CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY DURING AN INVOLUNTARY

ORGANIZATIONAL EXIT: THE CASE OF CIVILIAN CONTRACTORS ON U.S.

MILITARY BASES IN AFGHANISTAN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2016

ABSTRACT

THESIS: Constructing Social Identity During an Involuntary Organizational Exit: The Case of Civilian Contractors on U.S. Military Bases in Afghanistan

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DEGREE: Master of Arts

COLLEGE: College of Communication, Information, and Media

DATE: May 2016

PAGES: 118

Civilian contractors play a vital role in supporting military operations, whether for routine operations or in times of war. While the conclusion of deployment overseas, for military personnel, means going back to their military bases in the U.S., and continuing with their assigned duties, for the civilian contractors, the post-deployment period signifies loss of a job and income. Although academic research has strived to answer some of the fundamental questions pertaining to layoffs in traditional settings, there has been sparse literature on downsizing in a different cultural milieu such as a war zone. This study examines how civilian contractors construct social identity during involuntary organizational exit in a war zone.

Keywords: U.S. Department of Defense; civilian contractors; organizational exit

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my Mother Clothilda and my Father Albert. My parents taught me that education can open all closed doors. Although my mom passed away four years before I enrolled in graduate school, it was her prayer that I would continue my studies and become a professor. I also dedicate this thesis to my wife, Monique. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue my master's degree and become a better person.

Acknowledgements

There are not enough words to thank the many people who touched the core of my Ball State academic journey. I hope those named and unnamed realize how grateful I am for their time, support, advice, and encouragement. First, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Glen Stamp. Dr. Stamp guided me through each stage of my degree, always making sure that I was getting it right the first time. During the thesis process, he offered meaningful feedback, and guided me through the turbulent waters of academia. Dr. Stamp's guidance, patience, and understanding, helped me become a better scholar. Dr. Stamp pushed me to improve my research and writing. Thank you for your unmatched professionalism, energy, and support.

Secondly, I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Laura O'Hara and Dr. Kyle Heuett. They showed me respect and unwavering support. Having two accomplished individuals provide meaningful critique and feedback was an enriching experience. Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment. Dr. O'Hara and Dr. Heuett offered a perspective that pushed me to become a better researcher.

During the thesis process as well as my studies at Ball State University, my family has been my rock and my pillar. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my wife. She encouraged and supported me tirelessly. Monique never let a day pass without inquiring about my research. She was always there to push me and cheer me on. Her support has meant a lot to me. Thanks dad for making transcontinental long distance calls. I'd also like to thank my siblings, nephews, nieces and cousins for their unconditional love and support throughout my stay in the war zone and later in school. They have always had my back. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my in-laws who encouraged and supported me tirelessly.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely depended on civilian contractors to support military operations. Civilian contractors have played a pivotal role in supporting the United States military in combat missions, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian relief missions since 1775 (Luse, Madeline, Smith, & Starr, 2005). Although the United States Army is a volunteer outfit, it has recently experienced two long wars in the Middle East: Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (Bouvard, 2012). Defense analysts note that "the military is unable to effectively execute many operations particularly those that are large-scale and long-term in nature, without extensive operational contract support" (Schwartz & Church, 2013).

As the United States engages its military branches in different levels of operations, both domestic and overseas, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) continues to contract out logistical support for its troops to various military contracting companies. Since World War II, the United States has integrated contingency contracting into its military operations. Historically, the United States military has used civilians for logistical support; for example, 85,000 civilian workers were employed during World War I (DPAP, 2014). But the wars in the Persian Gulf, Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan have witnessed a steady increase in the number of civilian personnel. According to the Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy website, 112,092 civilians were hired to support military operations in Afghanistan against 79,100 military personnel. This is a sharp contrast to the Gulf War, where the United States deployed 541,000 military personnel against a civilian population of 5,200 (DPAP, 2014).

The notion that the population of civilian contractors surged during the Afghanistan war is clear evidence that civilian workers play a vital role in supporting military operations, whether

for routine operations or in times of war. Unlike the traditional military structure, today's United States military personnel coexist alongside civilian workforce units, which provide transportation, force protection, construction, local security force training, intelligence analysis, weapon systems maintenance, and linguistic services. Since uniformed personnel are preoccupied with combat operations, the role of civilian contractors during war is critical as they provide manpower needs and perform tasks once done by the military. For example, in the first months of the Gulf War in 1990, housing, transportation and food were locally contracted (Stanley, 2015).

