

## ABSTRACT

*Military veterans seeking to transition into civilian employment possess valuable skills, yet often face challenges in their job searches. Though veterans are legally protected in the U.S., stereotypes about them persist and influence the hiring process. Future human resource managers, (e.g. college students) will be key to veteran hiring and they will need to appropriately assess applicant qualifications in an unbiased manner. This paper demonstrates the results of a career development program in which 112 students provided monthly job search assistance to 242 military veterans preparing to be discharged from a large VA domiciliary. Results demonstrated the importance of context specific HR skills and coaching in applied settings, and the impact of such experiences on personal growth, and how career development programs might be used to reduce stereotypes.*

## **Career Development through Career Transition Coaching: A Qualitative Study of Military Veterans and Student Coaches**

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Career transition, defined as a major change in one's work role or context, is on the rise in contemporary society for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to, corporate downsizing, restructuring, or layoffs (Klehe et al., 2021). During the transition process individuals often undergo the process of *reinventing* themselves in some way or *repackaging* their skills and qualifications to make them marketable to a new field. This topic is especially important given the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent "great resignation" within the US. Though individuals left the workforce from a variety of professions areas such as teaching, health care, and restaurant workers left the workforce in greater numbers. Therefore, it is important to find creative ways to groom potential employees to fill corporate needs. The extent to which they believe their skills and abilities will transfer to a new occupation plays an important role in their success (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011) and this has been described as one's occupational identity (Opengart, 2021).

Social identity theory (SIT) offers insight into the occupational identity development process and is relevant to the career transition process. Social identity is described as an

individual's sense of who they are based on their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group membership guides personal behavior, decision making, and how one might fit into society. SIT proposes that groups (e.g. social class, family, occupational field) to which people belong are important sources of pride and self-esteem. Social identity goes beyond group membership; SIT posits that social identity arises due to members valuing and being attached to certain groups (Yates, 2017). Groups offer individuals a sense of social identity and belonging in a social world and can reduce uncertainty. Group membership also affects how individuals view other groups and offers a lens to *categorize* others in this effort. Group identity can also lead to negative stereotyping of out-groups. Part of the social identity process, which enhances self-esteem, is believing that one's group is superior to other groups, and therefore, there is a tendency to construct negative stereotypes about out-group members (Yates, 2017).

In this paper we focus on two important groups who are going through the career transition process: Military veterans transitioning to full-time civilian employment, and human resource management (HR) students looking to transition from being students to working professionals. The transition between college and professional work challenges students to be ready to demonstrate career-related skills, which influences their career trajectory (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Saks, 2018). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of early career HR professionals understanding the nuanced experiences, needs, and challenges of diverse applicants (Bañales et al., 2021; Combs & Luthans, 2007; Harris, 2016).

Similarly, military veterans transitioning to the civilian workplace experience challenges such as negative stereotypes and often a lack of appreciation for their military skills (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Parrott et al., 2019). Such beliefs may hinder the ability of veterans to transition into the civilian workforce even though organizations have a legal responsibility to avoid discrimination against them, and to make a concerted effort to recruit them (Noon, 2018). Even with legal protection, veterans often experience high unemployment rates and need additional resources in the career transition process (Stone & Stone, 2015).

This study offers insights on the career transition process and to do so we interviewed university HR students and military veterans who were involved in a service-learning project. We applied qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data as such approaches offered the most insight into "why" phenomenon might be occurring. Through this project, students worked with U.S. military veterans to help them identify their marketable job skills, develop resumes, practice interviewing, and learn how to navigate the online job application process. We focus on the importance of occupational identity in the transition process, and how both groups' current identities might be impacted by a career development experience. Such experiences allow students the opportunity to *practice* professional skills in a real world setting as opposed to a classroom (Marco-Gardoqui et al., 2020; Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). By qualitatively examining experiences of both groups, we aim to identify factors that influence career transition success.

Our study contributes to the literature in several ways. Importantly, this study uses SIT as a lens for viewing several concepts in the career transition process for veterans and students, primarily, the need for individuals to expand their occupational identities to consider new occupational possibilities as they make a successful

transition. In addition, the SIT lens is used to consider stereotypes that are prevalent in the workplace, and how uniting the groups in a coaching context may serve to reduce negative stereotypes of both groups. We contribute to the career transition literature by revealing some perceived barriers U.S. military veterans may experience in the transition process. In addition, we lay out a roadmap that organizations or educators might use to develop applied career transition projects.

