

# Advancing an understanding of the body amid transition from a military life

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the process of transitions from a military life to a civilian life. Making use of the concepts offered by Dialogical Self Theory, we explore how individuals negotiate the acquisition of new, civilian identities by integrating different, sometimes conflicting, cultural I-positions. Moreover, in this article, we explore how this narrative process is reflected through embodied processes of becoming civilian. We do so by presenting an in-depth analysis of two case studies: that of former Lieutenant Peter, who fully transitions to civilian life, and of Sergeant Emma, who opts for a hybrid outcome, combining a civilian job with working as an instructor in the military. We will argue that the narrative and embodied process of transition are intertwined in self-identity work, and that attention to the specifics of this entanglement can be useful for professionals who counsel military personnel who transition to civilian life.

## Keywords

Veterans, military, transition, dialogical self, identity, body

## Introduction

While the exploration of the construction of military identities has been given much attention over the years, far less focus has been placed upon transition

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from military to civilian life as a movement from one culture to another which affects the self-identity. There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that self-identity work is a profound but relatively neglected concern amid transition from military to civilian life (Brunger, Serrato, & Ogden, 2013; Buell, 2010; Drops, 1979; Savion, 2009; Yanos, 2004). A military identity is understood as a story of who I am shaped by a military culture, a personal narrative which serves as a claim of identity made by the self as a service member due to a specific set of military values, meanings, and practices (Grimell, 2018a). We suggest that this story has a corresponding I-position in the self. Moreover, that the self, by preexisting and new I-positions, is indeed involved in a narrative identity reconstruction amid transition (Hermans, 1999, 2003). Thereby the terms self-identity work and identity reconstruction assume and include the same self-identity process, but with different words, conceptualized through a dialogical view of the self (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Self-identity work and identity reconstruction are used somewhat interchangeably throughout this article. However, the term narrative identity reconstruction refers more to the narrative process of empirically changing the story of who I am into something different (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). A conceptualization of the self as a dialogical narrator will be further detailed later.

The movement from one culture to another requires narrative identity reconstruction; a service member is prompted to answer profound questions of life such as who am I, where am I going, and where is my place in the world. These questions may be challenging to answer if cultural differences are salient or even opposing. Nonetheless, meaningful answers to such life questions must be found in order to offer existential bearing to the evolution of civilian identities (Grimell, 2017c). Every culture—military or civilian—harbors its own ideas of appreciated values, meanings, and practices within that shared culture (Gregg, 2005), and military cultures often tend to illustrate opposing features in comparison to civilian ones (Brotz & Wilson, 1946; Goldstein, 2001; Hall, 2012a, 2012b; Huntington, 1957; Verrips, 2006). Such an exploration and navigation of new and opposing cultural ideas of what constitutes appreciated civilian identities, and a potential discovery and integration of an alternate identity amid transition, suggests that “the self is confronted with a new, unfamiliar or even threatening situation that requires an adaption or reorganization of the self” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 239).

While the role of the body in the construction of military selves (or I-positions) has, from Michel Foucault (1975) onward, been a topic of research in various disciplines, the same cannot be said for the embodied ways in which the reverse process, from the military to civilian life, takes place. This, in a sense, is understandable, since military identity appears as much more defined, apparent and, indeed, embodied, than civilian identity (Verrips, 2006). In this article, however, it is the particular process of “unlearning” military identity and the “learning” of a civilian identity that is of interest. In fact, we argue that by exploring the “undoing” of the military self by learning to embody a civilian self, the latter will no longer be the

unmarked default self from which military recruits are supposed to depart, but will become identifiable as an identity, or set of identities, in its own right.

The fact that a large number of service members transition from military cultural life to a contrasting civilian cultural life relatively early, compared to a typical professional career with employment continuing until one has well passed 60 years of age, suggests that self-identity work should be seriously addressed by society, military organizations, and the individual (Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Cooperation between military and civilian sectors with a combined focus on the unique characteristics of such transition is required in order to assist and promote the evolution of meaningful identities and lives amid cultural change, to better serve those who have served. The identity reconstruction which is necessitated by transition from military to civilian life deserves as much attention as military identity construction has been given throughout the past decades. This transition out of the military, too, is a powerful process even if the direction is reversed: supposedly leaving behind military cultural identities to instead live civilian ones. One way of helping to illuminate this process is to present empirical research which may provide qualitative insights which can themselves be further built upon and evolved (Grimell, 2018b).

The purpose of this article is to present longitudinal and qualitative data from an empirical research project on identity reconstruction among Swedish military personnel amid transition from military to civilian life utilizing two case study examples to highlight the processes (Grimell, 2018a). The central research question focuses on the investigation of how preexisting and new identities emerge and interplay with bodily expressions amid transition from a military culture to civilian ones. The interplay between the evolution of narrative identities and the participants' physical bodies amid transition is a seldom explored combination. This approach will widen the understanding of cultures, identities, and bodily dimensions within this specific field of research. Dialogical Self Theory (DST; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) serves as a theoretical framework throughout the analysis but will be assisted with theories of the body to better expound upon the interplay between narrative identity evolution and bodily dimensions. The following subquestions will outline the analysis:

- What are the transitional experiences in the process?
- How do preexisting and new narrative characters evolve over time?
- How does the body connect to this process?

This article will continue with a conceptualization of a dialogical self, method, results, and discussion.

