

RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 262

■ Reculturation: A new perspective on military-civilian transition stress

AUTHORS:

Jeremy S. Joseph, Lorraine Smith-MacDonald, Meg C. Filice & Matthew S. Smith

SOURCE: Military Psychology**DATE:** 2022**LINK:** <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08995605.2022.2094175>**KEYWORDS:** veterans, suicide prevention, military-civilian gap, reintegration, acculturation, belonging**ABSTRACT:**

“Various forms of assistance are offered to help US veterans achieve success in their post-military lives in recognition of their service. Despite the many successes, a significant number of veterans continue to remain at risk for negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality and low levels of life satisfaction. These findings may be due to challenges arising from cultural identity dissonance. Problematic strategies used by veterans to reduce this dissonance can result in a lack of belongingness, a key component in Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. The authors suggest that research on the immigrant experience of acculturation may provide a new perspective to better understand issues of identity and sense of belonging in veterans. Given that most veterans return to the culture in which they grew up, the authors offer the term “reculturation.” The authors propose clinical psychology focus on exploring the reculturation process of veterans to support program engagement and suicide prevention.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- This article underscores that despite available support, many U.S. veterans face negative mental health outcomes during civilian transition, potentially due to cultural identity dissonance. Acknowledging and addressing these identity-related challenges is vital for improving assistance programs and suicide prevention efforts for veterans.
- The authors highlight the significant challenges veterans encounter in transitioning from military to civilian life, emphasizing the role of cultural identity dissonance in affecting their sense of belonging and mental health outcomes. Recognizing and addressing these issues is essential for enhancing support systems and promoting successful reintegration into civilian society.
- This article suggests that veterans experiencing cultural identity dissonance may resort to problematic coping mechanisms, such as divisive “us vs. them” judgments, exacerbating their sense of not belonging.
- Highlighting the experiences that immigrants and veterans share in common, the authors suggest drawing insights from immigrant acculturation research. Adopting psychologically informed strategies, like “reculturation,” can assist veterans in navigating identity transitions and fostering belongingness crucial for their well-being and successful reintegration. Comparisons also highlight the critical impact of acculturation strategies on the mental health and life satisfaction of immigrants and veterans.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Understanding the diverse acculturation strategies of veterans, which range from separationist to integrationist approaches, is crucial for developing tailored evidence-based interventions to address cultural identity dissonance during the military-civilian transition. By recognizing and respecting these varying strategies, mental health providers can design interventions that are sensitive to veterans' cultural backgrounds and preferences. This involves prioritizing culturally informed approaches that not only acknowledge but also actively support veterans' unique reculturation journeys.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers play a vital role in supporting the successful transition of veterans into civilian life, and it's imperative for them to acknowledge the profound impact of cultural identity during this process. By recognizing the significance of cultural identity, policy makers can allocate resources and develop targeted interventions that promote reculturation and foster a sense of belongingness among veterans. Moreover, policy initiatives aimed at reducing the alarming rates of suicide among veterans must incorporate strategies to address cultural identity dissonance. By enhancing integrationist approaches that encourage veterans to embrace both their military and civilian identities, policy makers can create environments that foster positive mental health outcomes and reduce the risk of suicide. Policy makers have a crucial role in recognizing and supporting the cultural identity needs of veterans during the transition process. By allocating resources and implementing targeted interventions, they can promote reculturation, reduce cultural identity dissonance, and ultimately improve the mental health and well-being of veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research in the field of veteran well-being should prioritize delving deeper into the intricate relationship between acculturation strategies and various well-being outcomes. Moreover, there is a pressing need for the development and validation of assessment tools tailored to the unique experiences of veterans during the reculturation process. One such tool could be a bimodal screener, designed to identify and categorize veterans' reculturation strategies effectively. By employing rigorous research methodologies and innovative assessment tools, researchers can advance our understanding of how acculturation strategies influence veterans' well-being outcomes. This, in turn, can inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing mental health and life satisfaction among veterans transitioning to civilian life. Ultimately, such efforts can contribute significantly to improving the overall well-being and quality of life for veterans post-service.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Jeremy S. Joseph

San Francisco Veterans Affairs Healthcare System, San Francisco, California, USA

Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, California, USA

Jeremy.Joseph@VA.gov