To date, research on career transitions has used theoretical underpinnings from vocational personalities (Kim & Beier, 2020), student career transitions (Burlison et al., 2021), social cognitive career theory (Savickas et al., 2018), and others. Despite the importance of one's identity in the career transition process, few researchers have considered SIT in explaining this phenomenon. We fill a research gap in the career transition literature specific to the process of transitioning occupational identities. Specifically, we consider how SIT might illuminate the career transition process for individuals seeking to change careers.

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What factors specifically influence career transition?
2. How might SIT illuminate the career transition process for individuals seeking to change careers?
3. How does HR students' coaching impact veterans' career transition process, and reciprocally, how might veterans' experiences impact HR students?

## **Theory**

### **Social Identity Theory and Career Transitions**

SIT posits that individuals develop their identities in part through comparisons to relevant others and groups (Petitta & Jiang., 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Association with a group of relevant others, with whom the individual perceives as similar, can enhance self-esteem and self-image while creating distinctions between the referent group (in-group) and other groups (out-group) (Hoffmann et al., 2020). Some of an individual's multiple social identities (e.g., ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, occupation), will be more relevant or important than others. In fact, some have argued that individuals may identify with certain occupations they have chosen more than with other social groups, such as gender, race, or religion (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

According to SIT, the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity, based on individual differences, and a social identity, which is comprised of "salient group classifications" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Three social-psychological processes are subsumed within SIT: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification (Welbourne et al., 2017). Social categorization occurs when people assign themselves and others to categories based on specific salient attributes. Comparison occurs as individuals assess attributes, values, status, and rewards etc. of other groups in relation to their own. Social identity "is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Once individuals identify with a group, they are likely to take on characteristics of the prototypical member of that group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thus, individuals may adopt the characteristics of groups with which they identify and have a difficult time shifting to a new identity (e.g. professional or social).

An occupational identity is a social identity that is based on being in a certain occupational group. The military may evoke particularly strong social identities (Opengart, 2021). Due to its mission, the military intentionally utilizes structured, institutionalized socialization processes that “are designed to foster loyalty and a collective identity based on shared norms, values, and beliefs...” (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011, p.503). To a lesser extent, students may strongly identify with the “student” occupational group. We argue that the strength of one’s occupational identities becomes important when considering making a career transition, as part of the transition process requires individuals to imagine themselves as a member of a future in-group (the new occupational role) (Yates, 2017). Those whose occupational identity is deeply entwined with their personal identity may struggle more to imagine themselves in a different occupation, and/or may experience a sense of loss or “identity strain” when they are making a transition (Hamner, 2019).

The social categorization process results in individuals viewing the world as *us* and *them* (Tajfel, 1978; Yates, 2017). There are three factors that increase the tendency of individuals to identify with groups: the distinctiveness of the in-group; the prestige of the in-group, and the salience of the out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to Tajfel (1978) group members of an in-group (*us*) will seek to find negative characteristics of an out-group (*them*), which can interact with or lead to negative stereotypes. Social categories tend to be associated with specific expectations, known as stereotypes, which perceivers use to process and interpret incoming social information about another individual (He et al., 2019). This is a normal cognitive information processing function where individuals might exaggerate the differences between groups, the similarities of individuals within a group, and the way individuals view their own group (Tajfel, 1978; Yates, 2017). There is evidence that strong group identification may also result in discrimination against out-groups (Hong et al., 2004), and evidence that some stereotypes result in implicit bias (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Thus, stereotypes are relevant when considering career transitions.

### **Veteran Career Transitions: Challenges and Opportunities**

As of 2021, 18.8 million Americans qualified for veteran status; accounting for 8 percent of the U.S. population (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Although career transitions for veterans are similar in many ways to other job sectors, there are several challenges that veterans have in addition. Their challenges have been discussed extensively in the literature (see Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021 for a detailed review), but a few are worth noting here.

In the past, negative stereotypes of veterans were aligned with the public’s opposition to participation in a war (e.g., Vietnam War) (Stone et al., 2018; Parrott et al., 2019). By contrast, contemporary negative stereotypes about veterans appear to be based on the potential war-related physical and/or psychological problems veterans might experience (Keeling et al., 2019; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014, Parrott et al., 2019). Stories of violent behavior of former combat veterans appear in the news and lead some to fear or avoid veterans (White et al., 2016). In addition, increased attention to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compounds the prevalence of negative stereotypes (Stone et al., 2018). Negative stereotypes are further propagated by a lack of understanding of military culture, and a lack of employers’ knowledge about

jobs, skills, and certifications obtained in the military (Parrott et al., 2019; Stone & Stone, 2015; Stone et al., 2018). The limited research conducted in the area of veteran employment suggests that stereotypes may be a factor in their higher rates of unemployment (Shepherd et al., 2019). In fact, hiring managers are more likely to be resistant to considering veterans, and less likely to consider their military training to have resulted in skills that can transition to the civilian workplace (Opengart, 2021). Further, due to the strong collective group identity of the military, veterans may have trouble advocating for themselves individually in terms of selling their skills to potential employers (Opengart, 2021). Therefore, it is important for HR professionals to recognize this potential issue and proactively attempt to mitigate the use of negative stereotypes.