### **Conceptualization of a dialogical self**

Some decades ago, Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) introduced the idea of the self as a dialogical narrator which holds several I-positions. Depending upon

time, situation, and audience, different I-positions may author different characters of the self in the personal narrative (e.g., I as a service member, I as a brother, I as a friend, I as a music lover). This polyphonic idea suggests that there are a number of characters which function as a plurality of consciousness or as a multiplicity of voices in the self. This gallery of autonomous characters who can tell stories that are temporally dispersed implicates that space is just as important as time. Yet everything coexists and lives side by side, as if both space and time are crucial for a dialogical self. One of the classic definitions of a dialogical self particularly emphasizes the dimension of space (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 28):

The I has possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The I has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established.

The concept of a dialogical self is tightly integrated into DST, which combines what Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) conceptualize as traditional, modern, and postmodern understandings of the self (for a full review, see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 82–119). The notion of an I-position is a key concept in DST as well as for a dialogical self. It has been suggested that there are two types of I-positions of the self: those I-positions linked to the internal (otherness-in-the-self) and those to the external (others-in-the-self) domain of the self. I-positions related to the internal domain of the self are located inside of a person (e.g., I as ambitious, I as disciplined) while external I-positions are extended to the external domain of the self (e.g., my colleagues, my wife) but are nonetheless an integral part of the self. The gallery of these I-positions thus becomes the position repertoire of the multiplicity of the self (Hermans, 2001a, 2001b). Unity is, however, still a central concept, and unity and continuity are narrated by attributing I, me, or mine to positions; even if they are contradictory they nonetheless belong to the composite self. This implies that I-positions within the multiplicity of the self give voice to the various characters of the individual who thus become united through a complex personal narrative (Hermans, 1996, 1997). The personal narrative, which consists of many characters or I-positions, is the empirical composite term of the theoretical idea of a dialogical self. The variety of voices can be discerned and “function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement” (Hermans, 1999, p. 72).

I-positions of the self may have opposing desires, and these can be anticipated to produce decentring (destabilizing, disorganizing) movements, but different I-positions may also share desires and this agreement can be anticipated to lead to centring (stabilizing, organizing) movements of the self. Such movement may be viewed as an on-going and dynamic process of positioning, repositioning and counter-positioning as the I fluctuates in time and space over existing, new, and possible positions (Grimell, 2018b). The dialogical self promotes integration between such movements of the self (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). As internal

or external positions diverge further or even come into conflict, the composite self may act in the service of reintegrating such positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Nir, 2012). The dialogical capacity of the self varies from individual to individual; it may be flexible or rigid (i.e., under dominance of one I-position). The dialogical capacity of the self is linked to culture and society, and a lack of dialogue in a society may have a corresponding effect on the dialogical capacity of the self (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Hermans, 2002, 2004). The dialogue may be conducted between two internal I-positions (e.g., I as restless agrees with I as ambitious), between internal and external I-positions (e.g., I as ambitious enjoy working with my industrious colleagues) or even between two external I-positions (e.g., my children enjoy playing with the children of my colleagues and that helps me to interact and bond better with my colleagues). A dialogical self has the potential to engage a coalition of positions, which may work together to assist and support each other (Nir, 2012).

The dialogical process between I-positions may experience friction over time. Conflicting positions can clash due to opposing needs. Such a situation may dramatically decrease the dialogical process. For example, a service member in transition may experience great obstacles when the cultural I-positions of a university student and a Sergeant attempt to converse (Grimell, 2015). The content within cultural constructions of positions may be too divergent to see eye to eye and move forward together. However, the development of a third position, for example, as a reserve officer, may bridge such divergence to ameliorate such conflicts between the student and military I-positions (Grimell, 2017a). A third position has the potential to unify two conflicting positions without denying or removing their differences (Hermans, 2013; Raggatt, 2012). An individual may also have the capacity to assume a meta-position (or meta-cognitive activity), which enables the self to transcend individual I-positions by rising to a bird's-eye perspective from which different positions can be considered simultaneously (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans & Gieser, 2012). From a meta-position one can "take a broader array of specific I-positions into account and have an important executive function in the process of decision making" (Hermans, 2013, p. 86).

The self may require reorganization or innovation as new situations in life are encountered, for example, a transition from military to civilian life (Grimell, 2016, 2017d). Another way to assist and aid a dialogical evolution from a temporal outlook is through promoter positions, innovators of the self par excellence. Promoter positions produce and organize different I-positions on a temporal level in order to allow innovation of the self as a whole. Real, remembered, anticipated, or imaginary significant others may function as promoters, and promoters may be located within the internal and/or external domain (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). According to Valsiner (2004, 2005), promoter positions can be recognized by a number of characteristics such as openness toward the future and a potential to produce specialized and qualitatively different positions in the future self. This openness allows for the capacity to integrate new and already existing positions. Promoter positions have a central place in the position repertoire and

from this structure they offer the potential to reorganize the self toward higher levels of development. Moreover, promoter positions function in the service of continuity of the self, yet in the same time give room for discontinuity. Continuity is served by their capacity to link the past, present and the future of the self, and discontinuity to a certain degree results from the fact that they serve as a source of new positions.

