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**Difficult Life Transitions: Learning and Digital  
Technologies in the Military to Civilian  
Transition**

**A Literature Review**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This literature review explores some of the key elements of a specific research area – difficult life transitions. It does this within a specific context – the transition from military to civilian life and employment. Furthermore, it considers those in transition deploying specific activities – using digital technologies. When broken down into its constituent parts, this area covers at least three main themes, each of which has an extensive literature:

- Understanding transition;
- The military experience; and
- Using digital technologies during transition.

### 1.1 *Future for Heroes: background information*

To assist with the selection of a limited and more manageable range of literature related to each of these themes, it is useful to use the aims and objectives of the Future for Heroes (originally Remount)<sup>1</sup> course as a framework. A Future for Heroes course has up to 12 participants and runs from a Friday to Monday. It consists of a series of outdoor physical challenges that are connected to indoor discussion sessions which examine some strategies for making transition easier. Although the Future for Heroes programme includes several high profile and high impact experiential learning activities, it could be argued that its real value is found in the lower profile communication activities where participants can experience the benefits of talking about themselves and listening to the responses to these disclosures. The cumulative effect of the communication activities is to enable, often socially isolated, people to start the process of understanding their sense of self and how this relates to a set of circumstances which is changing significantly. At the core of the Future for Heroes philosophy is the belief that learning makes transition less difficult.

In most cases Future for Heroes helps participants:

- Articulate a clearer understanding of themselves – “I have never thought of myself in those terms”- *Identity*
- Become more confident about managing the military to civilian transition - “It’s knowing what to actually put on a civilian [curriculum vitae] CV that’s the problem” - *Agency*
- Identify and understand the challenges they face “I need to do some courses if I’m going to have a chance of the job I want” - *Structure*

Identity, agency and structure are three key concepts used in the literature in the understanding of transition, and these are extremely valuable as they do have clear links with Future for Heroes’ aims and objectives. However, before examining each of the three themes in turn, it is worth posing the question - just how difficult is the military to civilian transition?

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<sup>1</sup> Futures for Heroes was, prior to 2014, called Remount. This work was completed when Remount was described on its website as “a charity organisation serving the Armed Forces and Veterans of all ranks returning to civilian life” (The Remount Charity, 2014).

## 1.2 *How difficult is the military to civilian transition?*

Higate (2001) highlights some of the factors which could potentially make the military to civilian transition difficult, whilst also cautioning against overgeneralisation and stereotyping. One of his central concepts is the “tenacious military identity” which can serve as a major barrier to those undergoing “post-discharge resettlement”. However, the extent to which this might act as an obstacle depends on a number of variables including the branch of the armed services in which a person has served and their actual role within “the diverse military”. He suggests that some of the difficulties former service personnel experience in creating a satisfying and rewarding civilian life can probably be explained by structural factors such as age and experience rather than their military identity. Yet he also poses the central question - “might military service produce long-term characteristics that transcend the myriad of variables including age, military task, location of service, and so on?” (2001: 446).

Higate draws on previous work by Jolly (1996), who set out to answer the question of why a proportion of ex-service people “remain captives of their past”. Her research sample included those who had successfully left their military experiences and had transformed themselves into civilians, and those who continually thought of themselves as first and foremost ex-military. Higate argues that transition is experienced very differently depending on whether it is understood simply as an issue of employability or whether it is something operating at a far deeper emotional and psychological level. His view is that a military identity is more likely to be tenacious and act as a barrier when viewed from an emotional and psychological perspective rather than an employability one. Indeed, other research presented in this review presents the military to civilian transition as operating at a number of levels, with apparently unproblematic transitions taking place at one level, for instance finding a civilian job, whilst far more problematic transitions are occurring under the surface at an emotional level, which may not manifest themselves until many years after discharge. Consequently, it is necessary to analyse transition as a potentially complex rather than straightforward concept.



