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Military Commitment and Identity as Implicit Religion: A Key to Understanding the Loss of Profundity in the Transition from Military to Civilian Life

RESEARCH ARTICLE

JAN GRIMELL

SCANDINAVIAN MILITARY STUDIES

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a rare longitudinal interview study on the transition from military to civilian life in which participants shared their experiences over the course of ten years. The challenges of transition included disconnection from a collective life that had previously offered service members identity, community, camaraderie and purpose – experiences that can be understood as the partial loss of something profound. An abductive analysis was conducted which centred on the integrating foci of commitment and the creation of a military identity derived from implicit religion. When viewed through this lens, the significance or strength of implicit religion and belief, in the context of military commitment, can be described as paramount and sacred – worthy of dying for. The findings offer a novel understanding of the profound experiences related to military communal life, purpose, and identity during active service (that is, the conceptualization as implicit religion) as well as the loss of these implicit religious elements during the transition out of military life, and how the participants have thought about and dealt with this loss in various ways.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Jan Grimell
Umeå University, Dept. of Sociology, SE
jan.grimell@umu.se

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from military to civilian life can pose a number of challenges. These have prompted an increasing quantity of research, especially in response to Western military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali. Veterans face medical issues, such as PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and moral injury (Shay, 2003), as well as significant identity and cultural adjustments (Castro & Dursun, 2019). Most veterans, however, adapt well to civilian life, with many Swedish veterans successfully integrating into the labour market (Bäckström, 2023) and not developing PTSD or other medical conditions (Aux Analysis, 2021). Sweden's civil-military relationship, which aligns with Janowitz's (1960) model of integration, sees military personnel living among civilians and accessing civilian healthcare and legal frameworks. This differs from Huntington's (1957) strict civil-military dichotomy and may account for the swift integration of Swedish veterans into the workforce (Bäckström, 2023). Yet the shift can still bring profound changes, as veterans may lose aspects of the military identity – camaraderie, purpose, and a sense of belonging, for example – often irreplaceable in civilian life (Grimell, 2017a, 2017b; Lifton, 1992). While career programs support some permanent officers, soldiers with temporary roles often lack such support and may experience isolation (Grimell, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grimell & van den Berg, 2020). To capture these deep, embodied experiences, the sociology of religion offers valuable insights into the existential impact of military service and reintegration.

In the discipline of the sociology of religion, there is traditional effort to unfold and unpack features of everyday life implicitly religious (Bailey, 1983) or invisible (Luckmann, 1967). Such understanding can be particularly useful when it comes to practices and activities far beyond organized religion. Implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997) can help decipher and understand experiences and practices that can be understood and described as sacred – something greater than the self and worthy of dying for. Thus, this article seeks to employ a similar lens through which experiences of transition from military to civilian life are understood as a loss of something implicitly religious, as veterans start to live their lives in a culturally individualized civilian society.

The interview data that the article draws from are taken from a Swedish longitudinal research project on the reconstruction of identity occurring in the transition from military to civilian life. The project, *Reconsidering the Uniform* (Grimell, 2018), has been ongoing since 2013, with the last interview cycle conducted in summer, 2023.

This article will proceed with a description of a global research perspective on identity change during transition, followed by relevant findings from previous interview cycles in the longitudinal study *Reconsidering the Uniform*. It will then discuss the rationale for using concepts from the sociology of religion, including the conceptualization of implicit religion, before presenting a consideration of methodology. The analysis and discussion follow this.

THE IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE DURING TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Veteran studies have often relied on quantitative approaches to map factors in military-to-civilian transitions, leaving identity-focused perspectives underdeveloped. A qualitative approach highlights that military culture, which deeply socializes service members, fosters robust identities tied to unique values, practices, and meanings often contrasting with those of civilian life (Bragin, 2010; Beder, 2012; Buell, 2010; Woodward & Jenkings, 2011). Researchers indicate that ingrained military identities – reinforced by a sense of purpose, camaraderie, and shared mission – can complicate veterans' reintegration, requiring them to reconstruct their identities in civilian settings (Bragin, 2010; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Grimell, 2018). Thus, the transition can present significant identity challenges.

Studying a sample of military officers in retirement, Yanos (2004) indicated that the loss of the work role served to negatively affect personal identity (and well-being generally).

Based on a study of retired military officers, Savion (2009) offered the following conclusions relating to self-identity. Military transition is a life-transitioning experience that involves reshaping one's self-concept in relation to a new cultural environment. Adjusting to a different setting was an evolutionary process where an individual shifted from a structured military

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culture to one that was less defined in civilian life. During this period of transition, the process of letting go of the old and embracing the new required a shift in thinking, being, and doing. This adaptation typically unfolded in three stages: an ending, a neutral zone, and ultimately, a new beginning. As individuals navigated this journey, their identity and attitude evolved as they became more aware of themselves, others, and their environment. The learning process was transformative, involving self-reflection and self-discovery, which allowed them to embrace change and ultimately led to self-renewal. For the transition to be successful, a self-realizing mindset was essential, where the individual was open to personal growth and transformation.

Brunger and her colleagues determined that self-identity issues and the reconstruction of identity were a matter of concern for many service members throughout their transition into civilian life, writing that "the transition is representative of a shift in identity, whereby ex-service personnel must accept identity loss and the inevitable need for change therein" (Brunger et al., 2013, p. 95). Participants' experiences were categorised into three broad themes: characteristics of a military life, loss as experienced upon return to civilian life, and the attempt to bridge the gap between these two lives. Transcending these themes was the notion of identity, illustrating that the transition from military to civilian life can be viewed as a shift in sense of self from soldier to civilian.