As the military forces and civilian contractors meld together to fight different insurgents, as in Afghanistan, this creates a unique relationship for civilians, some of whom are considered not part of the uniformed services. Although some of the civilian contractors are military veterans having previously served in the U.S. military, like other civilians hired by U.S. DoD contracting companies, they are subject to military laws, standard operating procedures, and living conditions. The United States military companies in Iraq primarily hired U.S. citizens because most of the positions required security and secret clearance. But in Afghanistan, due to the nature of the conflict and involvement of coalition partners, the civilian contractors comprised U.S. citizens, third-country nationals and local nationals (DPAP, 2014). Third-country nationals is a term that was used to describe non-U.S. citizens while local nationals referred to Afghani citizens.

For military personnel, going "out of the wire," refers to the movement of various infantry divisions out of the forward operating bases in Afghanistan into a war zone. However, a vast majority of civilian contractors may not be directly involved in combat operations. Living and working in a harsh environment where they are physically removed from their immediate

family members for an extended period of time, like their uniformed counterparts, they might experience similar degree of risks and uncertainty. In fact, several newspaper reports have highlighted the deaths of civilian contractors, and the equally dangerous nature of their work (Isenberg, 2012). Additionally, post-wartime deployment literature notes that military personnel report experiencing mental health concerns such as burnout (Institute of Medicine, 2013). Although numerous cases of uniformed military personnel experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been documented (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015), research on civilian contractors experiencing PTSD is lacking, even though some of them still serve in military reserve units. In fact, researchers have extensively explored the role of communication during and after military deployment (Clark-Hitt, Smith, & Broderick, 2012; Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010; Maguire & Wilson, 2013). For example, in their study of how military youth communicatively experience a parent's homecoming, Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, and McGlaughlin (2014) found that military youth had difficulties adjusting to the returning service member's personality and physical health. In addition, Wilson, Gettings, Hall, and Pastor (2015) report that family members of returning service members noticed their loved ones exhibiting behaviors that might be symptoms of PTSD or depression. Despite the focus on returning service members, recent research suggests that civilian contractors face the same traumas of war experienced by military forces (Rand, 2015).

Furthermore, while the conclusion of deployment overseas, for military personnel, means going back to their military bases in the U.S., and continuing with their assigned duties, for the civilian contractors, the post-deployment period signifies loss of a job and income (Gunn, 2011). On June 22, 2011, in the East Room at the White House, President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. would begin to draw down its forces from Afghanistan the following month.

Indeed, by the end of 2011, the U.S. had managed to remove 10,000 troops from Afghanistan in a decade-long war (White House, 2011). When the drawdown of American troops from Afghanistan started, civilians working for the DoD contracting companies were adversely affected. For example, Northern Afghanistan was covered by Fluor Corporation, a multinational conglomerate headquartered in Irving, Texas, while DynCorp International, a U.S. based private military contractor headquartered in McLean, Virginia, provided services to military personnel in Southern Afghanistan.

To mitigate the effects of reduced funding in 2013, the U.S. Army reduced its contracted workforce (Schwellenbach, 2013). With the U.S. DoD being the main financer of wages for civilian contractors working in U.S. military bases in Afghanistan, the budget reduction has had an impact on civilian contractors' jobs. Feickert (2014) contends that as a result of DoD reduction and restructuring in the form of accelerated drawdown, DoD staff, including soldiers, civilians and contractors, are increasingly losing their jobs. It is not surprising that the most affected lot has been the civilian contractors deployed in Afghanistan. Apparently, there is little research pertaining to this group of individuals in the military organization. Research on the war zone, or Afghanistan, has primarily focused on issues such as political tension, language, feminism, media, peace, historical roots, and military deployment (see Dimitriu, 2012; Haigh, 2014; Rawan, 2002; Reyes, 2014). Civilian contractors occupy a unique position within the military culture. They perform roles alongside service members within an organization that is known for being secretive about its dealings. As such, it is imperative for researchers to examine how downsizing within the context of a war zone affects the post-deployment period of civilian contractors. Like their military counterparts, civilian contractors face the same risks in the war zone, and may be injured, captured or even killed.