SIT is a helpful lens for understanding the career transition process. SIT posits that career transitions require people to cognitively shift their self-perceptions as an out-group member to that of an in-group member (Yates, 2017). Haynie and Shepherd (2011) utilized case studies of traumatically injured war veterans to better understand how such veterans transitioned from a military career in which they had envisioned long-term employment, to an entrepreneurial role. The authors defined this as a “discontinuous” career transition, as opposed to a more linear, incremental (protean) transition, such as traditional students transitioning from school to the professional workforce. Veterans who transitioned more successfully were more likely to cognitively link the competencies gained from the military with those needed in their new role. These competencies included not only knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also coping competencies. In contrast, those who did not transition successfully were more likely to be dismissive about the ability of their competencies to transfer to a new occupation, even after training. Thus, being able to shift one’s identity from one occupation to a completely different one appears to be important. Yates (2017) referred to this as the ability to imagine the *possible self*.

### **Student Career Transitions: Challenges and Opportunities**

SIT and the development of a professional identity has also been linked to the career transition process for students (Burlison et al., 2021). According to Burlison et al. (2021), the development of a strong professional identity should be a component of any professional program of study. They posit that the role of higher education is to provide opportunities to promote student participation in professional identity development programs. The development of entry level skills has traditionally been offered through firsthand experiences such as internships, cooperative partnerships, or service-learning (Harris, 2016). When students do not have real world experiences, potential employers may feel they are unable to pivot from college to the workforce (Chavan & Carter, 2018). Learning about one’s profession (e.g. through coursework) and the development of a professional identity (e.g. through a program outside coursework) should occur simultaneously to be fully effective (Pratt et al., 2006).

Substantial research has examined the process of students transitioning from school to the workforce (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Klehe et al., 2021). Previous studies have used various career development theories to research student career transitions. These include, but are not limited to, Holland’s theory of vocational personalities in the work environment, social cognitive career theory, the self-concept theory of career development, and career construction theory’s full model of adaptation (Kim & Beier,

2020; Savickas et al., 2018; Burluson et al., 2021). The career development theories explain how people assess fit with certain careers, and identify tools, education, and methods used to adapt during the career transition process. Furthermore, career development theory encompasses career adaptability which is the ability to cope and be prepared for both predictable and unpredictable adjustments associated with changes at work and the work environment (Savickas, 1997). More recently, Donald et al. (2018) used career ecosystem theory stemming from career theory to explain student career perceptions of how university has prepared them for the global labor market.

Few researchers have considered SIT as a lens for understanding the role of the students' identity in their career development as they transition to the workforce. Ng and Feldman (2007) specified two important role identities necessary for a successful transition: the student role and the worker role. Similar to the military transition research above (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011), students must conceptualize that their current knowledge, skills, and abilities can transfer into their desired work role. Although social identity as a student may be strong, the transition process is likely less challenging for students than it is for veterans. Given that it is society's expectation as part of the maturation process that young people will inevitably transition from being students into being productive working adults, there are many structural supports for this transition. The challenge is for employers and educators to identify good, effective yet efficient learning opportunities that will help students practice the skills they need for successful transition (Klehe et al., 2021).

### **The Veteran's Resume Project and the Present Study**

The Veterans Resume Project was conducted at a Veterans Administration Domiciliary (VA DOM) in a large Midwestern city. A domiciliary is a veteran's medical care facility where patients are housed for a variety of reasons for an extended period of time (e.g. weeks or months). At this VA DOM, ninety-five percent of the veterans looking to transition out of the VA system were unable to find full time employment, became homeless, and then ended up back in the VA DOM within six months. This vicious cycle was difficult for the veterans, the VA DOM employees, and utilized resources (e.g. societal & VA). Therefore, gaining full time, permanent employment was extremely important to the long-term health and welfare of program participants. Many veterans who had previously not received assistance with the job search process were discharged from the facility, became homeless, and returned to the VA DOM to repeat their treatment. The Veterans Resume Project was conducted from 2012 through 2020 and was initiated by the first author through a large Midwestern university. There were two goals: 1) to assist local veterans in their employment search, and 2) to offer students real world experience applying HR skills.