### **Transition as an embodied process**

In this article, we argue that apart from a narrative process, the transition from military to civilian life is also very much an embodied process. Previous studies of how soldiers adopt to military life, especially during basic training, have already pointed at the importance of taking into account the body when researching the adaptation to military culture (Bornmann, 2009; Dyvik & Greenwood, 2016; Hockey, 2002). As Michel Foucault (1975) argued in his well-known work *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, in the 18th century there was a turn toward the disciplining of modern selves through the disciplining of bodies. Although more interested in the disciplining practices in penitentiary institutions, he also takes the military as a case in point. According to Foucault, the invention of the rifle in particular (as opposed to the musket) generated an interest in the disciplining of individual soldiers' bodies, since individuals and small groups were now required to maneuver as effectively and dynamically as possible. To Foucault, a soldier's body is an exemplary "docile body" that is part of "a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (p. 138). John Hockey (2002), in his research on the basic training of infantry soldiers in the United Kingdom, confirms this strong bodily dimension of contemporary military training (p. 150):

The body is experienced no longer primarily as an individual entity, but rather as part of a collective one, termed "section" or "platoon", and garbed in anonymous military camouflage. The extent of this environmental control can be judged by the fact that even how the body ingests food is at the whim of the particular instructor accompanying recruits to the cookhouse. When the instructor has finished his meal, recruits must also immediately finish theirs.

Importantly, Hockey does not agree to Foucault's analysis of the disciplining of the soldiers' body into "automatic docility" (Foucault, 1975, p. 169). Rather, soldiers will find embodied ways of resisting, even if only in a very cautious way, such all-encompassing disciplining practices. Likewise, Philip Smith (2008) has argued that rather than turning soldiers into robots, the seemingly irrelevant physical challenges that are laid out for them during training are meant to create a team spirit: "Basic training is not so much about teaching robotic skills and so eliminating the civilian self, as it is about remaking this into a less egocentric military self" (p. 281). While the scale of the bodily socialization process may

thus be debated, it is clear that the construction of military selves can be understood in Bourdieusian terms as the formation of an unconscious, embodied military habitus (Abraham, Cheney & Curran, 2015; Anastario, Hallum-Montes, Reyes, Manzanero, & Chun, 2013; Macdonald, 2004). In this article, we pose that the reverse, the formation of a civilian habitus, can also be observed, but that it there may be overlap with (and that it therefore need not consist of a complete deconstruction of) a military habitus. We will elaborate on this point when discussing our case studies.

## Method

The case study material which is presented in this article was derived from a longitudinal research project titled *Reconsidering the uniform*, a qualitative study which was designed to follow voluntarily released Swedish service members as they were about to enter or recently had begun transition from military to civilian life (Grimell, 2018a). The empirical phase of the *Reconsidering the uniform* project was launched during the summer of 2013 and concluded three years later. The purpose of the project was to describe existential and/or religious dimensions in identity reconstruction among Swedish service members during the process of becoming civilians. Annual interviews (Time 1–3) were conducted spanning from 2013 to 2016 in order to observe and follow the narrative evolution within the interview narratives amid the transitional process. The methodological principle was built around the interview data which was processed through narrative analysis. From this narrative outlook, identity construction and reconstruction referred to how preexisting and new I-positions shaped the identity claims in the interview narratives during transition, and how these narrative claims changed the stories of who I am across time. From a dialogical framework, it was assumed that storied characters of the self (e.g., military, student, employee, and other civilian identities) held corresponding I-positions in the self. Moreover, predefined positions such as a third position, promoter position, meta-position, and other positions were, if they existed, likely to manifest as narrative characters or point of views in the self-identity work across the transition. Among the sample of 19 service members three path-choices amid transition were discovered over time, and in turn path-choices also tailored the narrative evolution. These paths included a full transition to civilian life (six participants), a hybrid outcome (nine participants), and a full return to active military service (four participants). The case study examples in this article were selected on the basis of presenting a case for each of two civilian oriented paths which clearly involves bodily dimensions: the case of Lieutenant Peter (i.e., a full transition to civilian life) and Sergeant Emma (i.e., a hybrid outcome)—who are referred to using fictitious names throughout the study but with correct ranks. The interview data are vast and therefore these case studies are presented in a concentrated form in this article. Some of the presented details have been slightly altered or omitted to safeguard the anonymity of the participants. To safeguard the transparency and integrity of the cases, they can be accessed in

their entirety in the doctoral thesis *Reconsidering the uniform* (Grimell, 2018a). The unique contribution of this article is to expound upon the bodily dimension in self-identity work, a dimension which has been recognized as previously seldom observed, yet which offers a potential to discern another layer and thereby to advance the understanding of the process.

### *Interview sample*

Information letters were distributed via the postal service or e-mail, prior to the empirical phase, to service members who were to be voluntarily released from active duty or had recently begun to transition to civilian life. A snowball sampling method (Noy, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005) was applied in collaboration with a Swedish military regiment to accumulate a purposive sample selection (Merriam, 2002) which included 19 participants (16 males and 3 females) who varied in terms of age, rank, branches, mission experiences, and total years of service. All of the participants had voluntarily terminated their employment due to disappointment in the employer, stagnation of professional/personal development, curiosity to explore new avenues in life, retirement opportunities, and/or completion of employment contracts. More than half of the sample had been deployed to Afghanistan or elsewhere, and no one had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. The participants were required to fill in and return a response letter and, among other things, suggest a time and place for the interview. This also served as the informed consent agreement.