Additionally, Burkhart & Hogan's study of female veterans suggested that:

> Participants' identity became challenged when they re-entered civilian life. Life patterns and values of military and civilian life were different, particularly in relation to camaraderie, rules of behavior and work ethic. This created confusion that led to living two lives as veteran and civilian. The only way participants could maintain their identity within the civilian sector was to re-establish connections with the military, friends from the military and veteran groups. (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015, p. 122)

These findings regarding identity challenges, re-established connections with veterans, and the sense of loss are echoed in additional recent research on identity change and reconstruction amid the transition from military to civilian life (Atuel & Castro, 2019; Ainspan, Penk & Kearney, 2018; Saylors, 2020). These qualitative studies illustrate contrasting military and civilian cultures tailored to identity processes. Additionally, the loss of both the military context and identity have been described as something profound on an individual level. The studies, however, tend to fail to employ a conceptual understanding detailing why the feeling of loss of military context, community, camaraderie, and identity should be so pronounced. The studies tend to describe their findings without exploring the experiential depth and profundity of what has been lost, why it is difficult to recreate these experiences elsewhere, or why the construction of new identities with similar depth and significance may be challenging.

There are, of course, exceptions that employ spiritual or mythical approaches (Hogan, 2024, for instance). While these are compelling, they are also exclusive and related to spirituality or a transcendent dimension. Such approaches may not resonate well with veterans who describe themselves as neither spiritual nor religious. Moreover, typically, these qualitative studies of identity have either been carried out on a small number of participants in one, or at most two, interviews; further, the focus on self-identity work is commonly combined with other perspectives in acknowledgement of the extremely multifaceted nature of transition. Very few, if any, longitudinal designs exist on identity reconstruction during transition. *Reconsidering the Uniform* is one such.

REVISITING PREVIOUS INTERVIEW CYCLES: *RECONSIDERING THE UNIFORM*

Reconsidering the Uniform was launched as a longitudinal project to follow identity reconstruction during the transition from military to civilian life. The interviews were conducted annually between 2013 and 2016.

In 2013, 19 officers, soldiers, and seamen were recruited with support from 2 Swedish military regiments using a snowball method. All participants were either about to leave or had already left military service during the first interview cycle (T1). The sample, which included both male and female service members, varied in age, rank, branches, deployments, and years of service.

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The criteria for inclusion were two years of active service. Most were 23–35 years old at T1, while 4 were around 60 and transitioning to retirement. Eight had completed deployments to conflict zones.

However, during the second interview cycle (T2) it became clear that the process of retirement was not linear. Some participants aborted the transition and returned to active duty or opted for a hybrid model with one foot in an all-civilian professional working life and the other in the military through various arrangements of part-time service. Thus, the sample was organized into those who undertook a full transition from military to civilian life (n = 6); those who opted for a hybrid path to civilian life (n = 9); and those who returned to active service (n = 4). Since the study centred around understanding processes concerning self-identity operating during transition, it was of equal interest to continue to interview those who aborted the transition and returned to active service during T3.

Regardless of the transition paths taken by the participants, everyone struggled at T1 with the identity change brought about by the transition and the need to reconstruct the story of who they would become as civilians, including their direction in life and place in the world (Grimell, 2017a, 2018). Those who aborted the transition during T2 or T3 typically did so to cope with the loss of military community, camaraderie, purpose, and identity. The primary trigger of the decision to return to military life was commonly described as a need to address the loss of community, identity, and purpose. This decision was also influenced by the perception that military service held deeper meaning than a life in civilian work, along with interactions with battle buddies still serving, who exerted a certain relational influence on the transitioning participants. Those who fully returned to active duty could focus entirely on developing their military identity (Grimell, 2018, 2020).

In contrast, those who chose a hybrid path acknowledged that they maintained aspects of what was lost from the military world (e.g., community, identity, purpose) while simultaneously dealing with the difficulties of maintaining a military-civilian life. These difficulties often surfaced, for example, when they combined a civilian job with part-time service as a soldier or officer on weekends or in certain weeks alongside managing a family life (Grimell, 2018).

Those who opted for a linear transition to civilian life found supportive forces to help them develop meaningful civilian identities eventually surpassing their military ones. These forces included curiosity about civilian life, pursuing stimulating education or jobs, and the desire for stable relationships. Dissatisfaction with military unpredictability – such as understaffing, long hours, and sudden deployments – also prompted their initial transition. While many adapted well to civilian careers, they still felt a void in comparison to the depth of their military experiences (Grimell, 2018). This persistent military identity resonates existentially, reflecting profound life questions and lived experiences (Grimell, 2016, 2017a, 2018). Understanding this enduring impact through theories of implicit religion can illuminate what is lost during transition, specifically the existential essence of military identity.[1] Compared to existing studies within Reconsidering the Uniform, this article shifts the focus from the transition itself to its aftermath, examining it from a ten-year perspective through the lens of sociology of religion.

THEORETICAL APPROACH: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION, MILITARY CULTURE AND IDENTITY

There are many values, meanings and practices in contemporary society which seek to address aspects of life traditionally spoken to by religion; these have justified the development of terms which apparently strain to express the idea of something which is either rather-like- but-not-quite religion, or which is apparently non-religious on the surface but revealed to be religious on closer inspection (Hamilton, 2001). This has created fertile ground for sociological concepts which aspire to deal with that which appears to be very like religion, depending on the definition of religion. Within the sociology of religion there is a relatively long tradition of developing similar and equally familiar concepts born out of this situation, including, but not limited to, invisible

1 For additional insights from previous interview rounds, see Grimell (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020) and Grimell & Van den Berg (2020).

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religion (Luckmann, 1967), surrogate religion (Robertson, 1970), implicit religion (Bailey, 1983, 1990, 1997) and quasi-religion and para-religion (Greil, 1993; Greil & Robbins, 1994).