The students in the service-learning course were all HR students and met monthly at the VA DOM to work one-on-one with the veterans to assist with job search preparation and skills. Service-learning is a type of experiential learning in which students engage in structured, applied projects that promote learning and development, and at the same time, address human and community needs (Dumas, 2002). Students were tasked with helping veterans develop resumes, write cover letters, apply for jobs through online application systems, and acquire full-time civilian jobs. Such employment

would allow veterans to support themselves and transition out of the VA system as their primary means of support.

Prior to joining the Veterans Resume Project, students were required to complete an 8-hour training course designed to aid their understanding of veterans' unique experiences, needs, and challenges. While some students had family members who were veterans, most had no prior knowledge of veterans and their experiences, the military, or the skills acquired while in the service. This training was offered in two parts: Part one focused on military acumen (e.g. acronyms, ranks), for the students needed this knowledge to successfully assist the veterans. This training also included topics such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military certifications and how they might translate to the civilian workforce, and an introduction to the online search engines focused on military to civilian transition. Another key topic was battlefield experiences that could potentially lead to physical and psychological problems for war veterans.

Part two of the training covered detailed job interview techniques specifically geared toward veterans. Building on the information offered in the first part of the training, and then moving on to specific project steps, was key to success. The goal of this portion of the training was for students to become comfortable extensively interviewing veterans on their backgrounds and using the gathered information to coach them on job search skills. To do so, students took turns practicing interviewing each other while working with example veteran resumes. Detailed feedback was exchanged between the students and the professor until training was complete. If needed, additional training was offered until all students felt confident in their understanding. A total of 242 veterans and 112 students participated in the Veterans Resume Project.

## **Method**

### ***Study Design***

To best understand participants' perceptions and experiences, we used a qualitative interpretive study design (Green & Thorogood, 2004). This approach was chosen because interpretive approaches focus on participants' interpretations of their experiences rather than trying to measure some objective reality. Prior to beginning this research IRB approval was obtained.

### ***Participants***

Upon completion of the service-learning course, students who had successfully completed the course were contacted via e-mail to participate in this research. E-mails were sent at the conclusion of each semester. A total of 112 students were invited to participate, 32 responded favorably to the invitation, and the final sample consisted of 25 undergraduate students, 14 men and 11 women. Their ages ranged from 20 – 27, and all were majoring in HR.

All veterans who participated in the Veterans Resume Project were invited in person to participate. This occurred at the completion of each semester as was the case with the students. Nineteen participated in the final sample including 17 men and 2 women; their ages ranged from 30 – 58, and their average tenure in the military was 17 years. In keeping with IRB protocols, the research, procedures, and informed consent

process were described to each participant. Prior to interviews all participants completed the informed consent document.

### ***Procedure***

The first and third authors conducted in-depth interviews in order to enable participants to reflect on their experiences while telling meaningful stories (Rovers et al., 2011). Interviews of the veterans and students were conducted on site at the VA DOM and lasted between 60-90 minutes. The interview questions were developed based on the literature surrounding career development. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the questions are noted below A. A total of 264 pages of transcribed data were included in the study.

### ***Interview Questions for Participants***

1. Why did you initially join the Veterans Resume Project?
2. What did you gain out of this project (experience)? Please give as many examples as possible.
3. As a volunteer (participant) in the Veterans Resume Project, can you share a high point moment from your experience? Why would you consider this a high point?
  - A. Probe: Can you share a story when you felt a strong sense of purpose while working on this project? Specifically, what aspects of this project do you like? Dislike?
4. (Based on your observation) When do other volunteers (vets) in this project feel most engaged or passionate? Please share an example.
5. What challenges did you face while working on the Veterans Resume Project with the veterans (students)?

### ***Analysis***

Data were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach (Green & Thorogood, 2004). This approach was chosen because it identifies recurrent themes through repeated examination and comparison. The central focus of content analysis is the development of meaning, intentions, consequences, and context surrounding data.

The content analysis process proceeded through four steps, conducted by the first and second authors, in order to demonstrate validity. Prior to analysis, member checking was completed with all participants to ensure the transcribed data were correct and captured their intended meaning. No changes were required. Each of the two participant groups was analyzed separately at first using the below referenced steps and then cross analyzed to assess similarities. During the first analysis step, the first two authors read the transcripts independently to get a sense of the over-arching experiences the participants described. Second, we discussed each transcript, the major codes we initially saw, and what criteria should be used to assign each sentence fragment to a particular major code. Example codes and comments noted during this stage included: Helping others “I really enjoyed being helpful” (added to the meaningfulness theme), important discussions “We really spent time talking about their experience” (added to the coaching skills theme) and practice “You can’t do this in the classroom” (added to the context specific HR skills theme). We discussed those that we



disagreed upon until consensus was reached. Next, we independently conducted open coding to define and characterize the major themes; then fragments (phrases) were coded into the identified themes independently. Again, any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. The authors met a total of five times until a final list of themes was established and both researchers agreed. Themes that appeared to be recurring most frequently were identified (Green & Thorogood, 2004) (Table 1).

