

Identity Negotiation in Military Service Members

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Abstract

The identity of the hero and of military service members are often intricately linked in hegemonic civilian discourse. This connection is often created through popular media, such as film, and achievement recognition, such as the Medal of Honor. However, veteran identities are not limited to this connection, as there are multiple identities that a veteran can embody. This study takes a rhetorical approach through discourse analysis of an interview conducted with a Navy veteran in order to demonstrate the fluidity and multiplicity of identities that veterans constitute themselves as, as well as how the hero identity is negotiated.

Introduction

Military service requires service members to go above the call of duty expected from civilians, and because of this, service members and veterans are often seen as heroic. Films, such as *American Sniper*, and achievement recognition, such as the Medal of Honor, contribute to this connection between military service and heroism in the dominant civilian perspective. The connection reduces the identity of the service member or veteran to a singular one—that of the service member-hero. But in reality, service members, like civilians, produce fluid and multiple identities through interactions, and do not limit themselves to one identity.

The concept of heroism is typically studied through historical and literary lenses, while less attention has been paid to the discursive construction of heroism and its relationship to the military services. In order to study military identities and their relationship to heroism, I conducted an interview with a recent Navy veteran, Caroline. This study demonstrates the identities that this veteran produces during a one-on-one interaction. I aim to answer the following research question: In this interview, how does Caroline (a pseudonym) negotiate her competing identities as a former member of the military, a former and future civilian, and a hero? My analysis demonstrates that Caroline consistently negotiated between identifying as a veteran and a civilian; at times, she distanced herself from the dichotomy of these identities and indexed herself as a separate, unspecified identity; and she demonstrated that she is indexed as a hero by society.

Although there is a lack of research on the multiple identities of members of the military and the complexities that accompany them, I highlight some of the relevant research on the military and civilians, identities, and heroism. I then describe and analyze my interview based on established methodological principles for discourse analysis.

Identity Scholarship

Civilians often connect heroism and military service. Elizabeth Goren claims that “societies ‘use’ heroes as role models ‘for their own purposes’...the hero is created by society as ‘a collective response to...helplessness and dread of less.’... In society’s ‘hunger’ for heroism, heroes function as a source of ‘vicarious relief’ for the ‘unbearable emotions’ of the society it serves” (38). In other words, an image of the hero is constructed by society. Military service members are perceived by civilians as heroes, regardless of the service members’ own beliefs on their identity as a hero. Lisa Leitz proposes a less singular way to view members of the military and their identities: the use of “oppositional identities” as a concept to apply toward veterans and

military families. Her research focuses on participation within the peace movement, and she argues that veterans/soldiers and their families have oppositional identities if they participate in such a movement because peace conflicts with what the military stands for and thus what veterans/soldiers and their families have to support. However, this is not the only scenario in which a veteran or service member may have opposing identities—I propose that a service member has to negotiate between the identity of being a former civilian, being a service member, and being indexed as a hero.

Stephen Gibson and Susan Condor discuss social identity as it relates to social groups, distinguishing between social categories and institutions. Membership in a social category is “determined by judgements concerning the similarity, or functional equivalence, of a distinguishable class of people,” whereas institutions are made of a hybrid of members, both human and non-human; these institutions can include “groups of people, but also...material objects (places, buildings, and artifacts, and procedures [constitutions, statutes, bureaucratic systems, and so forth])” (314). “Institutions” describes the military and civilians in a broad sense because it encompasses the technology, artifacts, procedures, etc. that are related to the respective institution. These two concepts—social categories and institutions—are useful as tools for understanding identity, and how national identity and military are connected.

Other studies have been conducted on military identities, such as examining the dual identity of military identity and civilian identity (Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, and Ben-Ari) and identity transition from service member to civilian (Adducchio). These studies recognize the separate identities that members of the military have based on their occupation: when they are employed by the military, they identify as members of the military, and when they are not employed by the military, they identify as civilians. Still, this scholarship does not recognize that members of the military, in particular, do not have singular identities in this way. A member of the military begins their life as a civilian, and then adopts the identity of a service member, and then upon return to civilian life (due to retirement, dis/honorable discharge, medical discharge, etc.), becomes a civilian again. Neither do these studies recognize how these identities, which exist at different times within a service member’s life, interact and influence one another. We have, then, a gap in the literature, as military veterans have numerous concurrent identities, rather than compartmentalized identities. That is, a veteran is simultaneously able to be identified by their prior service and their current status as a civilian, rather than being identified by one or the other.