### *Interview methodology*

To cover topics relevant to the research purpose of the project, a semistructured interview protocol was used throughout the three interview cycles (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; van den Brand, Hermans, Scherer-Rath, & Verschuren, 2014). The questions were open and designed to allow the participants to construct answers in ways that they found meaningful (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2002, 2006; Riessman, 1993). The interview topics included: military story, transition, relationships, identity, and existential concerns, and each interview stretched about 60–90 minutes. Every interview was transcribed into a complete transcript.

In addition to the fact that the first author of this article conducted the interviews as a researcher with a stated research purpose, the participants also knew from the onset that I am a former military officer and thereby we share a common military background (Mishler, 1991, 2004). Such a shared cultural background was acknowledged by Brunger et al. (2013) as *researcher acceptance* in their research on British ex-military personnel, and this acceptance was “of principle importance when attempting to facilitate dialogue and insightful research” (p. 97).



### *Narrative analysis*

Steps 1 and 2: In the pre-phase of the analysis, complete transcripts were made of all three interviews (Time 1–3) and then used in close re-listening and re-reading to summarize the content and abstract plot(s) or story line(s), theme(s), and tone(s) of the interviews (cf. Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McAdams, 1988, 1997). This is in correspondence to what Ganzevoort (1998) described as global reading, which serves as the first step “to get a general picture of the text” (p. 28).

Step 3: All of the transcripts were then downloaded into a qualitative software program called Atlas.ti (version 7.5.16). This program was used to code and organize identity claims made by the interviewees (e.g., military, student, friend, daughter). Even though an interviewee did not always explicitly said “this is my character of a Sergeant speaking,” the military character in the military story represented a specific point of view in the self which equated an I-position (Grimell, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d). This applied for the rest of the characters as well. The qualitative software program easily allowed for comparison of the evolution and claims of narrative characters within the participants’ interview narratives and between path-choices (groups) over the course of the three interviews (Time 1–3). When any identification was deemed potentially ambiguous, the analytical observation was confirmed by an e-mail to the interviewee which included a description of the analysis and proposed I-position. The interviewee then responded as to whether this observation actually represented the interviewee’s self (Grimell, 2017a). Added to this methodology was a narrative element borrowed from another narrative methodology presented by Ganzevoort (2011) which emphasized the tone of the narratives, which in this case is linked to storied emotional experiences of characters.

Step 4: The final phase was to explore bodily expressions related to preexisting and new emerging characters within the presented cases.

### **Case study examples**

#### *Lieutenant Peter: A full transition to civilian life*

Background: Lieutenant Peter was in his early 30s when he participated in the study. He had served for about eight years and for the majority of that time as a platoon commander. Peter’s motives to leave military service revolved around storied experiences of stagnation; a new administrative system in the Swedish Armed Forces had relocated him from his previous outdoor training and leadership role with the platoon into the company office with a computer and a telephone. The administrative burden left only a few hours per week which could be spent with the platoon. Peter described that he had evolved into an administrator; he described a palpable discrepancy between his expectation and prior experience as a boots on the ground service member and later a platoon commander in contrast to the now actual life of an office-bound platoon commander. The decision,

even amid this discrepancy, was not easy because Peter had a salient military identity connected to his military community and battle buddies. Peter's military character as a platoon commander was described as extremely task oriented, efficient, focused, and uncompromising. As a platoon commander, Peter always got the job done, and this character of an officer was a deeply rooted identity and I-position in his self.

Time 1 (T1): during the first interview six months post exit, Peter had recently begun to study with a nature and tourism program at a campus in the northern part of Sweden which caused dialogical friction and tension between preexisting and new cultural I-positions. Peter was ridden by experiences of emptiness, as he missed his military buddies with whom he shared such deep and trusting bonds and maintained close and frequent contact. Peter was constantly updated on matters in regards to his former platoon and knew with detail what was occurring within the platoon six months post exit. The tone of the first interview narrative revolved around hollowness and loss, and Peter had no intention to fill that void resulting from the distance of his battle buddies with, for example, student peers. The campus was located near mountainous areas, and this proximity served Peter well since he was deeply committed to many kinds of outdoor activities. His outdoor character, which consisted of adventuristic features, was a salient I-position in his self. It was a laborious process for Peter to create and shape a student identity, and this difficulty plausibly related to a situation involving his peers upon the onset of their studies together. In a written assignment which was intended to assist the students in getting to know each other during the first days of study together the whole class wrote that he was militaristic. Peter's teachers were more proactive and provided Peter with assignments to cultivate alternate behaviors (e.g., while his peers were assigned tasks outdoors, whereas Peter was assigned indoor activities), while Peter also tried hard later in the first term to develop new behaviors such as not leading the peers all of the time. This was a taxing dialogical process between a dominant military position and a growing student position. By the end of the study year, an emerging student character was evolving with features that included the capacity to take a step back and to listen to others, and to be inefficient and to do things without any specific purpose. This developing character showed many counter features when compared with the military character's efficiency, concentration on results, task-focus, unwillingness to compromise, and purpose when engaging in activities.

