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Research Brief

Toward a Theory of Discontinuous Career Transition: Investigating Career Transitions Necessitated by Traumatic Life Events

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Research Highlights:

- Traumatic life event is a situation faced by a large and growing population both nationally and globally, but its impact on career is poorly understood. About 650,000 individuals possibly facing discontinuous career transitions necessitated by trauma in the United States and United Kingdom.
- Career is inextricably linked to identity. Attempting to develop a micro-narrative representative of a new career without first establishing a more fundamental, macro-narrative based on foundational beliefs about the self and the world may be a fruitless endeavor.
- Veterans who were transitioning less well focused their new career on conferring security in the present, while those veterans who were transitioning well focused on an espoused passion and excitement of their new career.
- Veterans transitioning well were able to create links between competences of the past and those required by the present and future; they also exhibited a strong proclivity toward linking the skills and knowledge they learned to their emerging career identities.

Authors: J. Michael Haynie, Ph.D.; Dean Shepherd, Ph.D.

Abstract:

“Career researchers have focused on the mechanisms related to career progression. Although less studied situations in which traumatic life events necessitate a discontinuous career transition are becoming increasingly prevalent. Employing a multiple case study method, the authors offer a deeper understanding of such transitions by studying an extreme case: soldiers and Marines disabled by wartime combat. This study highlights obstacles to future employment that are counterintuitive and stem from the discontinuous and traumatic nature of job loss. Effective management of this type of transitioning appears to stem from efforts positioned to formulate a coherent narrative of the traumatic experience and thus to reconstruct foundational assumptions about the world, humanity, and self. These foundational assumptions form the basis for enacting future-orientated career strategies, such that progress toward establishing a new career path is greatest for those who can orientate themselves away from the past (trauma), away from the present (obstacles to a new career), and toward an envisioned future career positioned to confer meaning and purpose through work.”



Implications

For Practice

Veterans who came back from battle experienced a discontinuous career transition necessitated by traumatic life events, ones that are extraordinary, evoke fear and helplessness, and are experienced as threats to survival (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). There are variations in how such transitions are experienced and managed among different veterans. Managing such transitions involves the enactment of behaviors focusing on rebuilding career-identity foundations. Those who are able to reestablish assumptions of the world and self are better positioned to pursue their passion through their careers and structurally link their past (career competences and coping competences) with their future (competences required for a new career). In essence, they are able to manage a discontinuous career transition effectively. In contrast, individuals who have yet to establish these foundational assumptions continue to feel vulnerable to an unknown world. Consequently, they are more motivated by security and think more about the superficial mismatches between previous competences and those currently required for their new careers. Therefore, veterans who face this type of discontinuous career transition should actively and positively rebuild their career-identity foundations. In order to do that, a few suggestions could be helpful: establish a more fundamental, macro-narrative based on foundational beliefs about the self and the world before developing a micro-narrative representative of a new career; focus less attention on career outcomes that provided immediate security against perceived threats and think more from the inner passion; link the skills and knowledge learned from the past to the emerging career identities and transfer the competences for future use.

For Policy

Data suggests that nearly 30% of those veterans who served in recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will live out their lives with enduring physical and/or psychological disabilities attributable to their military service. For them, there is a growing need of career transition after returning. Career transition necessitated by traumatic life events requires policy support from various dimensions. The finding of this research suggests that veterans often have strong interest in entrepreneurial careers because the flexibility and accommodation inherent in entrepreneurship can reduce their concerns about physical limitations, and entrepreneurship as a career path can satisfy some psychological needs rooted in trauma and transition. Therefore, programs and policies designed to foster entrepreneurship for veterans during career transition should be advocated. Also, the finding reported in this paper suggests that rebuilding career-identity foundations is confirmed crucial in career transition of veterans. It is therefore, necessary to provide subsidiary supports including counseling services aiming to solve their psychological issues and consulting service to help them find their career-identity foundations. Further, this research finds that many veterans lack understanding about how to transfer their skills and knowledge in the past to their emerging or current career. Therefore, government or related agencies should promote training programs for helping them better understand their own value and competence in an abstract and structural way.

For Future Research

One possible direction for future researcher is to investigate the nature of trauma and the role of organizational identification before and after the traumatic event by extending the boundary (this study is bounded to be a specific group). Researchers can also use experiments and longitudinal research designs to test the relationship inducted from the data. Furthermore, future research can investigate issues of causality, including reciprocal causality, feedback loops and spirals. Other possible direction is to consider how attributes of the individual, such as prior educational experiences and length of time engaged in the pre-trauma career, may impact psychological recovery from the trauma. There is a need in future research to further investigate the notion of developing a macro-narrative of a new career based on foundational beliefs discussed in this research. Future researchers could investigate the proposed role of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping in creating a path to an emerging career narrative or an obstructed career path. Longitudinal empirical research can follow individuals after they have experienced trauma, with mixed methods used to periodically capture their modes of coping. Testing the proposed model of this study by capturing the way individuals think about the similarities between their previous and future careers could be another possible path to proceed.

Author Information

J. Michael Haynie, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Institute for Veterans and Military Families
Barnes Professor of Entrepreneurship
Whitman School of Management
Syracuse University
315.442.0149
jmhaynie@syr.edu

Dean A. Shepherd, Ph.D.

Professor of Entrepreneurship
Kelley School of Business
Indiana University Bloomington
812.856.5220
shepherd@indiana.edu