Framing Identity Analysis

I use two concepts to guide my research design and frame my analysis of identity: the indexicality principle and the positionality principle (Bucholtz and Hall). The indexicality principle argues that “identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes,” which are a) clear mentioning of identity; b) implied characteristics or assumptions connected to identity; c) knowledge of language and interactions; and d) certain ways of speech associated with specific identities (594). The positionality principle argues that identity has three parts: a) macro-categories (e.g. race, age, gender), b) local categories (e.g. civilian, sailor, veteran), and c) temporary roles (e.g. specific to each interaction) (592). These categories and roles are constantly reinforcing and contradicting one another. These two principles allowed me to examine how Caroline’s identities emerge through her speech, how she positions herself through the interview, and how she indexes herself or is indexed¹. While examining Caroline’s discourse, I also examined how she positions civilians in her discourse. Bucholtz and Hall argue that “identity is the social positioning of self and other”—in this case, the “other” being civilians (586).

Through Caroline’s discourse, I also analyze the ways in which she navigates and negotiates “competing identities” (Baxter). This term is similar to Leitz’s “oppositional identities.” Oppositional identities places two (or more) identities against each other as opposing forces, highlighting the clashes between them,

whereas competing identities acknowledges that an individual has more than one identity at any given time and they compete for dominance (Baxter; Leitz). I explore how Caroline experiences competing identities and oppositional identities. At times in her discourse, Caroline's multiple identities coexist (competing identities) and at other times, Caroline expresses having identities that were in tension with one another (oppositional identities). The tool of footing also helped me analyze how Caroline positions herself and how she indexes herself and is indexed by civilians. Erving Goffman created the concept of footing, which is the "notion that when people talk they can speak as either the author of what they say, as the principal (the one the words are about), or as the animator of someone else's words" (Wetherell 19).

The Interview

The discourse I analyze is an interview that I conducted with Caroline in the spring of 2016. I chose Caroline as my interviewee because we have a personal connection as friends, and we have talked a great deal about her service in the Navy and the topic of heroism. In order to study both Caroline's identity and her relationship with the hero identity, I decided to conduct an interview because I was interested in examining how Caroline produced and made sense of these identities during an interaction. In order to prepare for this interview, I generated a list of questions that I wanted to ask as well as some possible follow up questions. These questions included the following: How would you define what a hero is? Is there any experience that you've had where you would say that you felt like a hero? Do you have any experiences that come to mind that you can think of someone else acting as a hero? Do you think that the difference, however big or small, between the military's and civilians' definition of heroes is problematic?

I had Caroline read through the interview transcript to make sure that there were no major errors in what she thought she said and what I transcribed. She selected the pseudonym Caroline after the interview. Once I had read through the interview several times, I began asking the following question, which I pose for this study: In an interview, how does Caroline negotiate her competing identities of being a former member of the military, a former and current civilian, and a hero (as indexed by society)?

I focus on multiple passages from the interview in order to demonstrate patterns of speech throughout Caroline's discourse, as no single passage or utterance alone addressed my question. Multiple utterances show ways in which Caroline switches between how she indexes herself both as a former member of the military and civilian, as well as an identity other than a member of the military and civilian. I also used multiple utterances because Caroline demonstrates that she is indexed as a hero by civilians in utterances that are separate from the ones in which she indexes herself as a veteran or an "other" identity.

Analyzing the Interview

Negotiating Veteran Identity

Through Caroline's use of pronouns, she indexes herself in the interview as a former member of the United States Navy, but also as an identity outside of it. Caroline indicates her identity in response to the question, "Would you say that the military trains people to be heroes?"

I think that our training as far as being situationally aware and how we handle situations sets us apart from people who did not have that training. I think it's very closely related to the flight or fight response. Ours has been conditioned to choose a certain response and a civilian has not had that type of training or been in a situation where they have to make those decisions

consistently so their responses and our responses would be different. [Utterance 1]

In the first sentence, Caroline uses first-person, plural pronouns such as “our” and “we” to describe herself and the military. She uses these pronouns to distinguish between two institutions (Gibson and Condor): those who have had “that training” and those who have not. The use of first-person, plural pronouns suggest that training contributes to identity production within this population. She clarifies that the people without this training are civilians by saying, “Ours has been conditioned to choose a certain response and a civilian has not had that type of training...” This opposing population to the “our” that Caroline is identifying with is consistent in both statements, which equates the “people who did not have that training” with the “civilian[s that have] not had that type of training.”

