Making dialogue with an existential voice in transition from military to civilian life

Jan Grimell
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

Dialogical Self Theory has contributed to the endeavors to map and grid self-identity work in transition from military to civilian life throughout an empirical and longitudinal research project which focuses on existential dimensions. This article is based on a case study from this project and centers upon Sergeant Jonas, who, upon his return from deployment in Afghanistan, struggled with his transition as a new existential position was vocalized throughout the following annual interviews. This voice narrated feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, and of having been deceived. In turn, this existential voice required an answer to a question which apparently had no answer. The meaning-making eventually evolved into an acceptance which enabled Jonas to proceed with his life. Dialogical processes between positions are important in order to go on with life amid existential concerns in the aftermath of military service since dialogicality of the self opens up a complex of dynamics of meaning-making processes, negotiations, and transformations. Based on the findings, it is suggested that the Personal Position Repertoire could potentially be strengthened by the addition of an internal existential position to its standard repertoire, at least when working with military personnel and/or veterans.

Keywords

Dialogical Self Theory, existential position, military, transition

Introduction

At some point, whether after only a few years of service, or mid-life, or even at typical retirement age, every military service member has to transition back to a civilian life and reintegrate into a civilian population. A growing body of research suggests that transitions from military to civilian life have the potential to challenge service members on

Corresponding author:
Jan Grimell, Faculty of Theology, Practical Theology, De Boelelaan 1105, Amsterdam, 1081 HV, the Netherlands.
Email: j.m.grimell@vu.nl

personal, social, familial, financial, and administrative levels (Adler, Bliese, & Castro, 2011; Blackburn, 2016; Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2012; Higate, 2008; Jolly, 1996; Moore, 2012; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Yarvis & Beder, 2012). Included among such challenges is self-identity work, which may become a taxing process for service members as they need to reformulate the stories of who they are as civilians, as they are no longer actively serving (Beder, 2012; Brunger, Serrato, & Ogden, 2013; Buell, 2010; Drops, 1979; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Savion, 2009; Wheeler, 2012; Yanos, 2004; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Self-identity work may also implicate coping with military experiences of an existentially burdensome or even traumatic character which could be formulated as existential concerns or moral injuries (Litz et al., 2009; Roth, St Cyr, & McIntyre-Smith, 2013; Yalom, 1980). An ongoing empirical and longitudinal research project is investigating existential and religious dimensions in narrative identity reconstruction among nineteen Swedish military service members during the process of becoming civilians. Although seldom used in empirical research on transitions from military to civilian life prior to this research project, Dialogical Self Theory (DST; Hermans, 1996, 2001a; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) has contributed heavily throughout this project's endeavors to map and grid self-identity work as it progresses.

Utilizing DST, a range of case studies from the research project have been published which illustrate different types of positions, derived from the theory, throughout the participants' self-identity work during transition. The results from the case studies, as already published in several articles, suggest that a military culture shapes a military story of "who I am" which creates a specific, sometimes vociferous, military I-position within the multiplicity of self (Grimell, 2015). Military and civilian I-positions, displayed as storied characters of the self, often demonstrate opposing narrative characteristics (Grimell, 2017a). Transition from military to civilian life calls for some type of reorganization of the self as pre-existing and new I-positions are supposed to function in a workable way, yet in a different cultural context; friction and tension may then increase in the self during the process. In the published case study of Sergeant Erik (Grimell, 2015, 2017b) the development of a third position as a reserve officer was suggested to function as a mediator between conflicting military and civilian positions in the self during the transition from multiple deployments in Afghanistan into a hybrid civilian/military life. Meanwhile, in the published case study of Sergeant Helen, previously opposing military and civilian I-positions became dialogical over time through a reformulated relationship and construction of meaning between the military and civilian positions in the self which allowed for cooperation and room for both to coexist (Grimell, 2017a). Taking another path, the case of Lieutenant John, who returned to full-time service, demonstrated that the self, over time, became integrated into civilian culture and life by entering into a steady relationship with a girlfriend, a development which included the prospect of marriage and children (Grimell, 2017a).

In this article, which is a further continuation of the series of case studies on self-identity work in transition, the longitudinal case of Sergeant Jonas will be presented so as to demonstrate the development of an existential I-position during the process of leaving military service. The interview cycles followed Sergeant Jonas, who had a military background in the Air Force and had served approximately four years in the Swedish Armed Forces including several deployments to Afghanistan and elsewhere, as he tried

to reintegrate into the civilian population and life over a three-year period of time. This will lead to a discussion of whether an existential I-position may be added to Hermans' (2001b) Personal Position Repertoire (PPR) so as to potentially strengthen it from an existential point of view.

