

Millennial Combat Veterans: How Identity Shapes Experience in College



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*“The violence of combat assaults
psyches, confuses ethics and tests
souls.”*

Karl Marlantes, Vietnam Veteran & Author



Why is this work important?

- Over 2 million troops deployed since 2001
- Paucity of literature to inform practices related to the needs of contemporary student veterans
- Increasing number of combat veterans enrolling in college (survivability rate)
 - Prevalence of TBI/PTSD on campus
- Vulnerable population - 22 veterans per day commit suicide (US Veterans' Administration, 2013)

(Steve) 1985 - 2013
Gone, but not forgotten.



2012 Research Study

- Qualitative
- Semi-structured interview series
- Research Sites
 - Two Community Colleges in Massachusetts
- 19 Participants
- Research Question
 - How do combat veterans perceive their own identity, and what influence does this have on their experience in college? (Identity vs. Transition)

Participant Profiles

- Self-identified 'Combat Veteran'
- Enrolled during 2011-12 Academic Year
- At least one combat deployment prior to enrollment
- 17 Males, 2 Females
- Aged 22 - 49 years of age (mean = 31yrs.)
- Army (10), Navy (1), Air Force (4) Marines (4)
- 17 one tour, 1 two tours, 1 three tours of duty
- Pseudonym chosen by participant for confidentiality

“In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.” - Jose Narosky, Author



Emergent Themes

- Perception of Self
- Perception of Others
- Inferred Perception of Self
- Connections to other veterans



Perception of Self

“I’ve grown up because of it. That’s who you are. It’s in my cells. Yeah, you know, it becomes a part of you.” (Jason)

- Combat Veteran, Soldier (17/19)
- Changed person (19/19)
 - More disciplined, focused
 - Greater appreciation
- PTSD - Triggering events
 - Classroom Orientation
 - Crowds, Sounds, smells, actions

Perception of Others

- Deeply rooted in how they see themselves
- Younger students
 - Immature, Unappreciative, disrespectful
- Distracting, takes away from experience

“You have a privilege. You’re in school, and it’s a privilege. Don’t squander it. Don’t sit there and waste my time. I paid with blood, sweat and tears for my time here.” (Blacksheep)

Inferred Perception of Self

- Social construction of identity
- Interactions with non-veterans creates dynamic tension between self and inferred perception
- Killer, emotionally unstable
 - Self-disclosure, filtered conversations

“Have I killed people? Yeah, you’re damn right I have. But yeah, you didn’t learn about the school I helped build. The soccer field we made for the kids.”

(Nate)

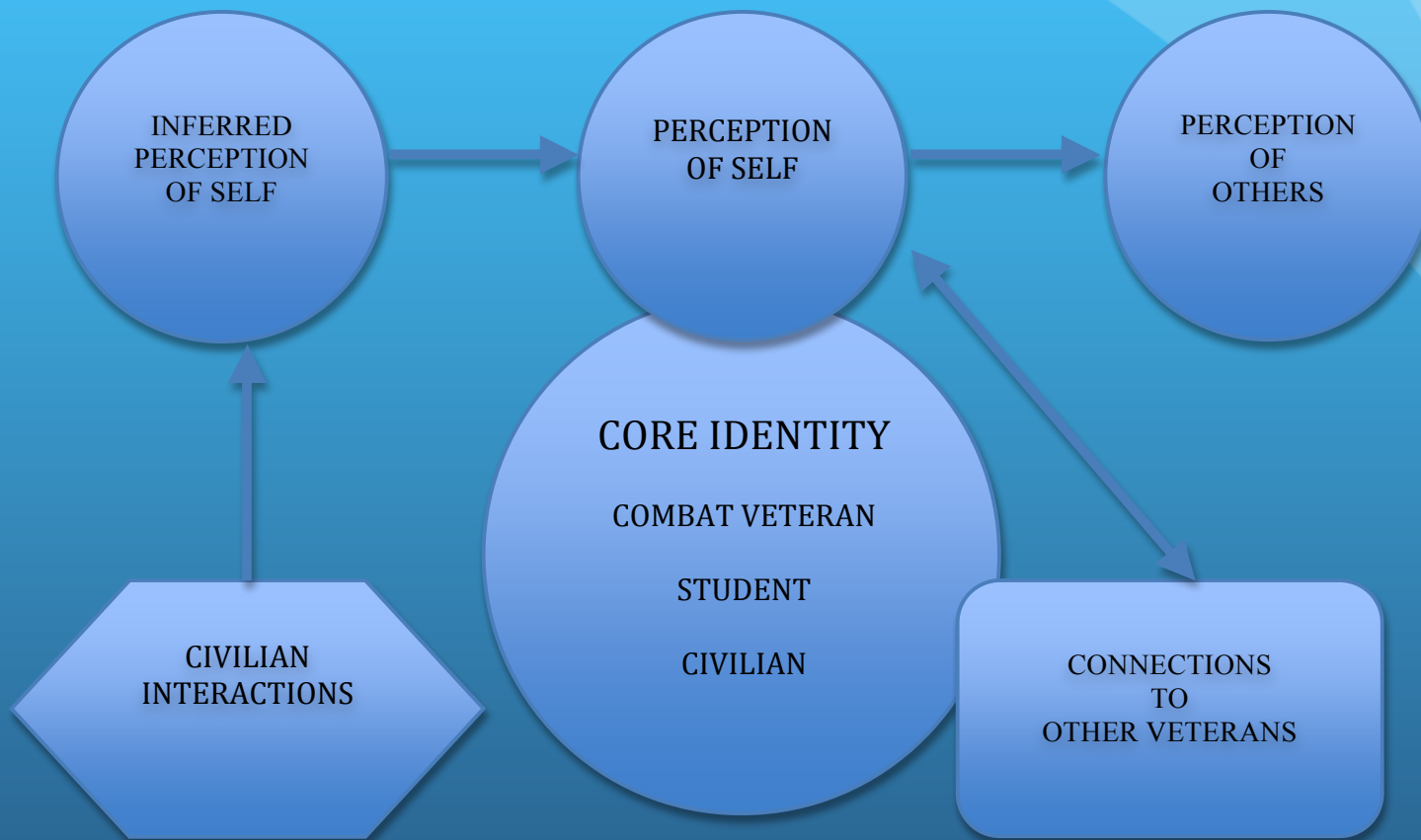
Connections to Other Veterans

- Common bond, unspoken understanding
- Comfort level, sense of safety
- Heightened sense of awareness to other veterans
- Seek out other veterans, look out for each other

“Being in the military, it’s different. It changes your thinking, the way you live, so it’s, to me, we’re all the same. I mean, that’s - it’s the brotherhood. I mean, I don’t care what branch you’re in, it’s brotherhood.”

(Andrew)

Figure 1: COMBAT VETERAN CONCEPTUAL IDENTITY MODEL



Excerpts from *WAR IS A DRUG*

“To this day I sometimes see the mortar on the side of the road exploding as though it’s happening all over again but the vision is opaque.”

“Far worse than seeing that on the roads while I am home is the boogie man that I have brought home with me. The black silhouette from up the ridgeline that I fired on now haunts me, I can see him from time to time when it’s dark out. It is as though he waits in the dark and watches me, never letting me forget my actions that April day. By far the most difficult thing about coming home was understanding how does a young man tell his mother that her little baby boy may have killed another human being.” (John)

Recommendations for Practice

- Professional Development Opportunities
- Awareness Programming for students
- Dedicated Space (safe haven)
- Enrollment/Advising Plan for Veterans
- Alternative Instruction - Hybrid models
- Opportunities for Self-authorship

Thank you!

Questions/Comments?

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