## 2. UNDERSTANDING TRANSITION

In an important and recent contribution to the understanding of transition, Ecclestone et al. (2010) draw attention to transition as an area of major policy concern as lives become less stable and predictable and people are required to create new lives for themselves far more frequently. They explain that transition is not just a transfer from one setting to another, but usually involves a change in identity too. And it is this change in identity which brings with it major emotional challenges that presents the major difficulty.

“Transition becomes problematic if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another” (2010: 9)

They conceptualise transition as a process of both “becoming” and “unbecoming”, where an exchange is made between what you were and what you now are. Transition can be difficult, therefore, if a person feels incapable of creating a new sense of self and/or is upset by the loss of what they once were. Transition is not always difficult, but can be uncomfortable for some and extremely challenging for others.

Ecclestone et al. warn against over-simplistic definitions of transition:

“it should come as no surprise that there is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes transition. Different practical and academic interests result in different conceptualisations and theories which, in turn, lead to different ideas about how to manage and support transitions” (2010: 5)

The chapters in their edited book, therefore, examine transition from a number of points of view, depending on the importance contributors attach to three key concepts: identity, agency and structure. (Participants on the Future for Heroes programme repeatedly refer to difficulties which can be placed under one or a combination of these concepts.)

### 2.1 *Identity*

Field (2012: 2) suggests that within the context of transition, identity is best defined in broad terms as having to do with sense of self, although he expands on this by also referring to identity as “a cluster of dispositions people have towards themselves”. The stress which transition places on a sense of self is a common theme within the literature. Hamilton (2010) has examined how groups who are faced with significant cultural transitions, such as highly educated and skilled migrants, can find their identities ‘lost in transition’ if their education and skills are not recognised in the new country. Their disposition towards themselves can be at odds with how people in the new country view them.

A key issue is whether identities automatically adapt to new sets of circumstances or whether deliberate steps need to be taken to construct a new, viable identity. With a background in adult learning theory, Field recognises that learning provides an appropriate opportunity and mechanism for creating the new identities which will assist people in navigating the life course, especially if this contains elements of biographical learning. In particular, he claims that adult courses provide a space designed to support transition, and Field’s concept of a

‘transition space’ is very similar to the notion of the ‘third space’ which is an essential part of the Future for Heroes /Brathay<sup>2</sup> learning philosophy.

‘Third spaces’ represent neutral zones between two worlds where different cultures and identities can meet to explore and reconcile their differences through dialogue story-telling, metaphor, theatre work, etc. (Gutierrez, 2008). In this sense, Future for Heroes offers a place which is neither wholly military nor civilian and where the issues of becoming civilian whilst also unbecoming military can be addressed. Metaphors play a particularly important role in the Future for Heroes programme and are used as a way of allowing a simple image to convey a complicated emotion, for example, “I feel that I’ve got a mountain to climb”. Bimrose and Brown (2010) have employed the metaphors of ‘anchors’ and ‘chains’ in their analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of possessing previously strong identities when experiencing transition. In one sense prior identities can be viewed positively as ‘anchors’ which provide stability and a degree of security during the process of new identity creation. But in another sense they can act negatively as ‘chains’ by trapping people in former roles and limiting their scope for change. There are similarities here with Higate’s notion of the “tenacious military identity” and Jolly’s interest in answering the question of why some ex-service people “remain captives of their past”.

## 2.2 Agency

Ecclestone et al. (2010: 9) view agency as the ‘ability or capacity for action’ and they also refer to Elder et al.’s (2003) conception of agency as the way an individual can manage their own life course. Whilst agency could be seen as power a person possesses in a fixed amount, Biesta and Tedder (2007) take a different stance and present agency as something not fixed but needing to be achieved in each new phase of a person’s life. They add that the ability to recreate agency, during and after a period of transition, partly depends on the successful use of agency in the past, and partly on whether one anticipates difficulty in exercising agency in the new situation. They note that although agency is

“acted out in the present....(it) is always located between the past and the future” (2007: 136)

This is a useful way of understanding agency in the context of military to civilian transition, for as will be discussed in a later section, one aspect of a particular type of military identity is the anticipation that ex-service people will struggle and be less successful as civilians than they were in the forces. This sense of loss of the ability to manage the world around them is particularly threatening to people who had gained considerable pride from their ability to “look after myself in hostile situations”.