These concepts are devices which may be useful for ordering and understanding the complex reality which surrounds people in such a way as to perceive (invisible, surrogate, quasi-, para- or implicit religious) patterns which deal with health (Greil & Robbins, 1994), environmentalism (Swatos, 1996), commitment (Bailey, 1990), and those existential questions termed *ultimate concerns* (Greil, 1993), to name but a few. Although these concepts share many similarities, they have also been nuanced and used in different, sometimes confusing, ways by researchers (for an attempt to present similarities and dissimilarities, see Hamilton, 2001). In addition, these concepts also reflect the problem that religion is a very difficult phenomena to define (either too narrow or too inclusive), still without an agreed, final, definition.

To approach military life and identity through a religious lens is not entirely new. In fact, more than half a century ago, the military sociologist Huntington (1957) proposed an analogy between the military communal life of service members and that of Christian monastic communities. From a functional perspective, there is wide resemblance, such as an organized communal life separated from life in the civilian world to varying degrees. This organized communal life cultivates strong beliefs, specific ethics and codes of conduct, numerous rituals, devotion to a cause and purpose, loyalty to the members, potential sacrifices and even standardized clothing, circumscribing individual uniqueness through the enforcement of a uniformed identity.

However, both Swedish society today and the Swedish Armed Forces are quite different from Huntington's context in 1950. While Sweden is also regarded as one of the world's most secular countries (Lemos & Puga-Gonzalez, 2021; see also Inglehart–Welzel, 2022), the same timeless military cultural standard continues to be valid in the Swedish Armed Forces today. Simultaneously, military culture and identity neither have a religious appearance nor understand themselves to be religious. This serves as the rationale for introducing an interpretative lens such as implicit religion in order to more thoroughly investigate what is actually challenged, and maybe lost, in the course of transition from military to civilian life.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF IMPLICIT RELIGION

According to the concept of implicit religion, religious or spiritual elements are present in various aspects of human life, even when individuals may not explicitly identify with or practice a formal religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997). The idea suggests that people engage in experiences, expressions, and behaviours in their daily lives that resemble those of religion, often without consciously recognizing or labelling them as religious. Implicit religion provides a more comprehensive perspective on what can be considered religious, spiritual or existential. It challenges the notion that religious activities are confined to formal rituals within established and traditional institutions and encourages scholars to explore the diverse ways in which people engage with the transcending patterns of action and meaning when creating identities.

The English sociologist Edward Bailey is often associated with developing the concept of implicit religion (Bailey, 1983, 1990, 1997). Having defined implicit religion as a matter of commitment, integrating foci and intensive concerns with extensive effects, Bailey further developed his definition through three empirical studies, each highlighting one of these aspects integral to the idea. He suggested, however, that if a single focus were to be assumed through the integration of the three studies' results, it could be called "creating our own identities" (Bailey, 1990, p. 494). The creation of one's identity was described as an intensive concern with extensive effects. While the process might contain internal contradictions and may not embrace the whole of any personal reality, it nevertheless remains fundamental. The process also highlighted an interdependence of social and personal reliance for which the local context or community could be described in terms of a *commitment to the human*.

Since implicit religion in contemporary society may be relatively undeveloped or unconscious, it is preferable to remain subjective in character and extensive in influence. It is difficult to pinpoint the strength or significance of an implicit belief or religion. Bailey (1990), rather, pointed toward the form of religious experience that characterizes a putative system or culture. He hypothesized that the experience of the commitment to the human was comparable to what students of small-scale societies have described as a sense of the sacred (Bailey, 1990,

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p. 496). Thus, a military community is understood in this article as a small-scale society with members. The social processes in such a small-scale society include, but are not limited to, military training facilities/schools/academia, a legal system, healthcare support, cultures, units, members, and so on.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative method, determined to be a suitable approach since it aimed to describe subtle self-identity work over time (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). One of the principal purposes of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness by participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, by delving into the nuances of experiences in lived life, qualitative research has a particular advantage over quantitative research when addressing narrative issues of self-identity work in transition (Grimell, 2018).

SAMPLE AND SELECTION

The 19 officers, soldiers and seamen in the original sample were recruited in 2013 with the support of two military regiments in Sweden, through a snowball method. A total of 16 interviewees completed the fourth interview cycle (T4) in 2023. Three interviewees were missing from this cycle; one declined participation, one could not be found, and one had died in the intervening years. The interview sample consists of male and female service members, some no longer in service and some currently serving in the Swedish Armed Forces. Three participants were female; the others were male. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of age, rank, branch, deployments and total years of service. The majority of the sample included service members between 23–35 years old at T1 (now plus 10 years). Four service members were around 60 years old at T1 and thus their transition was actually the process of retirement. Eight participants in the T4 sample had concluded one or more deployments to conflict zones. The participants have been given fictitious Swedish names.

INTERVIEW DESIGN

The participants were sent information about the study and asked to sign and return the informed consent agreement. The interviews were conducted via digital communication platforms or by phone.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to cover topics such as military identity, other identities, moral aspects and life questions (see Appendix A). Within each topic, several questions were formulated to open up themes and allow participants to construct answers in ways they found meaningful. While the questions were similar to those used during T1–T3 (Grimell, 2018), it was necessary to slightly alter them: the study was no longer only about the transition alone, but, rather, about life in the aftermath of military service or on the return to active service. The interview guide allowed for unplanned questions to follow up and clarify answers.

The participants' skill in reflecting on self-identity processes can be described as well-developed after the practice gained in interview rounds T1–T3. They were motivated to participate in T4 both as a rare opportunity to reflect upon identity while sharing their experiences with the wider veteran community, and as a result of the researcher–participant relationship established during T1–T3 (Grimell, 2018).

Catch-up conversations were conducted both prior to and after the interviews, sometimes resulting in additional researcher notes. The recorded interviews amounted to just over 16 hours of questions and answers. The interviews with retirees tended to be shorter than an hour. The interviews were transcribed verbatim into complete transcripts.