Downsizing is a common phenomenon in contemporary organizations and work narratives (Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman, & Bordia, 2004), and is primarily a result of budget cuts, an ailing economy, or corporate goals of production and profit. In contrast, in the war zone, downsizing is usually dictated by their overall employer – the U.S. Department of Defense. In light of the militaristic organizational exit culture of post-deployment, it is imperative to explore how civilian contractors negotiate their social identities during downsizing.

This study examined how civilian contractors constructed social identity during involuntary organizational exits in a war zone. In order to investigate the communicative construct of identity during layoffs in the war zone, I conducted nine semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who have worked as civilian contractors with U.S. based military contracting companies in Afghanistan since the start of the war in 2001. The reasons for examining the communicative behavior of individuals who have been affected by layoffs in the war zone is varied.

First, although academic research has strived to answer some of the fundamental questions pertaining to layoffs in traditional settings, there has been sparse literature on downsizing in a different cultural milieu such as a war zone. The few articles and journals that have examined military contracting companies have only described their activities through the lens of a private military. Additionally, the limited research conducted so far on civilian contractors has focused on international relations, the coalition forces, and the role of NATO. Researchers have not placed these military contracting companies in the context of their organizational structures and analyzed the role of civilians within the military culture. Therefore, an earnest examination of DoD civilian contractors has not been conducted. Second, the war in

Afghanistan relied on a larger number of civilian contractors than any other war in the history of the United States. As a former civilian contractor who worked in human resources, war zone downsizing narratives resonate with me. Despite numerous newspaper and journal articles making attempts to explore the activities of the U.S. military, most have failed to examine the effects of deployment and post-deployment on civilian contractors. Indeed, much has been written about returning service members after a deployment, and ignored the returning civilian contractors. A vast majority of the civilian contractors are veterans who deployed to Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Others are reserve members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Thus, it is important to understand the communicative behavior of the returning civilian contractors as they not only exit these organizations but the war zone.

While downsizing in traditional firms is extensively discussed, none has addressed organizational exit from the perspective of the individual working under duress in the war zone. Unlike a traditional company where individuals are not restricted by military rules, in the war zone, individuals have to adhere to strict military rules, and live under austere conditions. Research suggests that downsizing has adverse effects on a worker's health. Numerous studies examine how downsizing may escalate depression risks (Brenner, Andreeva, Goldberg, Westerlund, Leineweber, Hanson, Imbernon, & Bonnaud, 2014). Given that this perspective is paramount in understanding the nuances of downsizing, this study will focus on the communicative behavior of individuals exiting an organization situated in an untraditional context, and operating under different circumstances.

Generally, downsizing presents manifold health threats as individuals strive to cope with the associated stress (Green, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010; Kivimaki, Vahtera, Pentti, & Ferrie, 2000). Researchers have examined employees' sense making and leader

framing (Bean & Hamilton, 2006), and it is within this context that I seek to expand the literature on the downsizing process, especially in non-traditional settings. Since workers tend to be affected by the way the layoffs are implemented (Brenner et al., 2014), Jablin's (2001) model of organizational exit and Ebaugh's (1988) role transition model will frame the analysis. The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals construct their social identity during involuntary organizational exit in a war zone.

The first part of the thesis will be the literature review that addresses the history of civilian contractors in the U.S. military, organizational exit, and an overview of Jablin's (2001) model of organizational exit and Ebaugh's (2001) role transition model. As there are few academic studies on the topic of civilian contractors working for the U.S. military, the sources for this study are drawn from a variety of disciplines such as human resources, management, military history, political science, international relations, and social psychology.