Bimrose and Hearne (2012) use the distinct but complementary concepts of career resilience and career adaptability in their analysis of how career guidance professionals can help their clients feel more in control during major occupational upheaval and change, and these are particularly relevant to the experiences reported by Future for Heroes participants. Career resilience is a protective factor which enables individuals to survive the changes that could potentially disturb and damage their lives, and career resilience can be strengthened by gaining a better understanding of transitions as phases which are an increasingly common feature of modern life and not necessarily a consequence of personal failure. Career

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<sup>2</sup> Residential courses take place in Brathay Hall at Lake Windermere in Cumbria (Future for Heroes, 2014)

adaptability is not so much a state of mind but a set of decision making skills enabling individuals to determine the extent to which existing occupational skills are sufficient or need topping up, and clients can be introduced to techniques which enable them to map existing skills against requirements and to spot gaps.

### 2.3 *Structure*

If agency has to be re-achieved rather than transferred, it is possible that civilian structures could pose a problem for those used to operating in a highly regulated military structure which, to an extent, values the personal quality of fitting in and following instructions rather than making a constant series of individual decisions. For example, the Report of the Task Force on the Military Covenant (2010) draws attention to the differences which exist between the structures of military and civilian life and which can cause major problems for those moving between them, such as not paying sufficient attention to financial budgeting, paying bills on time and taking personal responsibility for registering with a general practitioner (GP). Furthermore, certain military occupations are open to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with low educational attainment, difficult school histories, etc. And although a successful military career might counteract these structural disadvantages, it is also possible that they could re-emerge on returning to civilian life.

### 2.4 *Capitals*

Another method which can be employed in understanding the dynamics of transition is the use of the concept of capitals, which in this context includes physical (body) capital as well as the more familiar human, social and cultural capitals. The composite term of identity capital (Bynner and Parsons, 2002) is also valuable in illustrating the combined value of possessing a set of different capitals.

As a metaphor, capital is useful when understanding military to civilian transitions as it refers to a stock of resources and is often readily understood by a group of people for whom having the right stock of resources or kit is fundamental to their performance of military tasks (Woodard and Jenkins, 2011). Field (2009) and Tett and Maclachlan (2007) have shown the value of adult education in enabling learners to manage the transitions in their lives by increasing their stock of human, social and cultural capitals. Tett and Maclachlan (2007) note the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital and use Baron et al.'s (2000) observation of the value of being connected to heterogeneous groups when explaining how adult education programmes provide learners with different networks in addition to the knowledge and skill content of the courses.

“This research has shown how bridging social capital has been developed through learners being at the centre of a range of new networks in relation to their tutors, other staff and fellow students” (2000: 163).

Similarly, Field (2009) has also noted how some people use adult learning as a deliberate attempt to increase their stocks of social as well as human capital.

Bynner and Parsons (2002) build on the work of Côté (1996) in using the concept of identity capital as a composite term covering human, social and cultural capitals. Their central argument is that those who possess high stocks of identity capital are usually more successful in managing changes in employment than those with smaller stocks. (Identity capital, therefore, has a similar meaning to agency and self-efficacy.) Warin (2013) also uses the notion of identity capital, although she views it as a sub-species of cultural capital and describes it as an ability to articulate a sense of 'self'. She notes that those with well-developed identity capital have accumulated this through discourse with a wide range of others, and this is potentially very significant for members of the armed services who tend to be reluctant to talk about private thoughts and emotions and who feel disconnected from civilian discourses (described by some Future for Heroes participants as "that touchy/feely stuff").