A NARRATIVE APPROACH

The interview guide and the interviews themselves allow us to view the concept of identity through a narrative identity approach, according to which individuals make claims of identity through stories about who they are and where they belong (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000;

Clandinin 2013; Mishler, 2004). In the interview stories, the participants present characters such as officers, soldiers or seamen, parents or workers of various kinds.

THE CONCEPT OF MILITARY IDENTITY

Regardless of whether participants have left the armed forces or not, their identity as former or current officer, soldier, or seaman is called a military identity. This is an analytical concept used to accommodate different types of military identities in a broader concept. The concept of veteran identity is often used as an analytical term for those who have left their employment in, for example, the United States (Atuel & Castro, 2019). Veteran identity is also related to the top-down perspective of veteran politics, veteran affairs, veteran support, veteran clinics and so on. While military identity and veteran identity can be used in different ways, they can also be understood as synonymous. The conceptual use of military identity in this study has always been deliberate and bottom-up, since a military identity and mindset emanate from military culture, education, training and any deployments undertaken. A military identity does not grow old or disintegrate – indeed, it remained an identity conspicuously important to the participants throughout every round of interviews.

CODING

The first analytical step after each interview was a summarization. Thus, the interviews were condensed into a core narrative with themes. This process, which can be termed a *global reading* (Ganzevoort, 1998), finally affords an overview of key findings in the interview narrative.

The next step was transcription, close reading and coding of the interview material, which involves the researcher delving more systematically into the interview data. A qualitative analysis software called Atlas.ti was used to keep track of all the interview codes in an easily manageable way.

Inductive logic was used during the analysis process, which involved a movement from many individual small codes to the group-level categories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), called *code families* in Atlas.ti. The family level accommodated a larger number of codes, which was necessary to present the findings in a meaningful way. While not every individual code is automatically reflected in a code family, the associations of a code should lead to the code family and vice versa.

The individual codes were organized into the following 12 code families:

- Military identity and culture(s)
- Professional working-life identities
- Emerging identities
- Civilian/military cultural contrasts
- Interaction between potentially conflicting identities
- Existential dimension (life questions, meanings, directions, dreams)
- Moral dimensions/conflicts (continuum)
- Health
- Gender differences
- The war in Ukraine (implications)
- Nature
- Transitional experiences in hindsight

As a final step to further improve the quality of the analysis, an abductive approach was applied, in which the analytical outcome and the conceptualization of implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997) were allowed to cross-pollinate in the analysis section.

METHODOLOGICAL ADVANTAGES OF THE SAMPLE

The methodological advantage of this sample was that it included interviewees who aborted the transition after a year or more and returned to active duty. As we have seen, the transition was ended as an alleviative response to the loss of community, identity, and purpose reported. Those who had aborted at T2 or T3 were still active officers or soldiers at T4, about a decade later. At the same time, most participants had been civilians since the first interview round.

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This has created several important perspectives regarding implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997) contributing to a larger whole, since actively serving participants could be compared with ex-military or veteran participants.

The first part of the analysis will present the voices of active-duty participants; the second will explore the experiences of those living as veterans in civilian society. This approach will highlight central elements of implicit religion, namely commitment to human connections (e.g., camaraderie, battle buddies, colleagues); commitment to the human as an integrating foci of military identity; and military identity as a project involving intensive concerns with extensive effects (positive and negative).

These elements will be examined from two distinct viewpoints: those who ended the transition but continued to serve for another decade, and those who remained as civilians. This comparison illustrates both the coinciding implicit religious findings among active and former active-duty service members and the lasting impact of these experiences on those who have been civilians for a long time.

In the analysis, current ranks of participants, exact positions, specific deployment areas and other detailed information have been omitted or slightly altered for the sake of anonymity.

ANALYSIS

COMMITMENT TO THE HUMAN EMBODIED IN MILITARY COMMUNAL LIFE, BATTLE BUDDIES AND COLLEAGUES

This subsection illustrates various aspects of military commitment to community, battle buddies, and colleagues. We'll begin with David, a specialist soldier who had been actively serving for the previous 10–15 years apart for a short period during which he left the armed forces. He testified to the continuity of commitment to the military community and battle buddies in the following way:

> I would say that it has been the same as when I began to serve a decade ago in [a unit and location]. I still feel that these are people I trust 100% when it comes to everything. That is, whatever it may be, if it's about… in combat, knowing that these people will try to get me to cover if I get hurt. Or maybe if I'm away and my partner needs help, my battle buddies will help her without even asking why. I've felt that way ever since I started in [my unit], and I feel the same now too.

David's ultimate "trust" in his colleagues, encompassing every aspect of life – including his trust for his battle buddies in all areas of their lives – illustrates a profound commitment extending to both battlefield and private life alike.

The loss of a close-knit community was also a major reason why David, as others, aborted the transition to civilian life and returned to the armed forces:

> As soon as I was away, between 2014 and 2015, I missed the community. Because that's what you miss, what you have with all your colleagues. And that's what also made me choose, because I was in-between… I had been accepted to [an educational position for another uniformed occupation outside of the military] and also been offered the military position in [a unit]. It didn't take long at all before I decided to return to the armed forces. So, it's a little bit like a drug sometimes, that's what it feels like.

The metaphorical expression "drug" suggests the powerful effect of camaraderie and communal life for David. While this metaphor helps illustrate the strong pull back to one's comrades, it does not necessarily imply that the experience is entirely positive. Military life also becomes all-encompassing, claiming large parts of one's life and not necessarily taking a break when the workday ends.

Erik, an officer who similarly testified to the commitment to military communal life and colleagues, was another-actively serving participant and multi-deployed veteran who also had aborted his transition. He described the ways in which an overseas posting affected the communal military life:

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> Many of the friends I hang out with have in one way or another been connected, either that they themselves are military or that they have been military. … So, in our life as a family, these military people and especially here in [a town outside Sweden] we connect. We're forced to become family to each other, even if we don't really know each other that well. A colleague from [a European country] and his wife had to go to the hospital. And they didn't have anyone to take care of their child. Then you have to be there. … That kind of thoughtfulness is more pronounced, and it has grown, this sense of care and helpfulness in some way. I don't know what to call it, it's like an identity.