The second section of the thesis will entail the methods, which will highlight the details of the participants, procedures, analysis, and the role of the participant. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, and then analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Following the methods section, the results section will detail findings from this study. Next, the discussion section will offer theoretical insights that can be used by practitioners to improve the downsizing process in non-traditional organizational settings. Finally, this thesis provides a summary of organizational exit and its future implications in organizations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

First Civilian Contractors

On July 6, 2015, the Los Angeles Times published a commentary by Rebecca Zimmerman, an Associate Policy Analyst with Rand Corporation, a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges (Rand, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). Referring to herself as one of the *frontline civilians*, Ms. Zimmerman wrote:

> I'm not a veteran. I am a social science researcher who saw six deployments to
> Afghanistan between 2007 and 2015 - one of an untold number of federal workers,
> contractors, aid workers and journalists who have returned home from a conflict zone
> with our own invisible wounds. We often refer to ourselves as frontline civilians
> (Zimmerman, 2015, "Civilian front workers," para. 2).

For civilians, working in a war zone means living and working on a remote military base alongside soldiers, and enduring rocket or ground attacks. Ms. Zimmerman stated that people tend to assume that the civilians "type memos from safely inside concrete bunkers. Actually, we're often in the field" (Zimmerman, 2015, "Civilian front workers," para. 3). Since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, civilian contractors have been deployed extensively to support the U.S. military and allied forces (Rand, 2015). Historically, the U.S. military has used civilian contractors to support wartime missions. The U.S. military has long relied on civilian contractors to support combat missions during the Second World War, in the Balkans, and during the Gulf War. For example, due to the shortage of workers to support combat missions during the Second World War, the U.S. federal government engaged in a massive recruitment to hire women to work within manufacturing and clerical units in defense industries (Yesil, 2004).

According to the U.S. Army official website, the first bid system for awarding service and supply contracts for the Army was in 1781 when Congress appointed Robert Morris as Superintendent of Finance of the United States. For the next 60 years the bidding system was adopted by the government – use of private contractors to perform military contracts. Prior to 1781, the U.S. military was directly purchasing goods, a system that was deemed inefficient (DPAP, 2014). Luse, Madeline, Smith, and Starr (2005) note that even with the new system, which utilized contractors, several problems arose. First, the Army officers complained of poor diet and quantity. Second, there was a confusion of accounts for fixed military installation as well as moving units. Lastly, the contractors complained of late payments. Despite the myriad challenges at its inception, the system of private contractors was widely endorsed to support military operations in 1783 by top military officials (Luse, Madeline, Smith, & Starr, 2005).

By 1812, private contractors were actively engaged in the War of 1812; providing food and clothing, building shelters, and providing transportation for the U.S. Army (Allen, Morris, & Plys, 2010). Weitzel (2011) observes that after the war of 1812, Brig. Gen Thomas S. Jesup, the quartermaster of the Army, initiated changes, and by the time of the Mexican-American Army War (1846-1848), quartermasters were the contracting agents of the Army. Each quartermaster was responsible for a direct account under the Treasury Department, and they could advertise contracts and make small direct payments whenever needed. At that point, the Army awarded contracts to mainly transport soldiers to Mexico.

During the 19th century, the Army embarked on downsizing its units (Weitzel, 2011). When the Spanish-American War started, the Army, which had laid off some of its personnel, found itself unprepared. Faced with the need to mobilize and transport troops, the Army lacked the capacity because it was smaller. Therefore, it had to outsource services for uniforms,

weapons, ammunition, food, rail transport and ships to help with the movement of troops from

Miami, Florida to Cuba (Weitzel, 2011). Although the quartermasters were procuring services

and awarding contracts, the contracting experiences of World War I exposed contracting officers

as competing with each other for goods and services, hence creating a catastrophic situation that

resulted in scarcity of items and services for the military. During World War I, the military

worked towards centralizing its procurement system (Wilson, 2003), consolidating the

Quartermaster, Commissary, and Pay Departments into the Quartermaster Corps staffed with

approximately 5,400 personnel (Luse, Madeline, Smith, & Starr, 2005). For example, if services

such as extra labor, transportation, and housekeeping were needed, French and Belgian firms

were at hand to cater for those specific needs (Shrader, 1999). Additionally, with a massive

buildup of the troops at the start of World War I, the revamped procurement system ensured that

the Army had enough supply of skilled and unskilled personnel, who worked under the military,

and could be deployed at any given time depending on contingency needs nationally and abroad

(Luse, Madeline, Smith, & Starr, 2005).

The Growth of Contingency Contracting

During World War II the role of the civilian working under the military became integral.