Although the term 'deficit model' is criticised when applied to adult learning, it can play a positive role in transition learning if participants view the term as referring to transition difficulties brought about by not possessing 'the right kit'. It is arguable that the 'third space' provided by Future for Heroes enables participants to ease the transition to becoming a civilian by presenting the challenges of this journey in terms that are initially viewed as more military than civilian, but which nevertheless increases in relevance for the civilian world. Future for Heroes can therefore be seen as a supply post where some old kit (physical capital) is handed in and replaced by the new kit (for example, social capital) that is needed for the next stage of the journey. Hence the importance of viewing transition from a military perspective.

### 3. THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE

A report by the National Audit Office (2007) outlined some of the structural factors which have the potential to make leaving the armed services difficult. They highlighted the obvious, but often overlooked, fact that by its very nature the length of military service means that most service personnel will require second or third careers before they reach the national retirement age. Other significant factors include the lack of transferability of some military skills, and the fact that some branches of the forces draw large numbers of their recruits from young people with educationally and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. They also note that those who had difficulty settling into military life and were early leavers, received less resettlement support than those with longer military careers.

Most studies and reports on leaving the military conclude that only a minority experience difficult transitions (Ashcroft Report, 2014). However, as has been discussed throughout this review, quantifying the number experiencing difficulty is problematic and rests on a number of assumptions about what constitutes transition, the length of time a person is regarded as being in transition, and whether resilient members of the armed forces actually report the difficulties they experience during transition.

#### 3.1 *Military identity*

Much of the literature attempts to analyse whether being in the armed services necessarily makes transition difficult and, if so, which aspects of the military experience are mostly responsible for this. For example, Woodward and Jenkins (2011) have studied transition from the perspective of military identities. Their view is that identity is not so much based on who you are but what you do - a set of practices rather than a set of personal attributes. Woodward and Jenkins propose that military identities are based on three key practices:

- i. the use of professional military skills;
- ii. the camaraderie required to function as an effective military unit; and
- iii. the experience of taking part in events of national or even global significance.

By employing this definition of identity, the logic of their analysis is that military to civilian transitions is potentially difficult for those who prefer their former military identity to their new civilian one, since the opportunity to take part in such practices is likely to be severely reduced after leaving the armed services. They add that even those who have directly transferable skills, such as in engineering or transport, can experience a challenge to their identity because they no longer exercise these skills in such extreme and hostile environments.

In a study which mainly focuses on why some ex-service people are drawn to rough sleeping, Higate (2010) suggests this is because it provides them with an opportunity to use their physical capital and survival skills and so keeps them in touch with an aspect of their military identity. Whilst cautioning against over-generalising, he noted that there were some amongst his sample of rough sleepers who were unable to find a role for their physical capital in modern labour markets and who were vulnerable because they “have little in the way of white-collar transferrable skills”.

### 3.2 *Resilience and emotional issues*

In an earlier section of the review, resilience, particularly career resilience, was presented as a valuable attribute. Adopting a different stance, McGarry et al. (2013) argue that military resilience can actually be counterproductive during periods of transition. They explain that from the start of their military training new recruits are moulded into resilient individuals capable of enduring the hardships of military life. They learn how to cope and to keep their emotions to themselves; in fact, they learn how ‘to soldier on’. Whilst this enables them to function within the armed services, such resilience can actually act as a problem after leaving since many are reluctant to seek help, especially emotional help, during their return to civilian life. (This could partly explain why there are differing views on the actual number who experience difficult transitions: in some cases it may be unreported.)