Erik used the metaphor of family to describe his relationships with colleagues, suggesting strong commitment and lifelong bonds typically associated with family.

Gustaf, a multi-deployed veteran and officer, described his military relationships and communal life in the following way:

> They mean quite a lot. … And maybe it's that if you come from a background where you have a lot of similar military experiences, it might also be easier to socialise outside with military personnel. I would say a large part of my social network is based around colleagues. And also some of my closest friends. So, it has meant a lot to be or become who I am. To have that base somehow. Also, even though there are a lot of shortcomings in the organization, you still find that camaraderie is important. … And because I've had a lot of support from my colleagues in, let's call these life crises, that have happened.

For Gustaf, military commitment to his comrades was not only a crucial factor in shaping his identity as an officer; it was also the glue that held the organization together during difficult times. Like David and Erik, Gustaf found that his colleagues were also present in his private life during crises, making those crises easier to endure.

Reflecting upon his military relationships and communal life, John, another deployed veteran and officer, stated:

> They mean a lot! But I realise that the longer the time in the armed forces goes by, the strongest cohesion and group affiliation – in addition to the general military upbringing that you share with most officers, soldiers, sailors – is in the group of colleagues from the academy. That group I return to, that's the group I'm really close to, former colleagues from my time as a cadet, that's the important group. It's the cohesion you mean when you talk about military cohesion, with the really strong bonds. Today myself and others go at such high pace through the military organization that you don't have time to develop the really strong bonds.

John's reflection varied across different comrades, groups, and periods in his military career. His commitment evolved over time, with his closest friends and strongest bonds being associated with his early military years and officer training. John, who was climbing the career ladder, perceived that the demanding career path within the armed forces made it challenging to develop strong bonds with higher-ranking officers. This suggests that different periods, contexts, and career paths in military life may influence the degree of commitment to military colleagues.

Regardless, the participants' experiences illustrate that commitment to military communal life, battle buddies, and colleagues is very strong and extends beyond the service (also see Grimell, 2018, 2020). Metaphorical expressions such as "drug" and "family," along with the mutual "trust" required among unit members, suggest that relational commitment is significant and profound. Thus, this relational commitment serves as an imperative and integrating focus for their military identities.

COMMITMENT TO THE MILITARY IDENTITY PROJECT: INTENSIVE CONCERNS WITH EXTENSIVE EFFECTS

As David was invited to reflect upon the significance of military identity in relation to his life, he stated:

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> Military identity will probably be very important because it comes first, usually. So, it's important, will always make it important. It's been there – all my adult life it's been there in some way. Even though I've been a civilian for a year when I worked elsewhere in 2015. But it's always been there. It feels like it's a part of who I am. So, it will always be there, regardless of whether I quit or not. Which I don't think I ever will. And this feeling of going to work and feeling that you, it's a cliché to say, but come to work and feel that you can make a difference if needed feels very good in my stomach.

The military identity project had extensive effects on David, influencing not only the time dimension and the military context but also who he had become, his direction in life, and his place in the world. Regardless of whether he quit or continued until retirement, he remained a specialist soldier with a deeply ingrained military identity.

As Erik was reflecting upon his military identity, he used the term "officer identity", testifying to its depth in both military and civilian spheres of life:

> The officer's identity is strong, absolutely. I notice it in my everyday life, in my job, that work is important to me. And especially now here in this environment where I think I'm doing pretty good work. There I feel that I'm seen. And then I also notice that it grows. It goes in waves. … It's such a big part of life that it can still be a part of [civilian ceremonies]. Because that's who I am too, no matter how much you sometimes choose to deny it.

Erik preferred to identify himself as an officer, a position he saw as distinct and exclusive compared to that of soldier, highlighting differences in rank and education (also see Grimell, 2017b). In this sense, the analytical concept of military identity is inclusive. Nevertheless, Erik's identity was strongly felt and had significant impacts on both his military and civilian life. The relational component – being recognized and validated by colleagues – further strengthened his identity.

Another participant, the officer and multi-deployed veteran Jonas, thought it required something of a "balancing act" to hold and exercise a military identity in life. He used the word "restrain" to indicate his caution for allowing it to completely take over his life:

> It's a bit of a balancing act. The military identity or the officer's identity is what enables me to have a roof over my head and food on the table. But at the same time, so much time is spent on it, so there is very little time left for "civilian me" or "friends". So it's hard. But if you were to put something first, it would be the military identity. … I would put it first. But I keep it very discreet and restrained.

In Jonas's case, there was an implicit suggestion that his commitment to military communal life – including his buddies and colleagues – and his military identity project involved significant concerns (i.e., restraint) and had extensive effects on his overall life, as it "came first". This can be seen as a downside of the "drug", which also served as a rationale for participants who transitioned to civilian life: it proved difficult to balance active service with family and other priorities (Grimell, 2018).

Since many years had passed since T3 and T4, and several younger participants had found time to find a partner, get married, and have children, many of them had reflected extensively on their military identity in relation to how their lives had evolved. Participation in the previous interview cycles over three years had clearly primed them to think about this. Several participants, such as Gustaf and John, expressed that their military identity had grown and taken on an even more prominent role in their sense of self and their lives since we last met. For Gustaf:

> Yes, it has probably grown on me a bit more lately. … I guess I've realised that I might have more of a military identity than I might have thought myself.

Also, John testified to a growing insight that military identity mattered more in life than he previously thought:

> Military identity matters more than I thought. Because it relates to the fact that I feel I have received a lot from the armed forces, which has shaped me, how I think, given me unique experiences that are incomparable to not being in the armed forces.