Time 2 (T2): during the second interview, 20 months post exit and five months postgraduation from this education, Peter described a specific episode prior to the graduation. The class was given a similar leadership assignment as the one which defined him upon their onset together; now the class thought Peter had become more harmonious and calm, no longer task-driven and militaristic. Moreover, Peter's character and I-position as a student, as described by his student peers, now found it much easier to connect with others, open up, share things, and approach life in harmonious ways. According to Peter, there were now two sides to coin. Another progression in Peter's life was that he had found employment as a

member of a ski and rescue patrol in the northern Swedish mountains. This was a positive evolution for Peter since it was relevant to his civilian education, complementary to his outdoor interest and also utilized his military experience, including medical training, yet something new and different—a promoter position. This brought Peter into another new civilian community, and the feelings of emptiness, loss and loneliness were now behind him. The dichotomy between military and civilian worlds and relationships had been bridged, and the importance of military camaraderie and community had declined.

Time 3 (T3): during the third and final interview, 32 months post exit, Peter had continued his career in the ski and rescue patrol and appeared to be drifting even further away from his military life. Peter continued to present his civilian characters (e.g., graduated student, member of the ski and rescue patrol) with their counter features. The tone was set by Peter as he felt harmonious and enjoyed the adventurous life in the mountains with his girlfriend, who was a major promoter of his military deprogramming. Peter frequently worked to expand the distance between his civilian self and his old military self; and he exalted working in the rescue patrol compared to the service in the Armed Forces.

### *Peter's embodied transition*

Peter's transition to civil life also had an important bodily dimension. His exploration of different sports is one example. During every interview, Peter had found yet another sport to try out: rock climbing, rafting, and kite surfing. Through these sports (in addition to his physically challenging work for the ski and rescue patrol), Peter found for himself the challenges that he so missed in his final years of service. There was, however, also a changing attitude toward physical activity in general that ran parallel to his changing, more relaxed attitude in social situations described above. Perhaps the most important change had been that while Peter was constantly looking for ways to challenge himself physically, he learned to appreciate the use of his body in a more "free" way than when he was in the military. He learned that he could undertake hikes that did not serve a particular purpose, but that were just for fun. And during those hikes, he need not stick to the military way of marching. Peter described a moment where he realized that he could take hikes according to his own preferences instead of moving through the mountains according to the military "50-10 rule" (50 minutes of marching followed by a 10-minute break):

I noticed this a lot with people with a military background who come up here, and who sometimes bring their wives. And then they explain how they will go about it when they will hike up to Sytertoppen. And then it's 50-10, 50-10, yes, but what is the fun in that? We just passed a beautiful spot, but we will sit here instead because only now the 50 minutes have passed. Perhaps if you are marching with a thousand men that might work. (Peter, T2)

Peter's changing attitude to physical activity was reflected in his changing relationship to the uniform. During the first interview, Peter frequently mentioned what he referred to as "the green clothes." At that point, to him the uniform marked a clear distinction between those who have served and those who have not. And even though he no longer wore the uniform, it still guided his actions and the way he moved through the world:

Now that I have left the military it is not like my friends see me as a different person, they still see me as a soldier through and through. My squad leaders are killing themselves because they think I will kneel down every time I check the map when we are out in the mountains in civil clothes. (Peter, T1)

During the second interview, however, he indicated that he wanted to look beyond the green clothes. He had exchanged his military uniform for the work clothes of the ski and rescue patrol, and this new outfit seemed to suit him very well, since the new clothes were not completely civilian: people tended to think he was a police officer when he wore them. When asked about the beret that was lying around the house, he admitted that his eight years of military service still defined him in important ways. There were, however, other things that defined him now. The beret was important, but so were the skis that he just took off or the mountain bike he kept under his bed. During the third interview, there was no more mentioning of the green clothes. Being able to shape his life according to his strong need for physical challenge, but doing so in ways he himself chooses, seemed to be the most important for Peter. There was in this third interview, however, a new dimension added to the many physical activities he undertook. It was no longer (just) about how he liked them and how they defined him as an outdoor person, but also about what these activities might mean for other people, how through them he might contribute to society. It was no longer just about being able to ski and drive a snow scooter at work: it was also about taking care of other people's safety. Peter realized that through his physical capacities he got to contribute to the greater good, in perhaps more meaningful or at least more concrete ways than when he was still in the military. Peter's need for physical challenge did not change, but what did change was the way he experienced physical activities and the meaning he ascribed to them.

### *Sergeant Emma: A hybrid outcome*

Background: Sergeant Emma was in her mid-20s as she entered the study; she had served for approximately four years, mostly as a military analyst. Emma had been deployed to Afghanistan, and she decided to leave due to disappointment and stagnation amid service. In addition to this, Emma's significant civilian others, such as her boyfriend and her family, influenced her decision to transition to a civilian life since they were seriously worried and concerned during her deployment. As she already had an academic degree and was accustomed to the university

context, she reapplied for university studies which thereby freed her from duty; she hoped that she could then figure out what to do with her life.

Time 1 (T1): during the first interview, one month post exit, Emma articulated that she felt confused in life and was unsure whether she should return to service, since it provided her with meaning, or continue the path to civilian life. Emma also experienced emptiness from time to time; she narrated walking through the grocery store lamenting that the biggest decision of the day was whether to buy oranges or apples. Various cultural I-positions were competing for terrain in Emma's self. A salient internal I-position in Emma liked challenges. This hunger for new challenges, physical as well as intellectual ones, had so far only been nourished by the Armed Forces. Emma's military character was characterized by competence, ambition, motivation, and a strong will to deliver results both intellectually and physically. The student character was not articulated in this first interview narrative.