Understanding military to civilian transition as an emotional as well as an occupational issue helps to explain why a proportion of Future for Heroes participants refer themselves to the programme even though at the occupational level they appear to be functioning as a civilian. Hatch et al. (2012: 1048) draw attention to the special nature of the military experience:

“the military remains a unique example of an institution that demands a higher level of social integration than other organisations as part of its purpose... Leaving the military breaks these social ties partially or completely. Although there are many ways (via reunions, regimental associations, commemorations, close friendships and family links) by which some service leavers seek to maintain these ties over time, it is likely that for many they will weaken”.

Hatch et al. add that this loss of social embeddedness and group cohesion often leads to social isolation, and there is also a risk of this if former military personnel mainly mix with people with similar backgrounds. (Hence the stress in the Future for Heroes programme of creating civilian networks, for example, by joining local sports clubs.)

### 3.3 *Homelessness*

One of the most extreme forms of social exclusion is homelessness, and Johnson and Fitzpatrick’s (2012) study of multiple exclusion homelessness found that 14% of people in this category had served in the armed services, although not all in the United Kingdom (UK) forces. They concluded that whilst some of the reasons for homelessness could be associated with military experience, other factors were responsible too, such as vulnerabilities which were present even before entry to the armed services and later life crises such as bereavement and bankruptcy. However, they noted that former members of the military were likely to experience sustained or repeated periods of homelessness which could possibly be explained in terms of their reluctance to ask for help and their ability to cope with rough sleeping.

### 3.4 *The criminal justice system*

Whether moving from a military career leads to some personnel engaging in criminal behaviours and activity has been considered in some reports and studies. A report by the Howard League for Penal Reform (2011) examined some of the myths associated with military experience and the criminal justice system. The report presents data from Defence Analytical Services and Advice (2010) which points out that military veterans are, in fact, less likely to end up in prison than the general population. They also concluded that exposure to combat was not a significant factor explaining why some former members offend, with no single reason being responsible. However, they did note that offending behaviour tended to occur around 10 years after leaving the forces, which again suggests that the military to civilian transition can extend over quite a long period of time.

#### 4. USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES DURING TRANSITION

Although it has never been quantified precisely, a large proportion of Future for Heroes participants use some form of digital technology. This is mainly smartphones, but an increasing number are bringing ‘tablets’ to the course. The majority book their place on the course online and receive joining instructions by email. It is also apparent that the modern military uses digital technology across a wide range of occupations, and in addition to those who receive formal training in its use, others gradually accumulate skills in an informal way, and the younger participants build on the existing knowledge and skills they obtained at school. Whilst on the course, participants keep in touch with family and friends through text and email. When the course coincides with a major sporting event, the mobile telephones and tablets are used during breaks to keep up to date with scores. And indeed, former Future for Heroes participants have created their own Facebook site.

The value of the Future for Heroes course is that it provides a ‘third space’, where information and advice is exchanged, plans and concerns are discussed, and a cohesive, if temporary, community is created. But this community is temporary, and there is some evidence to suggest that for some the benefits of attending Future for Heroes do wear off in the subsequent weeks and months. This has been recognised by Future for Heroes who are in the process of establishing a network of mentors who will be available to support participants following the course. Hence, one of the purposes of this study is to investigate whether Future for Heroes’ positive outcomes could be enhanced and prolonged by using digital technologies to create a post-course, virtual ‘third space’ to encourage future learning, and there is evidence emerging from the study which points to the valuable role mentors might play within this.

There have been numerous reports focusing on whether digital technologies could be used to support people making career transitions, for example, Passey and Davies (2009), and Hooley et al. (2010). They have noted the increasing opportunities for using digital technologies to provide information, advice and guidance, especially since the increase in widespread availability of mobile technologies. Hooley et al. (2010) have claimed that even though a digital divide may exist in the UK, this is increasingly becoming a divide based on skill and type of use rather than one based on access to technologies. They conclude that the potential of digital technologies to support career transitions is encouraging, because of its reach, although there still remain issues to do with quality and security.