This article will utilize a narrative approach and concepts derived from DST. One particular research question is formulated: How may existential concerns influence military transition to civilian life? The analysis will also be informed by the sub-questions: (a) what experiences dominate the transition and (b) what existential concerns influence the process?

The article will continue with a conceptualization of DST with an emphasis on I-positions, transition, and existential concerns, followed by the method, case study portrait, discussion, and conclusion.

Conceptualization

The classic definition of a dialogical self (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992) emphasizes the dimensions of space, time, and relations between positions:

> 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. (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992, p. 28)

It has been postulated that a dialogical self consists of two types of I-positions: those linked to the internal domain of the self and those linked to the external domain of the self (Hermans, 2001a, 2001b). I-positions within the internal domain of the self are located inside of a person (e.g., "I as ambitious" and "I as an enjoyer of life") whereas I-positions within the external domain of the self are located outside of the person (e.g., "my children" and "my work") but are really part of the self. Given the basic assumption of the extended self, the other is not outside of the self but rather an intrinsic part of it (Day & Jesus, 2013; Hermans, 2001a, 2013). The composition of these I-positions creates the position repertoire of the multiplicity of the self (Hermans, 2001b). However, unity is still a central concept and achieved through the composite self. Unity and continuity are narrated by attributing I, me, or mine to positions and, even if they are contradictory, they belong to the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

The composite self, more or less successfully, promotes integration between decentralizing and centralizing movements of the self (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). This movement of the self could be understood as a dynamic process of positioning and counter-positioning between I-positions. When an internal or external I-position increases tension or even instigates conflict with other positions, the composite self may act in the service of integration of diverse positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). The challenge of such a dialogical exercise of the self may differ from person to person. The capacity may be highly flexible or locked under a dominant I-position, where monologue becomes the hallmark of the self. The dialogue of the self may be conducted between two internal I-positions (e.g., "I as happy" agrees with "I as an enjoyer of life"), between

internal and external or extended I-positions (e.g., "I as patient" dislikes working with "my restless colleagues") or between two external I-positions (e.g., "my family" enjoys spending time with "the members of my track and field team"). The dialogical capacity of the self is tightly linked to our society, and a paucity of dialogue within a society will have a corresponding effect on the capacity of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2002, 2004; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007).

The dialogical self has the capacity to engage a coalition of positions, which may work together for cooperation and support. A coalition may arise and cooperatively act due to the desires, motives, and interests of such collaborative I-positions. Such a coalition may become dominant and could potentially decrease the capacity for dialogue, or it could promote innovation of the self amid the necessity of addressing change (Hermans, 2008). Moreover, the development of a third position has the capacity to unite two conflicting I-positions of the self. While promoter positions serve as innovators of the self on a temporal level and may include real, remembered, anticipated, or imaginary significant others. Promoters may be located within the internal and/or external domain of the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). According to Valsiner (2004), promoter positions can be recognized by a number of characteristics such as openness towards the future and a potential to produce specialized and qualitatively different positions in the future self. Through this openness they host the capacity to integrate new and already existing positions. Promoter positions have a central place in the position repertoire which includes the capacity to reorganize the self towards a higher level of development. Moreover, they function in the service of continuity of the self, but at the same time allow 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: A crisis or a process of adaptation

A transition may or may not lead to crisis; however, a crisis and a transition have rather different impacts on the self from a dialogical outlook. Presented elsewhere it has been suggested that as life is lived, unexpected and traumatic changes may result in crisis (Grimell, 2016). A crisis is understood as a disorganization of the self when core positions are changed or compromised. A position is considered a core position when a large number of other positions are dependent upon its functioning (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). When a core position loses its organizing function over the position repertoire, then those other positions are likewise eroded in a cascading manner, and disorganization of the self is very likely to manifest. This can begin an avalanche where many other positions are consequentially affected and undermined. The narrative structure of "who I am" is literally impacted, possibly to the degree that it is shattered and fragmented (Ganzevoort, 1993, 2008; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