## **Results**

Our analysis identified two general categories of experience: Career development and personal growth. Career development was divided into the following themes: coaching skills and context specific HR skills (e.g. working with student coaches; working with veterans). Each of these categories and themes emerged from both students and veterans and is analyzed through the perspective of both groups. From the student perspective, career development includes skills that are directly related to student HR coursework and could be directly transferable to the workplace. From the veteran perspective, career development focused on the methods, tools, and means that a veteran might use to seek civilian employment.

The personal growth category emerged from both the student and veteran perspective as well, and was divided into the following themes: meaningfulness, increased self-efficacy, identity shifting, and stereotypes of others. We offer exemplars for each theme and table 1 offers a summary of the categories, themes, and their definitions.

**Table 1. Study Categories, Themes, Definitions, and Exemplars (Students & Veterans)**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>
Career development- refers to the process of choosing a career, improving one's skills, and advancing along a career path	Context specific HR skills	Knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom that can be applied in a real-world job situation.	<i>I read about interviewing in class but, saw how important it was in this program (student). I am ready for an interview now (veteran).</i>
	Coaching	Advice and guidance intended to help develop the individual's skills, performance, and professional career.	<i>I helped him to see his potential (student). Now I get how my military certs [certifications] can be used outside (veteran).</i>
Personal growth – involves the personal impact from participation in the program.	Meaningfulness	Having purpose or finding significant value in an experience.	<i>This was the best experience in college by far (student). I feel like I can be useful again (veteran).</i>
	Self-efficacy	Belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or tasks.	<i>I know I can do this in the real world (student). I was so proud of my resume (veteran).</i>
	Stereotypes of others	A preconceived notion about a group of people.	<i>I thought they all had issues [problems] (student). They were nicer and more understanding than I thought before (veteran).</i>
	Shifting Identities	Shift from current professional identity to a new identity.	<i>I wasn't sure about my future but, now I can see myself in a career (student). I can be a civy (civilian) worker. I know I can now (veteran).</i>

### **Career Development**

Our analysis first demonstrated the importance of students and veterans being able to actively engage in their own career development, and the coaching aspect of the Veterans Resume Project appears to be key. As noted above, career development refers to the process of choosing a career, improving one's skills, and advancing along

a career path. It is a lifelong process of learning and decision-making, which brings an individual toward the goal of their ideal job, skillset, and lifestyle. How these experiences manifested for each participant varied, but ultimately the learning that occurred was based on the opportunity to *practice* within a real environment. The career development category was further delineated into two themes noted below.

**Context specific HR skills.** The coaching process proved to be of great value for both the veterans and the students, as all were able to practice interviewing, writing (resumes & cover letters), and applying for actual positions. For example, the act of interviewing individuals beyond classroom exercises was completely new to the students. Interviewing skills, and the ability to effectively assess the background and abilities of potential applicants, is a foundational skill for HR professionals and difficult to acquire solely through the classroom (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2006). The interview process often requires an element of detective work, where the interviewer listens carefully for clues about skills the resume may not clearly articulate. There also can be a learning curve on the part of the interviewer, because context specific acronyms, job titles, and certifications might be completely foreign to students (or interviewers). The interviews allowed students to practice what a majority of the students (n=22) previously saw as challenging real-world experiences (e.g. working with veterans) and learn what questions to ask in order to solicit the most beneficial information. For example,

*“Discussing their skills, their experiences, and what they did in the military got them to come up with tasks that they did while on these jobs [military] and helped to fill in the empty spaces on their resume” (Student 5).*

*“I found many of the vets had no idea how much experience they had in the military and how valuable it might be in general society” (Student 13).*

The interviews were also beneficial for the veterans. They gained insight into the types of questions they might be asked by a potential employer and had an opportunity to craft their responses in the most effective way. For example,

*“He [the student] told me what it was like to do on an interview. The types of questions he was asked and how valuable it was to practice interviewing. He said that practice made perfect for him and he learned from each interview he went on. He also told me how terrified he was to be rejected. That really helped me. I am not the only person who is afraid clearly” (Veteran 5).*

*“In the military we have our own language which people on the outside might not understand. She [the student] told me to use real language when explaining things to an interviewer and not to use all those letters” (Veteran 9).*

**Coaching skills.** For an HR professional, coaching is a training method in which a more experienced or skilled individual provides another employee with advice and guidance intended to help develop the individual's skills, performance, and/or advance in their professional career (Lin et al., 2016). During a coaching session, the coach works closely with the coached individual to understand their professional aspirations

and to help them understand how their skills fit into specific occupations or organizations, to help the individual make transitions, and advance in an organization or field. This may require the coach facilitating an occupational identity shift in the coached worker.