Time 2 (T2): during the second interview, 13 months post exit, Emma retold serving with her old regiment several weekends as an instructor, and that the connection to battle buddies made the process of transition relatively painless. New to the situation was that Emma had become employed as a civilian security analyst in a governmental agency, a new character which resonated with the internal position that cherished challenges. She was happy with this professional development. Emma's character as a security analyst was shaped in a new civilian culture with less teamwork and more individual work, a more mixed context with both males and females, civilian clothes, an absence of military formalities and hierarchies, and so on. This promoter position integrated old and new positions and functioned in the service of continuity in the self yet in the same time gave room for discontinuity. In addition to this, Emma had recently fulfilled a dream and completed some courses to become a personal trainer, a new character, in a sports club wherein she had made many new friends. This dream could not be fulfilled while serving full-time in the military, as that life was too demanding and irregular. This I-position of a personal trainer cooperated well with Emma's (civilian) promoter position.

Time 3 (T3): during the final and third interview, 24 months post exit, Emma's civilian character and promoter position as an analyst in a governmental agency had continued to grow and reorganize the self toward higher levels of development. Emma had continued to serve as a military instructor some weekends throughout the previous year, which sustained her military character. Emma revealed that she still harbored some ambivalence about her decision to leave active military service which suggests that there was still dialogical friction between preexisting and new positions. Even though her new job was meaningful, Emma desired from time to time to get away from the computer and all of the hellish codes, and back to the camaraderie, the physical parts of service out on exercises and in unplanned situations. In spite of this ambivalence and these opposing feelings, Emma had grown more deeply rooted in her civilian life with her co-habiting boyfriend, family, and growing network of friends, including those at the sports club, and her job, which collectively set the positive tone of the interview.

This repertoire of civilian positions collaborated in the interest of sustaining Emma's civilian path-choice.

### *Emma's embodied transition*

As in Peter's full transition to civilian life, the bodily dimension was important in Emma's transition to a hybrid outcome as well. Like Peter, Emma found physical challenges in exploring new sports such as long distance swimming, while participating in physical military activities during the exercises she joined as an instructor. Emma's account offers more insight in some aspects of the military body that remain less outspoken in Peter's account. First, Emma was more specific about the type of physical challenge the military has to offer that were particularly meaningful to her and which could not really be met through civilian positions. It was not just being physically challenged that she appreciated and missed when no longer in service, it was activities such as the shooting of a rifle, driving military vehicles, and even uncomfortably lying in a ditch in the rain. In other words, it was the particular greenness of these activities that was significant to her and that may explain why, other than Peter, she opted for a hybrid outcome rather than a full transition. Second, having been deployed, Emma was more aware of the fact that her body can be, and has been, in actual danger, and could be again should the Swedish government decide on another mission and she be selected to go. This had not made her refrain from military service altogether, but it had made her more aware of which conditions of service were acceptable to her. Third, Emma sketched what might be regarded as the opposite of the body in danger, but is perhaps just as much an inevitable part of military life: the waiting body. As Emma recalled, many hours in the military, also during exercises, are spent waiting. Although Emma mostly appreciated the physical challenges offered by the military, in civilian life she also missed this dead time, which she no longer experienced in her civilian job, especially for the opportunities it created for the small talk that allowed her to really get to know her colleagues. The "waiting body" as an integral part of the military body is an interesting notion, because it puts into perspective a more dominant view of the military body as necessarily active: in popular culture, the military body is usually imagined and represented as in training or in danger (cf. French, 2005; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009; Verrips, 2006). Usually, this shared experience of hardship and danger is also where a specific military camaraderie is located. From Emma's account, we learn that military camaraderie is just as much located in those moments of boredom, where the body is put on hold and legitimately engages in socializing activities while being on the job. In civilian life, Emma found that this way of "togetherness-while-waiting" was lacking. Civilian bodies engage in different ways in work and leisure time: while at work, bodies generally need to be active (even if only sitting behind a desk), only when the work is done is there room for bodies to relax and "do nothing"—but of course, these are also the moments when one is no longer self-evidently surrounded by colleagues to

participate in “doing nothing.” Thus, in civil life, Emma had to find new ways for her body to be implied in socializing: it was no longer implied in the job. This conflation of bodies participating in work and social life shows that the transition from military to civil life implies a transitioning in exploring the boundaries between professional and personal life. While in the military the personal and the professional seem to be connected by default, in civilian life Emma needed to become attuned to new ways of setting these boundaries and locate herself in this new setting. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, as a female with a small posture, Emma’s experiences were those of someone who does not have a cultural normative military body, which introduces the cultural complexity of a military identity. During the first interview, Emma’s experiences as a female appeared to be somewhat anecdotic: how was she to pee in Afghanistan when there were no trees around and people were watching? In the third interview, however, it became clear that being a woman in male-dominated military culture had shaped her experiences in significant ways, both in a negative and in a positive sense. Being the only female in the company during deployment has been very hard on Emma. She had felt the subject of ongoing gossip and had found it difficult to become part of the team:

You need to prove yourself all the time. You need to prove that you deserve this, that you belong, and only after that you can become part of the group. And if you in some way fail during this critical first period, if you become ill or if you in some damn way have a bad day and mess up a navigation or you do something stupid . . . These things happen. Then you are, like, no longer trusted. (Emma, T3)

Also when just working in Sweden, Emma found that being a woman would single her out, often in subtle and unintentional ways. The remark “it is good to have a woman on the team,” she explained, was probably not meant in a bad way, but she preferred to be told “it is good to have *you* on the team.” On the positive side, Emma experienced that having to fight gender stereotypes had made her tougher and made her feel like she could overcome difficult situations. This attitude could also come in handy in her civilian life. As Emma explained, in civilian life, too, as a woman with a small posture you may need to work harder to be heard and noticed. When addressing large audiences, she could fall back on her Sergeant-self (stretching herself a bit, speaking in a specific way).