As new situations in life are encountered the self will likely need to adjust its organization of positions. "In the case of a transition, the self is confronted with a new, unfamiliar or even threatening situation that requires an adaptation or reorganization of the self" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 239). However, a transition does not necessitate the destruction of core positions but rather instigates the adaptation or

reorganization of I-positions to a new situation. From a narrative perspective the stories of "who I am" still exist but need to be reorganized and retold. Thus, a reorganization of I-positions corresponds with a reorganization of stories. It has been suggested elsewhere that such a transitional situation may become a challenge for a dialogical self as it may result in decentring movements of the self (Grimell, 2015, 2017b). These movements, more or less, disrupt the existing integration and organization of positions. If the dialogical self senses that it is losing ground faster than it is gaining, that forward traction has been lost, especially over an extended period of time, then this regressive movement may entail a significant and looming risk of crisis and fragmentation. Such a back-slide begs for re-direction.

If the self, adapts throughout the transition, with intact but somewhat reorganized core positions, progressive development likely follows. However, existential concerns may appear during the transition and continue for a long period afterwards. The rise of existential concerns which may unleash experiences of meaninglessness, emptiness, or lack of place in the world, may have a profound impact on the self in a transition such as this. Existential concerns may serve as a type of fuel or energy which affect a self beyond expected tension or even conflict during reorganizing and adaptive movements amid transition. Such an existential experience of meaninglessness or emptiness in the self may or may not be described, using the terminology from DST, as an existential I-position dependent upon how it is constituted and related to other positions which react in response to the transition. Such a voice may be engaged in searching for the construction of meaning or meaning-making in the potential proceeding with life (Frankl, 2006; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Yalom, 1980).

Transition from military to civilian life: Rather unlike other professional transitions

Individuals, of course, enlist for military service for various reasons which they as individuals find meaningful, such as education benefits, personal and professional development, championing freedom and democracy, and/or a yearning to leave the world a better place, and with different intended and expected roles which may exclude them from actual combat, but the ultimate underlying fact is that each military force is sculpted to be a cohesive system which is designed and intended to destroy. Many examples of military forces being used for humanitarian and rescue operations present an interesting paradox and are often touted as reasons to join the armed forces, and the fact that several nations have maintained military forces for long periods of time without engaging in any conflict complicates the reality even further. Therefore, it might be suggested that there is a difference between the basic combat training of soldiers and how a military force may be used or not used in practice, but nonetheless military identities are shaped in such ways that service members, at least technically speaking, earn the skill, capacity, and armoury to break the (civilian) cultural taboos to commit the otherwise legally punishable act of killing other humans when on missions or during wartime. Military communities are segregated from civilian society and train service members in a variety of ways to face death, and potentially kill, based upon such

prerequisites. This implicates that military cultures stand in stark contrast to civilian cultures within the Western world (Bragin, 2010; French, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Hall, 2012a, 2012b; Kümmel, 2011; Strachan, 2006; Verrips, 2006; Wilson, 2008). In turn, this suggests that military identities are instilled with opposing cultural practices, meanings, and values when compared with civilian professional identities in general. Taken altogether, these imply that military I-positions, which are linked to military identities, are different from other professional I-positions (e.g., teacher, lawyer, truck driver, nurse, firefighter, and social worker) and suggest that the military transition to civilian life may face other potentially more taxing challenges. It is not uncommon that military personnel in the aftermath of service need to address different types of existential and/or moral concerns in the process of reorganization and adaptation. Such concerns may span the gamut from experiences of meaninglessness, emptiness, moral issues, to suicidal thoughts, quests for a place in the world, or to construct meaning amid trauma (Bragin, 2010; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006; Kopacz & Connery, 2015; Larner & Blow, 2011; Yalom, 1980). Dialogical tension has been used as a tool to explore military-related moral injuries via the framework of DST (Farnsworth, 2014).

Method

This research project was launched during the summer of 2013 to investigate existential and religious dimensions in identity reconstruction among 19 Swedish service members undergoing the process of becoming civilians. Annual interviews were conducted between 2013 to 2016. The approach is narrative. The process of narrative analysis is an inductive inquiry wherein the methodological principle is built around the interview (Clandinin, 2013; McAdams, 1988, 1997, 2013; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2002, 2006). The case study of Sergeant Jonas from this project is presented as his case grapples with the type of existential concerns and the existential I-position upon which this article focuses. He also gives voice to other participants in the project who dealt with existential issues in the aftermath of service. His case study enables an enriched presentation of the process of transition which includes detailed narrative accounts. The case of Jonas belongs to a series of case studies, as presented earlier, which demonstrate different types of positions in DST.

