culture. Any deviance or attempt to refute this assimilation is swiftly, strongly, and effectively punished. To “survive” the military experience, one must adapt to the circumstances and adopt the collective consciousness to at least some degree. Those who still fail to adapt to the circumstances and adopt the collective consciousness will be punitively and involuntarily separated from military

service for “failure to adapt.” Being separated from service in this way can have major effects on employment, education, healthcare opportunities, and more.

In Marine Corps basic training, recruits may not refer to themselves in first person at any time, not even when talking with their peers during the one hour per day of (supervised) “free time.” They must refer also to their peers in third person, even when speaking to them directly. They may not have or keep in their possession any aspect of their life or identity before the service and may only communicate with those “on the outside” via handwritten letters. They and all their peers must all recite, in unison, the same, specific responses when elicited to do so, all of this further enforcing the installation of the submissive, complementary part of the masochistic authoritarian personality.

For example, if a Drill Instructor says, or more likely, yells, “discipline is,” every recruit must then respond with the following statement: “Ma’am/Sir, discipline is the instant and willing obedience to all orders, respect for authority, self-reliance, and teamwork, ma'am/sir!” If even one individual fails to conform and comply, the entire group will face mass, collective punishment. An example of this would be taking the entire platoon to “the pit” for “intensive training” resulting from the mistake of one individual. This mass punishment sets the framework for the “self-policing” motto the Marine Corps teaches its members. Eventually, the drill instructors no longer must be even physically present for the group to collectively deter and punish deviants on their own. Other group rituals, not all of which as negative, can work to reaffirm the collective conscience, too, such as going to the field, attending or participating in ceremonies, formations, inspections, celebrations, funerals, mandatory fun days, or weekly field days, etc.

Conclusion

In sum, the effects of Mechanical Institutionalization led to excessive barriers and challenges for veteran post-service reintegration into civilian life. Individuals who are less secure in their identities, such as those who are young, are without secondary education, and/or come from more authoritarian cultures. These challenges are currently being missed by the institution and are not addressed during the veteran transition process.

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