In summary, the commitment to others – as embodied by and through military communal life, battle buddies, and colleagues – was a prominent narrative theme among the actively serving participants. This commitment was deeply cultivated through a military socialization process that included features such as conscription, basic training, education phases, specialist training, military academia, national and international military service, and deployments to conflict zones. Some of these phases may have generated stronger bonds than others. However, regardless of the relational depth and quality over time, commitment to others was paramount and served as a unifying focus within military identity.

Thus, military identity emerged from the military collective, with the interaction between the collective and the individual being central to understanding the military identity project. The construction of a military identity was a collective, rather than individual, endeavour. It could not have been formed without a commitment to community. Originating from military communal life and growing through that profound commitment, it resonates perfectly with the concept of implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997; Hamilton, 2001). The powerful interplay between the collective and the individual, understood through the lens of implicit religious commitment, explains why military identity became such a conspicuous and deliberately expressed part of the self: the collective voice is integrated into the self, which resonates with the extensive costs of the military identity project (Grimell, 2018, 2020). Commitment was (and is) highly valued by the collective, and commitment – to battle buddies, unit, mission, purpose, and hierarchy – must be seen as an essential component of military identity. Moreover, the collective was an integral part of the self, speaking through the military identity. Therefore, the commitment to the collective did not end when the uniform was hung up at the end of the day. Additionally, the military identity project involved intense concerns with far-reaching effects on private life (see Atuel & Castro, 2019; Brunger et al., 2013; Buell, 2010; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Drops, 1979; Jolly, 1996; Savion, 2009; Yanos, 2004).

EXPERIENCING THE LOSS OF MILITARY COMMITMENT AND THE CONTEXT FOR A MILITARY IDENTITY

Let's now turn to the other group of interviewees. The participants in this section had remained civilians since the study began in 2013. All participants of working age supported themselves with full-time civilian jobs, although some participants served part-time to a varying, if commonly small, extent after the transition. Before the transition, they had served as officers and a soldier between 3 and 50 years in the armed forces (Grimell, 2018).

Former officer Maria said that what felt so meaningful during military service was mutual closeness and commitment. Such a social dimension of meaning was absent in her civilian working life today, and she missed it. For Maria:

> The military service was such a big part of my life then. I felt that a large part of my life was very meaningful. Even if it's easy to romanticize in retrospect. I think what felt meaningful was to work closely with each other in a different way than I have experienced in civilian jobs. As a form of brotherhood or camaraderie, or why we fight, the soldier-feeling. It was easy to unite during a mission, but that's not the case now.

One reason for leaving was that active service had essentially consumed Maria's life, leaving very little room for a private life (Grimell, 2018). Although she had been well established as an employee for over a decade, Maria did not find the same level of meaning, unity, and commitment in her civilian work life. This depth of meaning and relational profoundness had been lost in the transition, even if other aspects of her private life had improved.

In contrast to Maria, for the former officer and combat-experienced veteran Andreas it was very important to find civilian work that resonated more closely with the military community's commitment, meaning, and identity (Grimell, 2018). He spoke about how the experience of a higher purpose and the desire to contribute to society were far more important than money or

high positions in civilian life. This led, among other things, to a uniformed profession outside of the military, with a perceived higher purpose and a strong sense of collegiality. Attributing this to his military identity, he recounted:

> Through service in the armed forces, I have had a clear purpose with my working life. I feel like I've contributed to something. Partly through deployment, but also when I served on the base at home, I have had a clear role in society and I think that's damn important as I've continued in civilian work life. It is a military identity to have a higher purpose. This community feeling and everything that's in there.

Andreas's way of resolving the loss, including the intense concerns and extensive effects following the transition, was to restore, as far as possible, a sense of commitment to his colleagues, purpose, meaning, and identity by choosing civilian work with a similar culture. This illustrates the maintenance of a kind of implicit religious practice and belief during the transition from military to civilian work life.

The third example revolves around the former officer Karl, who experienced burnout during his civilian career requiring him to reconsider and reconstruct a work identity characterized by an implicit religious military work ethic and commitment to the group. For a long time, until his body could no longer sustain the implicit religious pattern and belief required, Karl had attempted to uphold the military commitment to his civilian colleagues. Due to the burnout, he had to give up committing to teamwork because his all-civilian colleagues did not. The current identity reconstruction led to many negative emotions, as Karl explained:

> I force myself to give up a strong behaviour and drive that is part of my identity. Because I feel that it is not sustainable anymore. That's the situation I'm in. And partly it's admitting to myself or re-evaluating a view of the social work environment too, for me then, in a negative manner. Because I value this "work first, rest later, put the team first" idea. And then kind of take it all in and then decide what to dox, because I don't think that most people around me have that view or attitude. So, since I consider it to be something positive or highly valued, I just have to look with sad eyes at the social surroundings as well. In addition to forcing me to re-evaluate my own approach.

In contrast to Andreas, Karl tried to maintain an implicit religious military behaviour and belief in a civilian work culture that did not share this implicit religious commitment to tasks and colleagues.

Roger and Stig, two of the retirees, also reflected on the extraordinary commitment to the group and colleagues in a military context in contrast to the civilian context. Former officer Roger had been working in civilian life for a few years after his relatively early retirement (Grimell, 2018). Based on this experience, he perceived that the individual was superior to the group in civilian work life, while the group was superior to the individual in that of the military. Reflecting on why a military culture cultivated this commitment to the group, he recounted:

> I think a lot of it is that you're out on field exercises and you're bruised and wet and pushed hard and must stick together. It's a bit of a stretch. And then I think you develop a certain kind of care for each other, so to speak. To make sure that it works and that you take care of each other. I think so.

For Roger, the military communal life intensified after retirement:

> Well, I didn't think I'd stay in touch with the military. But there has been more contact. I have more contact with colleagues – old colleagues – now than I had when I was working. And it's one of those things that I didn't think would be like that. But that's what happens. … And above all, today it's fun to meet colleagues. It was commonplace before, what you belonged to was like life. But now it's different.