Interview sample

A letter of information about the study was distributed via email or postal service. In the early stages of the study a proportion of the letters were distributed by a Swedish regiment (i.e., Norrbotten Regiment) as the service members were about to or had recently exited. The vast majority of the sample volunteered through a snow-ball sampling method (Noy, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005). 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. The participants joined the study without any confessional requirements.

Interview methodology

In order to cover topics relevant to the purpose of the project, a semi-structured interview protocol was used throughout the three interviews (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 & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Riessman, 1993; Scherer-Rath, 2014; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The topics covered included: military story, transition, relationships, identity, and existential concerns. The interviews in general lasted 60–90 minutes. Each interview was transcribed into a complete transcript. Complete transcripts in Swedish and summaries in English can be provided to other researchers upon request.

In addition to the fact that I 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, thereby we shared a common background (Mishler, 1986, 2004).

Definition of experiences and existential concerns

Some time ago Clandinin and Rosiek suggested that experience "does not refer to some precognitive, precultural ground on which our conceptions of the world rest. Instead, it is a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). This statement suggests a continuous interaction with the self, others, and the world and thereby introduces the idea that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences as a result of a person's interaction with the self, other humans, communities, and the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, Clandinin (2013) understands continuity from an ontological perspective as experiences are continuous, and all that humans ultimately have in which to ground our understanding on in the stream of personal, social, and material interactions. Such a pragmatic-inspired and narrative understanding of experience infers that narrative analysis is a methodology which studies experience as storied.

Existential concerns refer to storied experiences of meaninglessness, emptiness, and indifference. This article adopts a softer version of Yalom's (1980) perspective of meaninglessness, emptiness, and indifference as a prerequisite of being in the world which suggests that experiences of being in the world may from time to time generate existential issues voiced by a position in the self which require some type of answer. In this case it refers to salient experiences of military service and deployments, which, as a result of existential rumination, necessitate a search for the construction of meaning or meaning-making in a transitional process in order to instill existential experiences with meaning (Bragin, 2010; Frankl, 2006; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006). Such a meaning-making process would in theory imply that meaning could be constructed in experiences of meaninglessness.

Narrative analysis

Steps 1–2: In the early phase of the analytical process, 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 (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McAdams, 1988, 1997). This is in correspondence to what Ganzevoort described as *global reading*, which serves as the first step "to get a general picture of the text" (Ganzevoort, 1998, p. 28).

Step 3: Global reading was then followed by re-reading to discern and hone in on the story lines, whereupon a more precise tentative meaning of the central existential themes of meaninglessness, emptiness, and indifference uttered by the participant was developed.

Step 4: A qualitative software program called Atlas.ti (version 7.5.16) was then used to organize and compare the content of the themes throughout the analysis. By comparing the narrative evolution of the content within the existential themes over time (Time 1–3), it was possible to discern a type of meaning-making used by the participant, and furthermore how such concerns influenced the process of becoming a civilian.

Step 5: It was also assumed that existential concerns and other storied experiences were tailored to specific I-positions or narrative characters of the self (Hermans, 1996, 1999). The main characters which populated Jonas's interviews were labelled by the researcher as "the military staff member" and "the engineer." This was a way of giving the salient characters in the story corresponding I-positions of the self which were related to existential and other experiences (Hermans et al., 1992).

Step 6: The analysis has been summarized into a case study portrait wherein the most crucial aspects of the analysis are presented. The narrative accounts have been selected based upon their significance during the analysis. Some details of the narrated accounts have been slightly altered in the article to protect anonymity; Jonas is not the participant's actual name. Square brackets indicate that the researcher has added clarifying material within them, for example: [Jonas is referring to missions]. The narrative accounts have been taken from the verbatim Swedish transcripts and translated into English. The grammatical errors in the English translations are the result of the best cooperative, face to face while reading and re-reading the original transcripts, attempts of the native Swedish researcher and a native English speaker who has used Swedish as a second language for a decade to directly and accurately, with regards to content, translate the real-life revelations of Sergeant Jonas in all of their intricacies, nuances, and grammatical imperfections as he strove and grappled to convey his complex thoughts, feelings, and meanings as most of us do in our everyday lives: rife with grammatical errors. It is far more important to convey his meaning, even when the search for meaning is itself a struggle which includes an acceptance of meaningless, than to pencil out minor errors or attempt to smooth out inconsistencies.