Caroline also uses third-person plural pronouns in this response: “...a civilian has not had that type of training or been in a situation where they have to make those decisions consistently so their responses and our responses would be different.” In contrast to Caroline’s use of first person plural pronouns, the use of third person pronouns indicate that she is excluding herself from the social category or institution that she is describing. Therefore, she uses “they” to index civilians as a separate identity from her own. Caroline goes on to say “their responses and our responses would be different” in which the opposing populations are put in direct contrast by her use of pronouns. This direct contrast demonstrates Caroline’s indexing herself as a veteran and not a civilian. Caroline aligns herself with the military in this utterance because she is acknowledging that as a former member of the military, she has received certain training in how to respond to situations that requires her to follow a different set of procedures from the ones civilians are expected to follow. This training lets Caroline differentiate her (former) military identity and a civilian identity. Thus, as Caroline moves between different identity alignments throughout the interview, she establishes here that her training affects her identity. Since she cannot undo this training, this utterance suggests that the military identity will continue to be a part of her regardless of her occupation.

Although she indexed herself as a former member of the military in her utterance about her military training, Caroline does not consistently align her identity with the Navy. In the following utterance, she indexes herself as an identity that is neither military nor civilian.

...I guess my definition of heroism would be somewhere along the same lines as bravery. I don’t think a hero thinks they’re a hero. I think they just think they did what they had to do and other people just want to make them a hero. You don’t run into a burning building to save someone because you think someone’s going to think you’re great for doing it. You did it because you wanted to save someone. [Utterance 2]

In this response, Caroline uses third person pronouns to create distance between herself and the two institutional identities at play, civilians and heroes. She states that a hero does not think they’re a hero; by using third person rather than first person, Caroline is demonstrating that she does not index herself as a hero. The “they” in the contraction “they’re” suggests that the heroes make up a different institution of which Caroline is not a member. In this utterance, she also refers to the civilian institution, referring to them as “other people.” Here, she is demonstrating that there is distance between the “other people” and herself, as well as the “other people” and heroes. The footing in this utterance suggests that Caroline does not claim the hero identity for herself but that she also does not belong to the institution of “other people” who perceive others as heroes.

In Utterance Two, Caroline also uses second person pronouns: “You don’t run into a burning building to save someone because you think someone’s going to think you’re great for doing it. You did it because you wanted to save someone.” The use of second person pronouns here represents an indefinite subject, similar to the function of third-person pronouns. These pronouns distance her from the content. Once again, by not using first person singular or plural pronouns, Caroline is not aligning herself with the hero identity. In this passage, she is not indexing herself as either of the identities that she presents: hero or “other people” (civilians). Thus, she others herself from identities that are present in the discourse around heroes and the

military, identifying neither as a hero nor a veteran in this utterance. But neither does she identify as a civilian. For Caroline, the identity “options” relating to the institutions of the military and civilians are not binary. Among the identities that members of the military can assume, there are options beyond just military and civilian; as Caroline does, some may align themselves as an “other”—something outside of both of the institutions. This does not demonstrate a limitation for identity; an individual can be both a part of an institution and outside of it because identities are fluid and multiple, not singular.

Caroline also indicates that members of the military are indexed as heroes automatically due to their service. I asked if she thought a civilian’s definition of heroism differed from a member of the military’s definition. Her response:

I feel like from what I understand from people that I talk to who aren’t in the military, they think pretty much anybody in the military is a hero because they’re doing what they can’t do. Like the person in the military is doing something so great and something that they can’t possibly imagine themselves doing. So I think it’s similar but it’s still got its own limitations. [Utterance 3]

The important piece of this utterance is, “...they think pretty much anybody in the military is a hero....” Similar to Utterances One and Two, she uses the third person plural “they,” representing civilians. Therefore, Caroline is reflecting on her perception that civilians “think pretty much anybody in the military is a hero.” In this utterance, civilians have the power to index members of the military as heroes, giving them an identity that members of the military do not necessarily index themselves with. In saying “pretty much anybody in the military,” Caroline assumes that civilians do not base the indexing on a specific action done by members of the military, but rather solely by their profession. Unlike in Utterance One, she does not use first person plural pronouns, which would include her, when talking about members of the military. This creates a distance between herself and the subjects of the utterance, as she speaks as the author rather than the principal, again using Groffman’s concept of footing. “Like the person in the military is doing something so great and something that they can’t possibly imagine themselves doing” excludes herself as a hero. As well, the phrase “pretty much anybody in the military” indicates that civilians view heroes as a generic identity; civilians do not pinpoint specific individuals as heroes when assigning the identity of the hero to members of the military. Both reasons demonstrate that the identity of a hero is indexed for Caroline by civilians and is not an identity that she indexes herself as.