It became clear that, like in the previous war, the United States was still going to utilize civilian

contractors to support combat missions. However, the U.S. government redefined civilian

contracting in two ways. First, due to complexity aircrafts, vehicles and other military

equipment, manufacturers' technical representatives became integral in overseeing operating and

maintenance procedures alongside their uniformed counterparts (Shrader, 1999). In fact, Luse,

Madeline, Smith, and Starr (2005) note that "in some cases, technical representatives were found

on the front lines seeking solutions to problems about their firm's equipment" (p. 9). Kelty

(2009) suggests it is cheaper to hire outside experts to maintain the sophisticated technology than to retain career soldiers to do so. Thus, he further argues that "a mixture of political and economic decisions provided the main motivation for the steep increase in reliance on civilian contractors" (Kelty, 2009, p. 134). Second, the civilian contractors were integrated into combat operations, often engaging the enemy in exchange of fire. As a result, like the uniformed service members, the civilian contractors were either killed or captured as prisoners of war. For example, during the battle of Wake Island, 70 civilian contractors assisting the Marines in enacting defensive positions were killed, 12 were wounded, and 100 civilian contractors captured by the Japanese as prisoners of war (Cressman, 1992). Researchers argue that World War II and the Korean War revolutionized the civilian contracting system. While entering the Korean War, the United States did not have clear cut policies in regards to how a local procurement plan could be utilized to support a contingency operation (DPAP, 2014). Therefore, for the first time, the United States hired Japanese and Korean civilians to support the military in several areas such as road and rail maintenance (Shrader, 1999). Shrader (1999) argues that although the cost of hiring Japanese and Korean workers was high, the Army was able to save significant amounts of money and manpower. Thus, the Army did not have to deploy an estimated 250,000 troops (Luse, Madeline, Smith, & Starr, 2005).

Since World War II and the Korean War, the literature on civilian contracting has expanded, and as a result, several scholars have offered insights into the relationships between civilians and the military. Kinsey (2006) analyzed the growth of private military companies (PMC), which are an integral part of contingency contracting. Kinsey (2006) argues that it is impossible to predict how many military personnel will be needed during the next conflict. Stanley (2015) further reports that most of the U.S. based private military companies have

metamorphosed from providing technical support to offering operational and training support.

Such an arrangement, Kinsey (2006) argues, enables the U.S. troops to execute a variety of tasks

with less manpower. Kinsey (2006) further asserts that the U.S. government will continue to use

private military companies because these companies have close relationships with the DoD, and

the U.S. Department of State. Similarly, Singer (2011) identified three factors that have

contributed to the rise of the private security industry: (1) the trimming of national troops; (2)

defense budget cuts; and (3) rising demand from global conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

Allen, Morris, and Ply (2010) add more insight into this perspective, arguing that the post-Cold

War cutbacks reduced the size of the entire DoD, hence leading to an increase in the number of

civilian contractors to support the U.S. military operations.

Despite the use of civilian contractors in conflict zones during World War II and the

Korean War, researchers note that the defining moment for the privatized military industry and

civilian contractors did not occur until the early 1990s. Singer (2011) notes that the emergence

and repositioning of the private military and civilian contractors was primarily driven by the

"end of the Cold War and associated political, economic, and ideological changes" (p. 243).

Singer (2011) reports that each preceding year the industry thrived, in size and scope, and when

the U.S. forces invaded Iraq in 2003, the industry expanded. For example, in 2008, the DoD

employed 155,826 private contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq compared to 152,275 troops

(Dunigan, 2015). Perhaps in the history of modern warfare, the U.S. has never engaged civilians

to that extent. It is no surprise that debate rages among researchers regarding the increase in the

numbers of civilian contracting firms working for the DoD (see Avant, 2005; Singer, 2011;

Uttley, 2005). Scholars note that the U.S. military has seen several structural changes in terms of

reduction in force since the Cold War in 1989, and this has subsequently determined whether the

military would hire civilian contractors to support base and combat operations. Kelty (2009)

notes that the number of military personnel dropped after the end of the Cold War in 1989, and

the U.S. military became a smaller, specialized force. As such, in order to complement the

smaller military unit, the U.S. government had to hire civilian staff. Thus, the numbers of U.S.

employed civilians surpassed the number of U.S. military personnel, indicating the use of

civilian contractors by the U.S. forces was much needed to support contingency operations.