The Veterans Resume Project focused on the career potential of the veterans, and often this was thought provoking for both the students and veterans. Student understanding of the military careers of the veterans was important as the students worked to match veterans with appropriate careers, companies, or open positions. For example, according to the students,

*“These vets are so down on themselves, but what they don’t realize, is how marketable they actually are. They have skills that employers would really be interested in. So, as HR people in the real world we might deal with people who at first don’t seem marketable. Sometimes we just need to take the time to learn a bit more about them” (Student 11).*

Some veterans also had a very difficult time understanding how their military background might transfer to the civilian world. However, through the project process they began to see the connections and how the military experience could be used as a career development opportunity.

*“I had all these certificates that were expired in the military. I worked really hard to get them, but they expired a long time ago. So, since they weren’t current, I just forgot about them. He [the student] told me they still would be important to an employer because I had worked for and achieved a goal. Interesting” (Veteran 1).*

### **Personal Growth**

Personal growth refers to those experiences that went beyond the career-oriented skills practice and impacted the participants on a deeply personal level. Beyond the applied HR experiences, the students and veterans appeared to acquire a great deal in terms of personal growth. The personal growth category was broken into four themes: meaningfulness, self-efficacy, identity shifting, and stereotypes of *others*.

**Meaningfulness.** Meaningful work involves engaging in work that is personally meaningful, supports personal growth, and contributes to the common good (Allan et al., 2017). To varying degrees, meaningfulness of the project was clearly an important aspect of the experience for all participants. For some students, the experience was meaningful because of their work with veterans; for other students and veterans, the experience shattered assumptions or stereotypes about each other. Still other participants (students and veterans) discovered meaning surrounding their own self-image (e.g. their view of their own current or future ability). Students provided examples where they felt personally satisfied seeing the progress made by the veterans,

*"I get such a high from working with the vets. After I leave, I think about the people I met, who I worked with, and the conversations. It is so fulfilling to see the looks on their faces when we finish their resume and print it out" (Student 11)*  
*"It may sound corny, but you leave here feeling like you have done something. You have been productive and helped someone with their life" (Student 3).*

Veterans also found meaning in the experiences, noted they found new friends, and felt the students truly cared about their struggles. Many expressed that they felt "heard."

*"He [the student] told me about his struggle finding a job. I thought he would have an easy time finding jobs because he is a college boy, but he had a tough time too. We talked about being rejected, giving up, and ideas to find jobs. I don't know if you are a religious person, but he was like an angel to me right when I needed to hear that" (Veteran 2).*

**Self-efficacy.** Our analysis also found a number of examples where the self-efficacy of the participant may have increased through the Veterans Resume Project. Self-efficacy is belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or tasks (Combs & Luthans, 2007). One's sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges (Bandura, 1977; Combs & Luthans, 2007, Kao et al., 2020). Examples of self-efficacy were evident among students and veterans. For example, one student stated with respect to his being able to coach the veteran through the process,

*"I gained experience doing things that we just practiced in classes. That was really a scary process at first for me but then I realized I could actually do this. When I go out there in the real world, I really think I will be a bit more prepared to do this" (Student 1).*

Some of the veterans demonstrated increased self-efficacy as well. For example,

*"The vets are tough to wake up. We are beaten down, we have lots of problems, we are afraid of living on the street again. I would say the most awake I have seen them (vets) is when they print out their resume and walk down the hall with it" (Veteran 2).*

Often the veterans would return to visit the students even after they had completed the project in order to share their good news with the student who had helped them.

*"It was a great feeling of accomplishment when a veteran would come back to tell us they had gotten a job" (Student 12).*  
*"I just couldn't wait to tell her [the student] I got a job. We were in that [job search] together" (Veteran 3).*

**Shifting identities.** This theme refers to instances where participants demonstrated examples where they began to shift from their current professional identity (e.g. student or veteran) to a new identity (e.g. HR professional or civilian worker). Such insights were demonstrated by more veterans (n = 10) than students (n = 8). For example, students demonstrated the shift from their role as a student and envisioned themselves in a professional career.