In Emma’s account, there appears to be a tension: the specific aspects of the military that she appreciated, which were the green, physical activities, were also the aspects that, because of her body, were not automatically available to her. Emma had to find ways of reducing the negative and cultivating the positive aspects of acquiring and maintaining a military body. Her hybrid outcome of serving in the military part time seems to be in accordance with these embodied negotiations: she got to appreciate and identify with the green activities she so loved, but could now do so on her own terms.

## Discussion

Transition from military to civilian life takes place in both narrative and embodied ways. In the narrative sense, from the accounts of both Peter and Emma, it becomes clear that a transition to civilian life can be experienced in terms of conflict and loss (cf. Bragin, 2010; Brunger et al., 2013; Savion, 2009; Yanos, 2004). Preexisting military I-positions and new civilian I-positions as a student or a security analyst were demonstrated with opposing cultural expectations and performance. In both cases, but most notably Emma's case, significant others such as a partner/family encouraged them to invest in a career, while competing external positions, that of former colleagues, drew them back into the military (cf. Grimell, 2015, 2017a). As time progressed, both Peter and Emma developed promoter positions recognized by a number of characteristics such as openness toward the future; specialized and qualitatively different positions with the capacity to integrate new and already existing positions. Both the ski and rescue patrol position and the security analyst position evolved into a central place in the position repertoire and thus offered the potential to reorganize the self toward higher levels of development. They also worked in the service of continuity and discontinuity of the self. Continuity was served by their capacity to link the past, present, and the future of the self, and discontinuity to a certain degree resulted from the fact that they served as a source of new positions (cf. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Valsiner, 2004, 2005). In the case of Emma, although with a higher degree of dialogical tension, her military I-position was allowed room in her future self. In the same time, preexisting and new civilian positions cooperated with her promoter position in the interest of sustaining the civilian path-choice (Nir, 2012).

From the two case studies, it becomes clear that the bodily dimension in military identities play an important role in how Peter and Emma perceive of their life in the military but, more importantly, also in how they transition out of it. Those aspects that were significant in becoming embodied soldiers (an outdoor lifestyle, enduring hardship, embodied ways of socializing, acquiring a certain posture and way of speaking) were also important in their transition process. Most importantly, both Emma and Peter found ways not only to live a certain physically challenging lifestyle but also to imbue these activities with new meanings. Their bodies enabled them to explore physical activities for other reasons than within the context of the military. Physical challenge could now be about fun, or about enjoying the company of friends, or investing in the safety of others. Their bodies could thus become vehicles for new identities, moving from the body of a soldier to the body of a ski and rescue patrol member or a personal trainer, while developing a complementary position to the military one. Not all aspects needed to be unlearned or undone: some could be developed through new identities, slightly altered, or activated according to circumstance.

The interviews also raise important, and perhaps more broad, questions about body and ownership. For Peter, it was very helpful to realize that transitioning also meant he could reclaim ownership over his body. Across the study, the military



cultural influence over Peter's body continued to decline in the interview narratives. Yet the greatest dialogical conflict Peter presented in the third and final interview concerned the clashing views of bodily discipline within his self. His military I pushed him to go and workout, as he always did as an officer no matter how tired he was, after a long exhausting working day with the ski and rescue patrol. His civilian I on the other hand thought it was alright to go home and instead relax and spend time with his girlfriend. As for Emma, her hybrid outcome made it possible to give her body to the military, but under different and more individually controlled conditions. This reclaiming of ownership is reflected in the narrative relocation of the self, which also becomes more individualistic rather than part of a collectivistic whole. Yet their accounts also show that a civilian body, too, is in certain ways owned and that a completely "free" body does not really exist. At work, Emma's body needed to be constantly active, leaving hardly any space for the self-evident socializing she had participating in during the many moments of "doing nothing" in the military. Both Peter and Emma complained that in their civilian jobs they had less time to work out than they would have liked, and Emma in particular had to spend a significant amount of hours behind a computer screen which allowed for dialogical tension between opposing voices (Hermans, 1999, 2003). Moreover, now that they no longer were wearing the uniform, they had to reconsider their outfit. This may seem a rather mundane concern, but especially through transition narratives, it becomes clear that clothes bear particular cultural meanings. For Peter, his "hybrid uniform" of the ski and rescue patrol did fit his new identity perfectly well with continuity and discontinuity, but Emma narrated how she sometime felt estranged when her female friends had endless discussions about what to wear to a party. As the "green clothes" and all they represented in terms of unification and collectivism were relegated to the closet, both Peter and Emma found out that there were no such things as neutral appearances.

