

Military discharge is not simply an occupational transition—it is a critical psychosocial event capable of profoundly disrupting identity, belonging, and psychological health. Despite extensive government investment and veteran support initiatives, military-to-civilian transitions remain marked by persistent mental health challenges, alienation, and elevated suicide risk internationally. Addressing a crucial but inadequately understood phenomenon, this thesis seeks to answer the question: *why, how, when, and for whom does military discharge produce identity losses, and in what ways do these identity losses contribute to veterans' mental health and well-being?* Through integration of quantitative, qualitative, and autoethnographic research methods, this thesis provides evidence that identity loss during discharge is not an inevitable, within-person psychological outcome occurring at the moment of discharge, but rather a socially and institutionally enacted process that may unfold throughout service and extend long into civilian life.

My original contribution to knowledge lies in identifying military institutional processes as key determinants of veteran transition outcomes. Specifically, I identify military identity centralisation as a formal psychosocial hazard; the systematic and institutionally reinforced process by which military identities become highly centralised, monopolising psychological resources and needs, and decomplexifying self-concept, thereby creating the conditions for profound identity loss at discharge. Additionally, I identify discharge-related institutional betrayal as a critical factor contributing to identity loss and introduce the mechanism of social-moral identity threat, by which institutional transgressions contribute to identity loss via communicating rejection both before and long after discharge.

In the course of this research, I adapted and validated Subjective Loss of Self Scale in military populations. Where previous measures relied on proxy indicators of identity loss, such as identity strength, conflict, or continuity, the validation of the Subjective Loss of Self Scale offers a direct measure of veterans' subjective experience of identity loss. Across two

quantitative studies involving United States and Australian veterans, I found a significant positive association between negative discharge experiences and subjective loss of self, which in turn predicted poorer mental health and well-being outcomes. I further found that perceived institutional betrayal mediated the relationship between discharge experience and both past and future dimensions of self-loss. Using a mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches, I found that discharge-related institutional betrayal and identity loss were largely shaped by what can be considered psycho-social hazards during discharge, small to large events that veterans experienced as transgression. Some veterans, i.e. those medically discharged and also those with a prior positive military experience (up until the point of discharge) were more negatively impacted by discharge events overall. These findings highlight that identity loss is socially enacted, relationally mediated, and institutionally facilitated during discharge.

This research advances theoretical understandings of identity loss and institutional betrayal in military contexts and demonstrates that military transition must be re-examined through social and organisational psychological perspectives. By recognising identity loss as an institutional psychosocial hazard rather than an inevitable outcome determined largely by the individual, this thesis provides a critical roadmap toward institutional accountability and compassionate transition practices, with profound implications for reducing veteran distress and saving lives.