Former officer Stig, also a retiree, was involved in several military and civilian comrades' associations. He perceived cohesion to be different in military and civilian associations:

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> In the military comrades' associations, there is more cohesion. Even if you don't hang out with everyone after the meetings, you still feel this sense of community. We have done the same, we've been working in the same field. In civil associations, you meet and we all come from different professions. It won't be… you don't feel the same way. … So, there is a difference between military associations and these civilian ones.

Thus, as revealed in the fourth interview cycle, the participants had experienced and reflected on the void regarding their commitment to others, including its effects on their sense of purpose, meaning in life, and identity, over the decade they had spent as former officers in a civilian work and social context.

Finally, in contrast to Maria, the former specialist soldier Helen, also a multi-deployed and combat-experienced veteran, testified to how tough it had been to be a woman in a male-dominated military world, highlighting the intense concerns with extensive effects that a military identity may have due to gender (also see Agostino, 1998; Badaró, 2015, Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Kaspersen, 2023):

> All the women I've talked to who have ever been in the armed forces also think it's been tough. That we've always had to prove ourselves as a little bit better, or that you can't make mistakes because then it's because you're a girl. … It's not fun to be both shot at and feel thwarted by your own [male] colleagues.

At the same time, some of her closest friends in civilian life are female veterans from the military, highlighting the depth of commitment and intimacy with military buddies that remains ingrained in civilian life, even growing over time. Helen recounted:

> I am still in contact with many of my conscript buddies. Some of my best friends are from the armed forces. Absolutely. Just girls in and of themselves. … So, these relationships are engrained, so to speak.

In summary, the military cultural concept of commitment to team, colleagues, battle buddies, purpose, mission, and identity – as narrated by the participants – can be seen as a vital element of implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997). This practice and belief in implicit religion were clearly weakened, or even absent, in civilian work and social life. Thus, the participants who transitioned to civilian life experienced various degrees of loss regarding an integrating focus with an implicit religious character. This process challenged the existence of their military identities, which had been present in all spheres of their social lives, as well as their emerging work-life identities and identities as retirees. Implicit religion pertains to the experience of profundity and depth in life (Bailey, 1983, 1990, 1997; Hamilton, 2001). The four patterns of response to the loss of implicit religion identified are illustrated below in Figure 1.

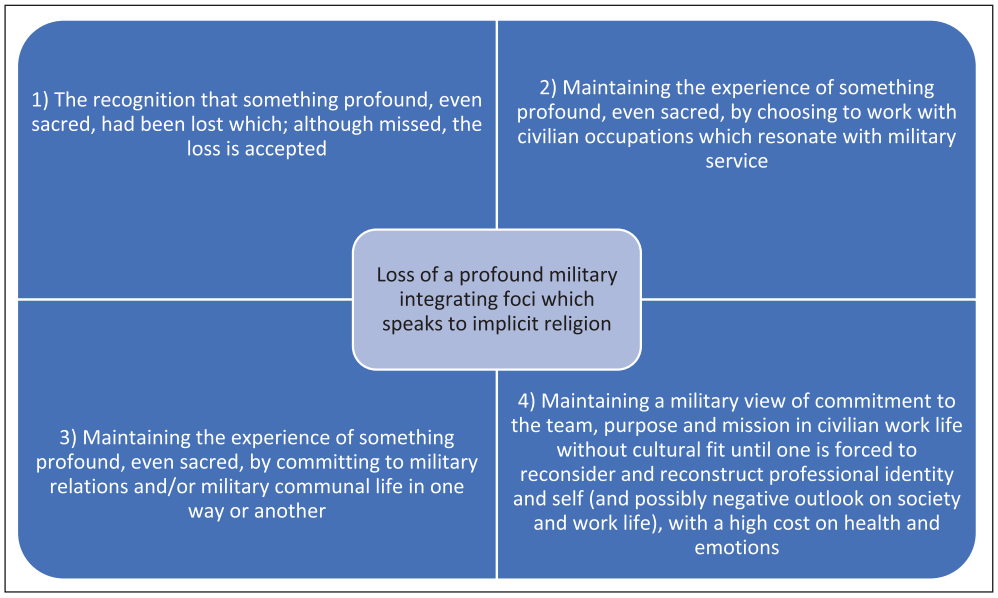

Figure 1 The four identified ways to tackle the loss of an integrating foci with profound, even sacred, dimensions, including transcending patterns of action and meaning.

These patterns of responses can very possibly be combined in various ways, while new ones may be added through future research.

DISCUSSION

In the highly secular context of Sweden today (Lemos & Puga-Gonzalez, 2021; see also Inglehart–Welzel, 2022), it is more difficult to follow Huntington (1957) by directly comparing the culture and lifestyle of the military with those of a monastery. Such an analogy is irrelevant in contemporary life, explicitly linked to pious practice – devotion to God and the Christian practices that follow such an explicit faith. Few participants in this study would describe themselves as religious; almost certainly none as a monk. Yet the participants articulated and agreed upon a profound experience of camaraderie and commitment to the human, embodied in military communal life, battle buddies and colleagues – even though there were gender differences that created variations in the experiences of men and women. As global research would predict, some female participants experienced difficulties in a male-coded environment, aware of their perception as *other* in such a context (Agostino, 1998; Badaró, 2015; Daphna-Tekoah et al., 2021; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). This offers the potential, however, of generating long-lasting female bonds. Also, in line with the concept of implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997), the military identity project encompasses intensive concerns with extensive effects (positive and negative).