*“Now I can’t wait to start my career. Now [after the project] I know I can work in HR” (Student 10).*

Some veterans also demonstrated an openness to shifting their professional identities:

*“I am going to look into the construction field. It makes sense to me because I did that in the Navy” (Veteran, 18).*

*“Maybe I can be truck driver? I drove large trucks in the Army. I just need to get my CDL license” (Veteran, 16).*

**Stereotypes of others.** At the inception of the project, both groups appeared to have preconceived stereotypes (positive and negative) about the other group, and some expressed surprise to learn their initial stereotypes were possibly incorrect. Only 3 participants (students) expressed positive stereotypes about the other group, and both groups expressed initial negative stereotypes. For example, from the students (n = 22),

*“I heard veterans often have criminal backgrounds” (Student 1).*

*“I heard they all have PTSD and that can’t be fixed. So why anyone would go into the military and end up that way? I have no idea?” (Student 9).*

Negative stereotypes from the veterans with respect to students was also quite prevalent (n = 19).

*“These are college students. They have money, cars, great lives, and really don’t know us at all. Why should they care about us” (Veteran 4)?*

*“I assumed all college students are not nice, and [are] snobby” (Veteran 8).*

What was particularly interesting were the examples where negative stereotypes, held either by students or veterans, shifted based on the service-learning experience.

*“I didn’t know about military people before. All I learned about them was from the news and I thought they were homeless drug addicts. I learned so much from hearing their stories and they are not as bad as I had heard” (Student 3).*

Veterans also demonstrated stereotyping shifts.

*“He [student] treated me like a human being. He looked at me with respect. He took the time to listen to me, make suggestions, and tell me about his own job search issues. I was really surprised how kind he was to me and seemed to actually care about my goal” (Veteran 2).*

## **Discussion**

The aim of the present study was to examine the impact of career development activities on two groups, military veterans and students, in the context of a service-learning project, and to consider these impacts through the lens of SIT. This is the first study using SIT as a lens to examine these two groups and the results offer two key contributions to the SIT and career transition literatures. First, we contribute to the career transition literature, particularly for military veterans, and qualitatively demonstrate the “how and why” this might link with social identity social identity (e.g. specifically identity shifting) may play a role in their career transition process. Second, we contribute to the stereotype/implicit bias literature by demonstrating how negative assumptions about groups might be mitigated by encouraging distinctly different populations to work together and re-categorize others in a more positive light. We also offer insight into ways individuals might re-categorize themselves. The results also offered surprising insight into how a career development and coaching activity could serve as a mechanism to help those making career transitions to expand their professional identities.

## **Career Transition and Identity Shifting**

Relevant to the first research question guiding this study, the findings demonstrate the importance of examining how individuals may shift their identity in the career transition process. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of an individual’s identity and how this links with one’s career (Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). An identity *shift* was certainly evident within the student sample, where several began to see themselves more as HR professionals and less as college students. However, for students, the shift was less drastic and appeared to be more easily accepted by the participants. This might be because students are often passive consumers of information and understand their role as a student is to become a professional upon graduation (Ng & Feldman, 2007). They often spend their years as an undergraduate preparing for the transition through internships or classroom activities. Therefore, the process of shifting from a student identity to a workforce identity might be a more natural shift.

However, the identity shift for the veterans appeared to be more dramatic and surprising to both groups of participants. The student participants began to see the skills and abilities of the veterans and how they would transfer to the civilian workforce. The veterans saw the empathy of the students and through conversation began to see their own ability to successfully transition beyond the military. This ability to shift will be key to the success of both groups, but especially for the veterans. Previous research has demonstrated a strong interconnectedness between a veteran’s sense of self and their career success (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). Veterans often strongly identify with the military even after they have left the service (Hamner, 2019) and the termination of their military career can challenge their self-identity; making them feel alienated, hopeless,

and full of despair. To an extent, those leaving the military might go through a grieving process on *what once was* and be unable to see *what might be* in the future. Haynie and Shepherd (2011) describe those transitioning out of the military as individuals going through a discontinuous career transition where the traditional methods of career exploration might not be appropriate.

Most previous research on military veterans has focused on the impact of their individual differences and how such differences might predict a successful transition to the civilian workforce. Individual differences are important; however, it is also important for veterans to *visualize* themselves beyond the military in order to successfully transition (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). This research extends SIT by demonstrating the importance of identity shifting and not simply recognition of an established social identity (e.g. an established self- categorization which is static). Currently SIT does not address how individuals progress toward an identity shift; however, these data demonstrate identity shift might be especially relevant to groups which possess particularly strong group identities (e.g. military veterans) and often find themselves *frozen* in an identity and unable to transition to a new career.

We also offer additional empirical support to the career transition literature and the challenges experienced by veterans (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). We extend on this research to demonstrate how a veteran own self- image might be an additional challenge which should be examined. This is especially relevant for two reasons. First, many veterans experience trauma during their military service, and previous research has demonstrated trauma to be a subsequent career constraint (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). Second, the socialization process of the military is designed to develop a self-identity which is strongly aligned with the military (Budd, 2007; Hale, 2008; Lande et al., 2007).