Case study portrait

At the time of the study, Jonas was in his early 30s and had a background in the Swedish Air Force. He had served in different positions, spanning from rifle platoon to staff section, as a Sergeant (Other Ranks 5) for about four years on time-limited deployments in

Afghanistan and elsewhere. Between deployments Jonas studied at a university and earned an academic degree as an engineer. However, upon graduation in a recession-racked country (and Western world) he experienced difficulty finding civilian employment, so he returned once again to military service and deployment.

First interview (Time 1): A feeling of being deceived coupled with a sense of emptiness

At the time of the first interview (2014) Jonas was 2 years post-exit in relation to his most recent deployment in Afghanistan and was about to finish a 1-year fill-in contract as an engineer at a private company. As Jonas was invited to talk about existentially tailored experiences he described the early phase of his transition into civilian life:

> When I came home after the last deployment it was a rather tough summer and fall. The reason was that, then it was this here feeling of having been deceived, misled by something which you couldn't really put a finger on. By someone who you couldn't really know who. It was really, brutally strong then. That summer and fall was for me as a civilian very, very difficult. There weren't any flashbacks or PTSD stress but instead a pure depression is what I would prefer to call it. Stemming from, based then upon what I said before, the feeling of having be lured by something of someone, but that emptiness, but it never became so extreme so that there were as you would say suicidal thoughts, absolutely not, and it was never so extreme so that one isolated oneself from his surroundings or that one applied for help for it, but I would like to call it a milder depression based what was said before, I repeat myself, but emptiness.

During the first interview, about two years post exit, Jonas still experienced meaninglessness and emptiness in regards to his deployment, and as he was invited to describe it some more he replied:

> When one deployed to Afghanistan I think that very many had a naïve idea that they in some way could rescue the world or in some way do something life-changing. So that I believe many in fact from these deployments carry with them a little emptiness in their self because it happened to me a little bit afterwards. But I feel like I should say that those last two deployments, that I experienced them as totally meaningless, I must unfortunately say… A feeling of having been deceived almost. A feeling that a person has been promised something, which one has not been promised I must emphasize, but nonetheless this here feeling that one had been promised something, but no, which one later did not receive. It is a feeling of having been tricked, fooled. But it is impossible to really define what it was which one had been misled about or by whom. So it is an emptiness after the missions or more a disappointment maybe or as I said before it is impossible really and say what it is which one is disappointed about or who.

In regards to his military identity he replied:

> Yeah, in fact, deeper than what I actually thought. I never thought, so that now when I work as an engineer and, I notice indeed myself that I sit and formulate plans in a way which no other does because I think very much: "yeah, but if this happens what shall I do then?" We must have a, not strategy, but a plan of action about what happens and we cannot sit and talk over one another in front of the consultant, yeah it resides deeper than what I thought.

It appears during the first interview that Jonas has applied to become a reserve officer since the civilian/military combination instills meaning, and he replied:

> The salary is indeed not so good in the Armed Forces but at the same time it is cool to be a part of the military and live, not live soldier life so to speak, but instead to be able to work with it as one is educated as, as an engineer then. It feels meaningful, in fact more meaningful than to be permanently employed full-time or to deploy on missions.

Second interview (Time 2): One could not answer it; and that I believe was the answer

As we met one year later (2015), Jonas was 3 years post-exit. He had a tough year in which he was unemployed. He attended about nine job interviews with no positive results. Meanwhile, the experiences of being deceived after the return from the last deployment were still salient. Jonas stated:

> It was indeed like I said to you before a year ago that the biggest mistake which they who deploy on international mission make, especially all of those who are new, rookies if a person would like to call them, it is that they really believe that they accomplish something, that they make a difference or that they really offer something in some way. That they make a difference. One does not, it is the first thing now that comes to mind. So here in hindsight it is so pointless. Who had stood, had it really played a significant role if it was a Swedish infantry soldier who stood at a check point on that road, had it really made any difference.

In response to the subsequent question addressing his experience of deception Jonas articulated a change:

> In the interview a year ago so said I that when one comes home from international deployment so was it a feeling of having been fooled. But the problem with this feeling, was it that therein I believe also that the feeling itself resided, I couldn't point out who or what you were disappointed in but you were deceived: "how had you been deceived?" It was that I, one could not answer it; and that I believe was the answer. It was a question which did not have any answer about what caused it which one found oneself in, in one such a situation which simply had no answer.