Finally, the case studies show how the experience of embodying and disembodying the military life is also about the *kind* of body that an individual has, and here cultural gender dimensions of the military body are of importance for the self-identity work (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Although it has been argued that the military identity in general and military masculinity in particular is not homogeneous and stable (Gardiner, 2013), several studies have pointed at the importance of gender in both the construction and deconstruction of a military self. It is through ideals of hegemonic masculinity and its particular relation to the body and emotions that recruits (both male and female) learn and unlearn to become service members (Cooper, Caddick, Godier, Cooper, & Fossey, 2016; Gardiner, 2013; Higate, 2001). This gendered nature of the construction of military and civilian selves is reflected in the two case studies. Peter, who has a normative military body, may never have had to ask himself the questions that Emma, who has a non-normative military body, has had to ask: Do I fit in? Am I accepted? Will I be able to do this? For Emma, acquiring a military identity seems to have been accompanied by much more resistance and struggle than was Peter's (cf. Badaró, 2015;

Burkhart & Hogan, 2015), and it included much more “emotion work” (Hochschild, 1979). Since her military identity was constantly contested and hard-won, it may also have been harder for her to depart from it. While in this article gender has been a category of significance, other identity categories have also been pointed to as of importance in the acquisition of a military identity in the face of normative bodies, such as race (Jensen, 2016) and homosexuality (Adolfson & Keuzenkamp, 2006). These categories should be included in further studies into transition processes.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have discussed only two case studies, and we do not presume that these provide us with the whole picture of the narrative and bodily dimensions of the transition from military to civilian life. But in consideration of the relevance of idiographic research for psychology, and because this research is based on exhaustive longitudinal information on singular cases, it provides us with valuable general notions about psychological processes that are observed along transitions which opens the door for understanding their variability. We do conclude that already in these two accounts the ways in which individuals narrate and embody their military and civilian identity are very different, but also that narrative and embodiment are closely intertwined. Based on our analysis of these connected processes, we argue for distinct attention paid to the relationship between narrative and embodied positions of the transitional process in the counseling of military personnel who leave the service. We therefore suggest that our analysis could form the starting point for a broader perspective on DST (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) which acknowledges the social dimension and the bodily dimension in the evolution of I-positions but demonstrates a certain focus on childhood and adolescent development. Our study illustrates that the body continues to have a powerful influence also later in life amid self-identity work during transition from military to civilian life. Since the narrative and the bodily process have been demonstrated to be so closely connected or increasingly intertwined, it may be useful for professionals who counsel the transition process to explore together with their clients which of the embodied aspects of military life in particular they valued (or did not value), and how such embodied processes may take shape in meaningful identities in civilian life. Importantly, such an exploration need not be restricted to the specific context of transitioning from a military to a civilian context, but could be applied to other moments in life where significant transitions take place. We are here thinking of transitioning from related occupations such as the police, the fire brigade and medical professions, as well as more general significant life transitions such as migration, retirement, and detox. We are in particular also thinking of studies of processes of deconversion, where individuals depart from a context of a strong group identity which is sometimes accompanied by dress codes and certain (ritualized) behaviors in order to live a much less defined secular life. These studies, we suggest, could benefit from an approach where narrative and bodily dimensions of their transition are brought into dialogue.

For narrative and embodied transitions to be understood in relation to each other, we suggest, first, that attention be paid to the specific role of the body in this process. This could be done, first, by acknowledging the body from a semiotic perspective as a dimension of language and a bearer of signs and meanings. For instance, which meanings were connected with wearing a uniform, and which meanings are attached to the variety of civilian clothes that are worn when entering civilian life (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 179)? What are significant moments of conformation and disruption in personal appearance? How are appearances related to fitting in or standing out in various contexts? To give a brief example, work-related clothes such as a uniform or a bulletproof vest could be seen as a “semiotic skin” (Nedergaard, 2016) which has both a cultural and a personal meaning, for instance conveying messages of the ways in which the person who wears these clothes is either protected from or subject to possible harm. Second, we suggest that such a focus on “embodied narrative sense-making” (Cunliff & Coupland, 2011) would imply taking the body seriously as an epistemological tool. The body is not merely a sheet on which cultural meaning is projected but has a narrative agency of itself. This means that in understanding and successfully negotiating a process of transition one needs to “listen to one’s body,” not only in the more general sense of taking seriously signs of unease, fatigue, or ache but also to the specific story or narrative the body has to tell. Third, and finally, our suggestion is that the focus on embodied narrative sense-making leaves open the possibility that a variety of stories about military I-positions can be told. Both the military as an institution as well as cultural productions about military life stress the military identity and body as being part of a social unit such as that of the squad or the platoon. Our interviewees supported this notion of their military identity being part of strong, shared group identity. Their narratives, however, also showed discrepancies, in particular Emma, who found that her female body did not easily fit into this “grand narrative” of military identity. Embodied narrative sense-making can therefore be expected to be most successful when it pays attention to the interplay between cultural and personal processes of meaning-making, and when it does not uncritically affirm dominant understandings of either professional or personal identities, but rather pays attention to the complexity and layeredness of identity construction.


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**Jan Grimell** is a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam Centre for the Study of Lived Religion). He has conducted a longitudinal interview study on 19 Swedish service members amid their

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**Mariecke van den Berg** studied Theology (BA) and Gender Studies (RMA) at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). She obtained a PhD in Public Administration from the University of Twente in 2014. She currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. From 2009–2016 Mariecke served in the Royal Netherlands Army Reserve, at last as a noncommissioned officer.