Caroline’s discourse demonstrates both competing and opposing identities. She demonstrates ways in which the identities of military member, civilian, and hero can contradict one another and clash (oppose). This overlap and navigation of identity does not always result in contradiction and opposition, but Caroline demonstrates that it is a possibility. One of the major clashes that Caroline highlights is the indexicality of the hero; civilians index members of the military as heroes, but Caroline argues that members of the military simply do their job and follow their training. Thus members of the military do not necessarily view themselves as heroes. Caroline does not index herself as a hero; rather, she distances herself from that identity and distinguishes it as indexed by civilians. Seeing these “oppositional identities” at play is important because it demonstrates that identities are not complacent in their contradictions, but rather clearly clashing. Although civilians and members of the military—current or former—may have similar definitions of heroism and what constitutes a heroic act, the contradiction that arises is the connection between heroism and the military.

Categories of Identity

In the interview that I conducted with Caroline, I did not focus on the ways in which her macro-category identities interact with her local category identities (per Bucholtz and Hall’s positionality principle). In my reading of the interview, the local categories were more dominant than her identities relating to race, age, gender, and so on (which could be due to my personal relationship with Caroline). Given that other scholarship considers the ways in which macro-categories and the identity of the military interact, I chose to

focus on the local categories within the interview. The local categories that are present within these utterances are civilian, former service member, veteran, and hero.

Caroline positions herself as a veteran in her response to the question “Do you think that you being granted a medical discharge will affect how you are or will be seen as a hero?”

I think the term “veteran” lends itself to heroism just because there still are Vietnam and WWII veterans who are still alive, that when you go to that status from active duty to veteran people automatically assume you took part in some great thing that was bigger than yourself. I mean, yeah, on some level, I am taking part of something that’s bigger than myself, but I’m one small person in this large unit that is advertised, if you will, as a global force for good. I’m not even kidding, that’s our slogan right now. So lame. And on top of that, me being a disabled veteran, people...blow my service even more out of proportion, not realizing that the things I’ve done are far more minute—my injuries are directly related to my genetics, not what I did. [Utterance 4]

Positionality can create identities that overlap and contradict one another, and the identity of veteran does just that. Caroline positions herself as a “disabled veteran” very clearly in the utterance: “And on top of that, me being a disabled veteran....” A veteran is not an active duty service member, but a veteran is also not quite an ordinary civilian. A civilian does not have the military experience of a veteran, but a veteran does not share an occupation with a current service member. Caroline therefore occupies a middle space that borrows from both institutions to create her identity of the veteran. This middle space can be seen in her flexibility of identity within the interview: In some utterances in her interview, Caroline indexes herself alongside the military; in others, she indexes herself alongside civilians. This timeline of identities is reflected in the way she indexes herself because the identities are still a part of her, even when her current identity is not the same as her past. That is, Caroline occupies the civilian identity and the military identity simultaneously, and this is why she must continually negotiate her identity through her discourse.

Caroline also position herself as a hero during the interview. This positioning is different than that of her positioning herself as a veteran because I contribute to this positioning by asking, “Is there any experience that you’ve had where you would say that you felt like a hero?” As I, in part, help to position Caroline as a hero, she participates:

Mmm... I mean, I suppose I might have felt like a hero at some point in time probably with my squadron because there were a few times when somebody was in the wrong place at the wrong time and I just happened to be watching to let them know that “hey, that jet wing is going to hit you in the face unless you turn around and duck.” I mean, but that’s really just me watching and making sure someone wasn’t going to get hurt, which I was just doing my job. [Utterance 5]

Caroline acknowledges that there has been at least one time that she has felt like a hero during her career. The action that contributes to her being able to identify as such is just part of her job, as she says, but it nonetheless is an act that she allows to position her as a hero. This admission relates to the idea of training contributing to heroism that she discusses earlier in the interview, because it suggests that service members may be trained to act in a heroic way, and thus heroism may be a characteristic of military service.