The sociology of religion can be useful for ordering and understanding a complex social reality with transcending patterns which surrounds service members and veterans, through assistance with conceptual devices that deal with fundamental questions of existence (Greil, 1993), health (Greil & Robbins, 1994), and commitment as embodiment of the sacred (Bailey, 1990, 1997). Commitment (to the military community, colleagues, and battle buddies) stands out as a particularly useful concept for describing a military cultural feature and the profound experience of something implicitly religious, even sacred – worth dying for – in a military environment that shapes and defines a specific military identity. The literature in the sociology of work and on professional experiences often overlooks the transcendent patterns of action and meaning. These patterns, regarded as sacred, worth dying for, manifest in collective commitment, strong cohesion, and group affiliation.

In comparison to other similar approaches that lean towards civil religion within the armed forces – where the nation is arguably sacralized as "worth dying for" – this article's use of implicit religion focuses more on the human aspect and the relationship with one's neighbour. This focus aligns with Danish and British research emphasizing group dynamics, battle buddies, and relationships (Sørensen, 2011; Woodward, 2008). However, this does not preclude a combination, even if the empirical data in the study highlight relational commitment and the depth of identity as the most important factors. In a time of war in Europe, rather than just international deployments to distant war zones (e.g., Afghanistan, Mali), the national dimension may grow in significance.

Given the methodological strength that this study presents, it is reasonable to suggest that commitment to the human was, or is, an integrating foci into the military culture(s) expressed by the various participants, both actively serving and civilian, which had shaped their military identities. In light of Bailey's (1990, 1997) concepts, a military culture with such an integrating foci of commitment to the human can be understood as implicitly religious – which indicates that the identities created are themselves bearers of implicit religion and belief. In the creation of military identities, the group and battle buddies can be understood as sacred and worth dying for, and the experience of this profound relational commitment can follow the bearer of a military identity through life. Such an identity can be understood as a lens through which other professional identities and social life itself can be viewed, evaluated, and valued based on implicit religious experience and belief. A one-sided and over-individualized focus within civilian work cultures can then be perceived as community-alienating, selfish and negative for health, organizational climate, productivity and business.

Yet, the participants have engaged in profound or quasi-religious experiences, expressions and behaviours during their military service and daily military lives, often without consciously recognizing or labelling them as potentially religious, spiritual or even existential (Hogan, 2024).

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Military service and daily lives created military identities which included intensive concern with extensive existential effects (positive and negative). The process of cultivating both military skills and a military mindset capable of overriding the principle that it is wrong to kill another can be expected to be inconsistent with the constitution of civilian moral identities (French, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Strachan, 2006; Verrips, 2006). Thus, the commitment to the military must be primary and fundamental. A service member must surrender and submit the self to the collective through the act of commitment to the human. The strength or significance of an implicit religion and belief can be described as ultimate in the case of the military commitment, as seen through the lens of implicit religion. The commitment, loyalty, and sacrifice observed can even surpass those of explicit and institutional religions in Western society, where faith does not necessarily entail risk to one's life. In Goffman's theory (2015), the military institution can be understood as a total institution holding a comprehensive, firm, hold on the military individual, with a tremendous impact on the self as a collective voice mediated by strong feelings and ultimate commitment to one's community and battle buddies.

In the transition from a military to a civilian life, implicit religion, as lived in the military communal life, is lost. The loss manifests as strong emotions and feelings stemming from a military identity (Atuel & Castro, 2019; Brunger et al., 2013; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Savion, 2009; Yanos, 2004), alongside the experience of no longer being part of the transcendent actions and meanings of the group and the collective sacred military body that embodies an implicit lived religion. Given this study, such experiences can be addressed through the four patterns of responses to the loss of implicit religion, which relate to the embodiment of the sacred through commitment to community, colleagues, and battle buddies. Moreover, the longitudinal design suggests that the impact of implicit religion does not fade away with time. Participants have expressed that the implicitly religious elements –encapsulated in the military identity – continue to exert influence (i.e., extensive effects) on them in various ways over time. These patterns can very possibly be combined in various ways, while new ones may be added through future research.

By understanding both military community culture and identity as practices and expressions of implicit religion, military personnel and veterans can gain a novel perspective that provides a deeper understanding of feelings, thoughts, and experiences related to a profound loss – even the loss of something sacred – followed by a type of emptiness that arises during the transition out of military life (Beder, 2012; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Castro & Dursun, 2019; Drops, 1979; Yanos, 2004). Creating new identities in civilian life is not necessarily easy. Civilian life lacks the implicit religious integrating focus provided by military commitment, including clear answers to existential questions such as "Who am I?", "What is my direction and purpose in life?", and "What is my place in the world?" (Grimell, 2018, 2020). Involving the loss of the practice of implicit religion, transitioning from military to civilian life is a deeply existential identity project. Its beliefs and practices are challenging to apply in work and social life within a civilian context, often leaving individuals to grapple with these intense concerns and extensive effects on their own. Presenting and providing a vocabulary for veterans allowing them to articulate deeper feelings of losing something profound and to gain an existential understanding of the various aspects of the transition from military to civilian life is crucial for their existential health and well-being as they leave active service.

LIMITATIONS

This article utilizes the concept of implicit religion (Bailey, 1990, 1997) to analyse the profound loss experienced by veterans during their transition from military to civilian life. Related concepts, such as military identity, serve as analytical tools to understand the complexities of military commitments and identities worth dying for. Although similar experiences can be found in other contexts, the military's unique culture makes this loss particularly difficult for veterans. Over ten years of study, participants have shared profound experiences related to military communal life (Grimell, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020), interpreted abductively as implicit religion. While interviewees did not explicitly use these concepts, their narratives reveal existential themes such as purpose and meaning. While this qualitative study does not claim to represent all veterans, it contributes to research on military-to-civilian transitions from a sociology of religion perspective.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

For additional access to the data drawn on in this article, please contact the author.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary Material.** Appendix A. Interview Guide. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.295.s1

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2023-00131-01). Participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Jan Grimell orcid.org/0000-0002-7327-8519
Umeå University, Dept. of Sociology, SE

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