Somewhat later in the second interview it appears that Jonas was not approved to become a reserve officer, but in reaction he applied to become an officer and was approved. A feeling of fitting in within the military context contrasted with being a perceived misfit in a civilian context appears in regard to this development, and Jonas stated:

> So that it is indeed a return to the whole can I in fact think, and it is really a decision taken based simply upon the recent unemployment and of course self-understanding then about my old job as an engineer that there, there exists a place where one fits in and it is simply in the Armed Forces, simple as that. Of course, I often heard during the evaluations that I was too direct, too blunt and almost on the border of mean, they did not accept well certain things that I did there, simply put. So then I realized that after this year of unemployment then, I have in fact been on rather many interviews where they, the first question one is given then is indeed simply about

these here years down in Afghanistan and what one did and one notices yes also that they lose interest rather fast, or one sees in fact in them that they lose quite a lot of interest when one explains what one has done in one's engineer's service and it is, yes, it is indeed understandable that must I indeed agree with. Because as I have said before these years which were needed to gain the experiences and competences which make one a marketable engineer, those I have wasted.

When asked how he felt at that very moment during the interview in regards to his pending attendance at the Military Academy and the prospect of becoming a full-time serving officer, Jonas replied:

It is a, it is a mixed feeling. There is a feeling of indifference in a larger sense to the job search even if I of course must do it [as required by the employment service until he begins at the academy], but at the same time so exists a little hope that if one indeed finds a job as an engineer, finds a job as an engineer so will I probably take it because it is what one has been educated for. But at the same time so is there also a longing back.

Third interview (Time 3): The evolution of a military identity

As we met for the third interview (2016) Jonas had completed his first term at the Military Academy, and had just begun the second. He attends the interview in his uniform. The focus of the interview is in resonance with the uniform Jonas is wearing. In the previous two interviews Jonas began his answers to the open questions about his military story with his experiences of meaninglessness, indifference, and emptiness in regards to the aftermath of deployments. But this time he starts to talk about his current experiences from the Military Academy. Jonas's military identity has evolved, and he is puzzled by that:

I should say that it is a totally new identity as earlier mentioned, this is, as also earlier mentioned, built upon my time in conscription and during international deployments. That which I react to very strongly now in my new identity, which also surprises me, but at the same time irritates me a little also, is that I react very, very strongly when I see civilian personnel in civilian positions walking around in uniform. That I react to very strongly. I cannot really understand the need for it, and I question also the right to do it… For it is a feeling which makes me a little surprised, especially since I never reacted this way when I was deployed abroad. For then I thought that these here civilians who go around in uniform and think they are so cool, they were mostly cute to look at, they are so sweet, yeah, let them play. But now when one has become real military and should be a part of the system, not just a temporary part, but instead a permanent part of the system, then I believe that one questions the need for these personnel to go around in uniform.

New information in the third interview narrative is that Jonas had a dream to become an officer for a long time. He applied the first time to the Military Academy in early 2000 after his conscription was completed, but was not approved. Still, however, it is a complex of feelings since it has taken so long to fulfill this dream. In regards to his current thoughts about life Jonas replied:

As I said before, that one is mid-30s and will soon take the exam, and how many years do I have left then in the career field? And which positions will I get? Is it worth it? What is it for a new

life which awaits one? Such thoughts have I of course had. And furthermore, have I also reflected upon how had life evolved if one had been accepted earlier? What would one have done?

The overall stress is gone according to Jonas, despite these issues in regards to how his life has evolved, and he stated:

It feels incredibly satisfying. It feels as though, as you say, one has not found the identity, because that I have kept the whole time, but one has found this here little part of the world which is mine. Absolutely. Something solid to stand on and expand upon.