One way of analysing the potential of digital technologies to support people experiencing transition is to start from the perspective of the technologies which are available. However, Hughes and Gratton (2009) advise that a more appropriate starting point is what people actually need, and a needs analysis is absolutely fundamental. Bimrose et al. (2011) suggest that one way of developing provision is to build it around different decision-making styles and they argue that it is possible to place adult career making styles into one of four broad categories. To an extent, these categories are applicable to the majority of Future for Heroes participants, but there is also a significant minority who are not yet in a position to make a future decision as they still need to resolve emotional issues before they can move closer to entering training or employment.

There is considerable agreement in the literature about the ways digital technologies could be used to help people during career transitions. For example, Passey and Davies (2009) list: reporting opportunities and vacancies; matching interests and choices to opportunities and



vacancies; creating and maintaining records of achievement; communicating with those looking for work; and engaging people in specific endeavours or activities. Hooley et al. (2010) identified similar methods and also included 'automated interaction' to refer to online diagnostic and career-matching tools.

Together these could be viewed as covering the range of face-to-face communications and exchanges which actually take place during a Future for Heroes course which, each time, are made up of participants with different needs and different communication styles. Early pilot work, with a small number of Future for Heroes participants, indicates that whilst some would be at ease using digital technologies for immediate exchanges with others online, there are those who prefer to place a period of time between exchanges so they can formulate questions and responses and even retract responses they previously made. Venables (2010) emphasises the distinction between asynchronous and synchronous methods of communication when providing career guidance, and this distinction is probably helpful for accommodating the range of participants' needs and the ways in which they would prefer to communicate online.

A theme running throughout the literature is the challenge of navigating through the enormous amount of information which is available online. Future for Heroes provides a list of recommended websites, and Future for Heroes participants also are regular users of their 'cap badge' sites (former regiments). This is consistent with a view expressed by several authors such as Hooley et al. (2010) that personal recommendations play a vital role in enabling users to filter and manage the information available. (Initial contact with Future for Heroes participants is showing that they would prefer to have access to a mentor who could help them with their online activities and even remind and nudge them to use it.)

Finally, whilst one way of viewing the use of digital technologies in helping with the military to civilian transition is to focus on a twin-tracked approach consisting of a blend of online and mentor support, it is also possible to imagine the growing autonomy and independence of a former member of the armed services who reaches a turning point where his/her enlarged stock of identity capital enables him/her to take an increasing amount of responsibility for his/her own transition research and decision making. There is some emerging evidence that a handful of Future for Heroes participants who have been encouraged to undertake some online contact do extend the scope of their online presence and identify their own learning opportunities. Hague and Logan (2009) believe that finding ways to support learners to make connections between informal, non-formal and formal learning is a significant challenge for adult educators.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Although there is a large body of evidence indicating that the majority of ex-service people make a successful transition to civilian life, it is also recognised that some, for example early leavers from the army, are more likely to experience difficulties. Moreover, it is arguable that data on transitions is open to interpretation since transition can occur at different levels, for example, occupational and emotional, and what could be perceived as a successful transition at one level might disguise the fact that transition at another level has gone less well.

Transition could be viewed in purely structural terms, and my involvement with Future for Heroes began in 2011, which coincided with the recession, which has made transition more difficult. However, the challenges of military to civilian transition have been reported in times of economic prosperity, which suggests that identity and agency also play a part.

Although an economic upturn will probably have a positive effect on occupational transition, many Future for Heroes participants also experience emotional difficulties and will not be entirely helped by an easier pathway into employment. These participants usually benefit from learning about how to understand and manage their emotions. The Report of the Task Group on the Military Covenant emphasises the need for more *pre-leaving learning* to help with the transition back to civilian life. Yet a large number of Future for Heroes participants report either not fully engaging with these courses or opting out altogether. However, having now experienced difficult transitions, many are more open to the *post-leaving learning* provided by Future for Heroes. Therefore, the key question for this study is whether and how digital technologies might be used to enhance and prolong the Future for Heroes learning.

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