In Utterance Five, Caroline acknowledges that she has performed actions that she would qualify as heroic; however, by saying “I was just doing my job” she demonstrates that she is a hero because she is doing what is expected of her. It is possible that Caroline acknowledges this action as heroic in order to be cooperative as an interviewee and to “please me” as the interviewer but also as her friend. While this was not the aim for my question, it would demonstrate the way in which individuals may alter their identity to appease others. As noted, Caroline suggests that civilians index members of the military as heroes, and Caroline’s utterance would demonstrate the way in which members of the military might cooperate with that indexicality. She also starts this response with “Mmm... I mean, I suppose I might have...” and this demonstrates that a) she had to think of an example and did not have one immediately come to mind and b) she was not confident about her answer. The “Mmm...” that begins the utterance signals the pause that she

took with an audible sound. Caroline uses both “I suppose” and “I might have” rather than “I felt like a hero....” She continues the utterance by saying “I mean, I suppose I might have felt like a hero at some point in time probably...,” which is nonspecific and not definitive. The modalities and hedges in this utterance demonstrate that, while Caroline may be able to position herself as a hero, she does not automatically identify as one—she had to put thought into the act of positioning herself as a hero. If she typically identified as a hero, she would have been able to recall an example of her identity more quickly and precisely. Again, Caroline’s hesitation may have emerged from her negotiation of that “middle space,” considering this example as simply part of her job while also recognizing that civilians would perceive it as heroic.

Implications

Members of the military embody a multitude of identities, ranging from those belonging to macro-categories to local categories to temporary identities. Caroline is a Caucasian 22-year-old female (macro-category identities); she was a Logistics Specialist Third Class Petty Officer in the United States Navy, which identifies her (and she indexes herself) as a former member of the military; she is civilian; and she is a hero, as indexed by civilians (local category identities). She was also my interviewee (temporary identity). The local category identities (along with the temporary identity of interviewee) are those that I argue she had to negotiate in this interview; she indexed herself as a veteran, as well as a civilian, and she demonstrated that she is indexed as a hero by civilians, and when pressed, could identify herself momentarily as such as well. Caroline seems to make a choice not to call into being her macro-category identities. (Though this might have also been due to the nature of the questions in the interview.) Her focus on local-category identities allowed the identities of veteran, civilian, and hero to be dominant within her discourse. It is also important to notice that individuals can distance themselves from the dominant identities present within their given discourse; at points within the interview, Caroline did not explicitly identify with the military or civilians, which created an “other” identity. This limbo space is one that requires further research: it appears there may be motivations that lead members of the military to identify as this “other” identity, rather than identify as a member of the military or as a former or future civilian.

The limited research on military identities has so far not simultaneously investigated pluralities of identity (e.g., Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, and Ben Ari) and the transition from military to civilian identity—Adduchio, for example, compartmentalizes the identities so that they coincide with occupation (i.e. a member of the military has a military identity during their service and has a civilian identity only when they have left the military). My findings suggest that more research should focus on plurality, rather than transitional or separate identities alone. Such research on plurality should also consider macro-categories of identity such as race, gender, and age, important given their significance and their influence on and relationship with other identities. Further research is also clearly needed on the ways in which military and civilian institutions co-construct one another’s identities. While it is helpful to understand identities separately, and as pluralities, understanding how these institutions co-construct one another may shed light on how relationships between the institutions can be improved.

Also limited is research on how civilians index members of the military as heroes. Although my study aligns with other research demonstrating a correlation between military membership and the identity of a hero, the consequences of this assumed connection bear further investigation. It is especially important to examine these consequences with the understanding that, as my research suggests, civilians are the ones drawing this connection, not members of the military. My findings also suggest possibilities for further research on how the military and civilians communicate with and about one another. The interaction between these two institutions bears much further inquiry. This is more true given that U.S. government civilians run the military, and thus the way in which civilian-created policy informs and communicates with the institution and members of the military will affect the way in which civilians co-construct the military identity. (Activists

critical of the military, most often civilians, would also benefit from a better understanding of military members' pluralist identities.)

This study, in addition to pointing the way to future research, demonstrates the complexity of identities within institutions, even, or particularly, those that are well-established. The military is an example of such an institution, and Caroline's interview demonstrates the way in which American culture has created a stereotypically fixed identity for service members and veterans. This interview and study are important in the way that they illustrate that this notion of singular identities is incorrect. Caroline shows that she operates within multiple spaces when interacting with others, and a fixed identity limits her—and service members' and veterans' across the nation—ability to be fully understood. By accepting the complexity and concurrent identities that service members experience, we open ourselves to more honest and nuanced dialogues that improve the relationship between service members and civilians, and improve the transition for service members into civilian life at the conclusion of their service.

Note

1 I make a distinction between indexing and being indexed because one is intentional by the speaker, and the other is unintentional and occurs solely through the discourse and interaction. In the interview, Caroline attributes the assignment of the hero identity onto members of the military to civilians—civilians identify the identity of the hero for members of the military by attending to certain features of language, and Caroline makes room for this in order to demonstrate that someone besides herself is bringing this identity into being.

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