Discussion

The complex of meaninglessness, emptiness, and feelings of having been deceived and disappointed narrated and experienced by an existential voice in Jonas's self required an answer, and his answer was an acceptance of existential questions which really did not have any given answer. This acceptance was a type of existential meaning-making with interrelated internal and external layers in his self, which will be subsequently elaborated. In retrospect, the third interview (T3), 4 years after the most recent deployment, gave an important existential narrative clue about what had been going on in Jonas's self across time. He had apparently harbored a dream to become an officer for quite a long time, but had been rejected on repeated occasions by the Armed Forces, and this rejection generated stressful emotions for Jonas's military I-position. In the early years Jonas could cope with that and still sustain this dream to some degree by deploying. But once he committed himself to military service and deployments, the military I-position also grew stronger at the expense of other positions, yet it kept his dream going. Additionally, every deployment ended in the same way: Jonas was sent home to his civilian life and so was his dream to become an officer. Jonas eventually earned a degree as an engineer between deployments, but this professional identity could not be sufficiently integrated in his self since he could not find civilian employment. So, Jonas deployed one more time, and somewhere while chasing the dream to become an officer and compiling multiple deployments, Jonas's existential voice grew within his self to engage a complex of existential concerns. When he returned from the most recent deployment in Afghanistan and was sent home to his civilian life, depression, emptiness, feelings of having been deceived, meaninglessness, and disappointment haunted him. Jonas felt that he had been deceived, but he did not dare explicitly say to himself (or to the researcher) what or who he was deceived by and disappointed in; it was existentially dangerous to acknowledge that the agent behind such emotions had control over and was the source of his dream: the military (according to the researcher). This situation became even more complex as potential dialogue could not be made on the same terms since the "power differences" and hierarchy between the Armed Forces and Jonas were absolute (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 38). With time, being a former service member and civilian engineer on a time-limited job, the dream of becoming an officer drove Jonas to apply once again to combine a potential civilian employment with being a reserve officer. But the application was rejected, and the time-limited job was concluded, and these disappointments

were followed by unemployment and various failed attempts during job interviews to start a career as a civilian engineer. As a response to the most recent rejection, and perhaps to the overall situation, Jonas applied once more, this time to become a regular officer, and he was approved. His dream had finally become reality; he was happy and living strongly his new identity as an officer.

An external layered existential concern vocalized by Jonas's existential position was related to the real-life experiences of deployment in a war zone such as Afghanistan. Over time, Jonas felt that his and other service members' presences in Afghanistan were meaningless. Jonas recounted that it was often expected, particularly by less experienced service members, to achieve great things by deployment to a war zone, to contribute to a good outcome. Jonas, on the other hand, reported an increasing sense of meaninglessness over the time of his deployments which culminated during the most recent tour in Afghanistan. He tried hard to find any answer to the purpose of the deployments. Ultimately his existential evolution led this voice in Jonas to the conclusion that he could not answer that, and that was the answer. Using other words, this was meaning-making by acceptance. Military service may include a wide range of experiences which often go far beyond those of an ordinary civilian life (French, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Strachan, 2006). Such experiences could span from being a witness to or engaging in war, combat, violence, death of battle buddies or others, and killing during deployments, to making a tremendous effort and risking one's life for the sake of national and international reasons such as defending democracy, Western values, and freedom in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Motives such as these for war and combat may not always seem reasonable in the eyes of service members executing orders and commands in the field (Sørensen, 2011). These types of experiences may leave the service members with moral injuries and/or existential questions to deal with in the aftermath of service (Litz et al., 2009; Nakishima Brock & Lettini, 2012; Rambo, 2010). Military service and particular deployments to areas of conflict likely accentuate the awareness of potential existential and moral issues which only exist on a theoretical level prior to deployment. Psychologically or sociologically tailored literature on military research and transition to civilian life often emphasize meaning-making approaches of experiences with a negative impact on a service member's self (Bragin, 2010; Kopacz & Connery, 2015; Larner & Blow, 2011; Schok, 2009; Schok, Kleber, Elands, & Weerts, 2008). Such positions suggest that some type of meaning-making processes are critical in order to reframe the meaning of experiences and instill new understanding of trauma or moral concerns so as to then go on with a life worth living. This article has acknowledged acceptance of existential concerns as a type of meaning-making device, inspired by theological perspectives of acceptance derived from Tillich (1957, 2014) and Ganzevoort (2008). Jonas accepted an immutable circumstance of his military service and deployments from the outlook of his current life situation, and this acceptance, built upon several years of rumination, enabled Jonas to proceed in life. The observation that the meaning-making by acceptance was demonstrated during the second interview, which corresponded with Jonas becoming a regular officer, may suggest that this acceptance was facilitated by Jonas's dream of being accepted by the Armed Forces coming to fruition, a type of mutual and/or reciprocal act of acceptance which assisted Jonas's existential voice in letting go of deployment concerns, even while new, yet less dire, existential concerns were still vocalized.