### **Career Transition and Stereotypes**

Another very interesting contribution from this study was the shifting of stereotypes: that is, the reduction of negative stereotypes based on two very different groups of individuals working together with a common goal. These findings support research question one again. Both students and veterans expressed that their initial assumptions about the other changed the more they talked and shared experiences. These one-on-one conversations between the two groups, the sharing of challenges, opportunities, and stories seemed to be key to the process of seeing the reality of the *other*. Through such conversations the negative stereotypes seemed to dissipate, and the potential and value of the *other* were more apparent.

Certainly, these findings are in line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) which proposed personal experience with a stereotyped group would minimize any negative stereotypes individuals might have about another group of individuals (Schreiber et al., 2014). However, we propose our findings are unique because we examine two distinct groups of individuals who probably would not necessarily have experience working together in most situations unless compelled to do so. Therefore, relevant to the second research question, we extend SIT (Tajfel, 1978) and demonstrate the categorization process is malleable at the group level. Through this experience the two groups were able to see the other as less of an outgroup member by re-categorizing them through the coaching conversations. Such experiences might apply to



other groups which might not cross paths. Stereotypes in organizations can be challenging and might be present between individuals from different cultures, different generations, or in different disciplines (e.g. accounting vs. marketing). An experience such as the coaching activity utilized in this study might therefore be of value to organizations seeking to *break down* some of the *us* against *them* which is in many organizational cultures.

### **Practical Implications**

The Veterans Resume Project has had a notable impact on both the veterans and the students. These findings support research question three. Since the inception of the program, 119 of the total 242 veterans found full-time employment. This equates to a 49 percent success rate (veterans who participated in Veterans Resume Project) which stands in stark contrast to the previous 2 percent success rate prior to the Veterans Resume Project. The impact on the students has also been significant, and many have continued to be involved with the project as volunteers after their course ended. Students developed listening and coaching skills, found their way through often difficult conversations, guided veterans through a reflective process on their skills, and developed their own HR competencies. The experience gave the students a level of understanding of the context of veteran experiences (e.g. life in the military, certification, war experience) which may motivate them to actively seek veterans for positions in their future organizations (Opengart, 2021).

The findings of this research demonstrate how social identities and perceived stereotypes can possibly be changed through career development programs. Our data demonstrate methods organizations could use to integrate groups (e.g. underrepresented minorities, disabled) into their workforce. Such approaches could potentially be adapted to other reentry populations (e.g. mothers reentering the workforce, ex-offenders). These groups are often hindered in their job search by negative stereotypes and also the dramatic changes in the employment process (e.g. technological changes) since they were last employed.

Perhaps rather than simply teaching veterans how to apply for jobs in the civilian world they need to be coached on how to develop a new occupational identity, (i.e., to visualize themselves in an occupational role outside the military). Instruction on how to shift their social identity when they are seeking civilian employment is not included in career transition programs, and not examined in the literature. Through this study's coaching opportunities, veterans began to visualize themselves in the civilian workforce and develop a new self-narrative. Research has demonstrated one's narrative repertoire (or their own story of who they are) can be adjusted through feedback from others (Ashforth et al. 2001; Ibarra, 2004; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Through conversations with students, the veterans were able to revise their self-narratives and begin to develop a new role identity in the civilian workforce. These coaching sessions gave new insight into their abilities, how their military skills might be transferable into the civilian workforce and offered them a new positive understanding of their military experiences. Veterans who were able to see themselves through a new identity were the most successful in transitioning to a new civilian role (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011).

## **Future Research & Limitations**

Future research might consider a pre/post-test design in order to capture the degree of impact through the career development experience on both student and veteran participants regarding stereotypes, self-efficacy, and job search knowledge. Another area worth consideration might assess similar projects on other populations with strong social identities and those who might have difficulty shifting careers. We propose studying of mechanisms that might influence individuals to shift their identities toward new careers. Saks and colleagues (1994) note the importance of “anticipatory socialization” where new employee expectations on the new position might be set (or we posit reset) prior to beginning a new job or career.

## **Conclusion**

The Veteran Administration is challenged to find adequate support for veterans transitioning from military to civilian employment. However, many of the traditional career development mechanisms are not adequate to successfully assist veterans in their move to full time employment. We propose career development programs assisting veterans should seek ways to assist them in shifting their social identity as part of the career development process. Such programs may have other benefits, such as the mitigation of stereotypes, and be of value to other groups that have difficulty transitioning from one career to another. This research offers ways to bridge a number of gaps in the career transition literature and offers ways SIT might offer insight into a unique population.

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