Jonas's self evolved in complex ways throughout these years amid the interplay between an internal dream, an existentially articulated voice in his self, meta-cognitive activities from a bird's eye perspective upon his most influential I-positions (i.e., military and engineer), and the lack of robust civilian promoter positions which could support the development of a civilian life on a temporal, as well as a spatial, level of the self. The significance of promoter positions in military transition to civilian life has been recognized repeatedly in the series of case studies presented earlier in the article and elsewhere (Grimell, 2015, 2016, 2017b). In Jonas's case, the Armed Forces functioned as a significant other which supported the development of a promoter position for Jonas during the temporal evolution of his new identity as an officer. The promoter position as officer was a specialized, qualitatively different yet central position in his present and future self with the potential to reorganize and integrate new and preexisting positions. Additionally, the officer position could link the past and present with the future, even while encompassing a degree of discontinuity since it was a new position and a source of inspiration (Valsiner, 2004). The approval to become a regular officer also implied that a new, yet more qualitative, dialogue was established between the Armed Forces and Jonas which allowed for "progressive movements" of organization of positions around his military I-position which was now destined for stability (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 237).

Hermans' (2001b) PPR was considered with special interest while reflecting upon the case of Jonas's evolution of an existential I-position. The idea of PPR was presented as:

> The PPR is devised as a method for the investigation of the spatial realm of the self in such a way that insight is gained not only into the multiplicity of existing positions, but also into the more dynamic process of positioning, repositioning and being positioned in a variety of social contexts . . . In order to facilitate dialogical processes, positions were approached as voiced positions, able to tell their stories and implied meaning units. (Hermans, 2001b, p. 362)

In the PPR's standard list of internal and external I-positions (which includes 52 explicit internal positions and 41 explicit external positions) no explicit internal position was found which corresponds directly to an existential voice wrestling with meaninglessness, emptiness, indifference, failed dreams, and rejected desires which require some type of answer. However, dialogical processes between positions, and especially potential promoter positions, are important in order to go on with life amid existential issues in the aftermath of military service since dialogical capacity of the self opens up complex dynamics of meaning-making processes, negotiations, and transformations. Therefore, when investigating the spatial realms of military personnel and/or veterans who may potentially have such voices that deal with existential concerns spanning the gamut from experiences of meaninglessness, emptiness, moral issues, to suicidal thoughts, quests for a place in the world, or to constructing meaning amid military trauma, it is suggested that an internal existential position (e.g., I as having existential concerns) and an internal position of an active/former service member (e.g., I as a soldier and I as an officer) may be added to Hermans' (2001b) PPR. The PPR could potentially be strengthened by making this explicit addition when assisting military personnel and/or veterans in dialogical self-identity work and counseling.

Conclusion

A dialogical self evolves in complex ways over time as preexisting and new I-positions encounter the many facets of life and significant others. Jonas's military service and multiple deployments interrupted and delayed the growth of his civilian I-position as an engineer. Meanwhile, an existential voice grew within his self, fueled by experiences such as depression, having been deceived, meaninglessness of deployment, and emptiness, and all the while a military I-position continued to harbor a dream of becoming an officer whilst the engineer position failed to find sustained civilian employment. This should serve as an invitation for those who work in the field of counseling military service members and veterans to pay greater attention to the implications of repeated deployments with regards to dialogically supporting self-identity work and the integration into a civilian life and population. A dialogical self evolves in complex ways, as was seen in another case study from the same project. In the case of Sergeant Helen (Grimell, 2017a), it was revealed in the first interview about 2 years after her deployment in Afghanistan that she had experienced great difficulties reconciling her civilian activist position and her military position. During the second interview, after several years as a student, she narrated that she had been encouraged by military peers to redeploy to a war zone and was scheduled to do just that in the following weeks. During the third interview, she had returned to Sweden and continued her studies, and her dialogical capacity had improved. In fact, she had reformulated the meaning of her military experiences and arrived at the conclusion that the activist position within herself could actually enrich attitudes and understanding within the military context. A strength of DST is that it allows for a conceptualization of transitions beyond the simple move of a homogenous entity from A to B, instead various positions are interacting differently at different moments in time. Yet DST is itself no more than a theory, and thus exists on a totally different plane from Jonas's haunting real-life existential experiences of meaninglessness, indifference, and emptiness. So, in the interest of potentially expanding the theory to better include existential experiences, a potential research question for the future would be to what extent an existential I-position is qualitatively different from all of the other I-positions in the dialogical self-model.

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Author biography

Jan Grimell is a PhD candidate in practical theology at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. He has conducted a longitudinal interview study on nineteen Swedish service members amid their transition from military to civilian life. The overarching purpose of the study is to describe the role of existential and/or religious dimensions in identity reconstruction during the process of becoming civilians. Several articles from the project have been published.