Civilian Contractors within a Different Political Dispensation

Extant research highlights the progress of civilian contracting and the importance of

recent wars in analyzing civilian contractors. Researchers such as Stanley (2015) argue that an

analysis of Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, and the Coalition offensive in the

Persian Gulf War would enhance our understanding of the rationale and motivation for using

civilian contractors. During these two wars, the U.S. did not have enough manpower in terms of

uniformed service members. In fact, Swain (1997) notes that unlike World War II, these wars

were happening in a different context and political dispensation. Since the deployment of U.S.

forces happened with little advance warning, troops were rapidly deployed to the frontline. As a

result, such rapid deployment established the need for additional assistance, thus compelling the

military to rely upon the contracting system to offer logistical support and transportation of

combat troops (Stewart, 2010). And, this contracting system not only used U.S. citizens, but third

country nationals as well. As Stanley (2015) notes, though there are data on the number of U.S.

citizens who worked as private contractors, a vast "majority of the private contractors were third-

country nationals working in Saudi Arabia" (p. 57).

But the use of civilians in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm was not the only

underlying issue. First, there was the actual cost of the wars. According to Stanley (2015), the

estimated cost for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm was $61 billion, with the United

States providing $7.4 billion and Saudi Arabia $16 billion (Sultan & Seale, 1995). It was

apparent that both the U.S. and Saudi Arabian governments spent billions of dollars in order to

meet the needs of the two wars. Second, while the U.S. had used private military companies in

previous conflicts, Operation Desert Storm was a unique combat experience for the U.S. Armed

Forces, prompting the need for support from other countries. Although during the previous wars

the U.S. had solicited for political support, but not necessarily financial support from its allies,

the financial support for Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, primarily came from the

Saudi Arabian government (Stanley, 2015). Stanley (2015) offers that the U.S. government's

need for financial support from a foreign government might have been in line with the

Department of the Army (1971) pamphlet, "Use and Administration of Locals in Foreign Areas

during Hostilities," which is used to guide contracting procedures with foreign governments. In

other words, this rule permitted the U.S. Army to contract for the host nation's contingency

support, including using foreign nationals, instead of deploying additional service troops.

 With the increase in reliance on civilian contractors in the 20th century, existing literature

highlights the transition of the military into an all-volunteer force in July 1971 (Weitzel, 2011),

as civilian contractors fully performed tasks that were initially the preserve of the military. In

addition, in December, 1985, the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) was

initiated to provide "another support alternative by capitalizing on the civilian sector in the

continental United States and overseas locations; it is designed to be used primarily in areas

where no multilateral or bilateral agreements or treaties exist" (Stanley, 2015, pp. 58-59).

LOGCAP has since evolved into the hallmark of civilian contracting in the Balkans,

Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries in the world in need of contingency support.

Civilian-Military Culture

To better understand the role of civilian contractors within the military culture, it is important to examine the civilian-military distinction. Underlying this difference is the culture of the military as an institution. Murray (1999) conceptualizes military culture as the culture that "represents the ethos and professional attributes, both in terms of experience and intellectual study, that contribute to a common core understanding of the nature of war within military organizations" (p. 27). Hence, military culture tends to be defined within the confines of war. Grant (1998) notes that the military is different from other professions simply because its experts are engaged in war making and organized use of violence. While there is truism in this statement, military institutions spend long periods of time not necessarily engaged in war (Howard, 1962). Besides periodically engaging in war, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States military style is one that relies on transportation of military personnel, and material superiority (procurement and maintenance of military machinery), and tends to avoid military or political conflict at the point where diplomacy has failed (Murray, 1999). As such, there has been a heavy emphasis on diplomacy, as a means to negotiate peace and not to indulge in war until all options have been exhausted. Perhaps the heavy emphasis on logistics - procuring, maintaining, and transporting military material and personnel - is a precipitating factor that has definitely driven the United States military to hire civilian military contractors to provide supplies and services for its uniformed personnel.

But scholars such as Soeters, Winslow, and Weibull (2006) assert that it is important to note that military organizations are characterized by "specific culture which is relatively isolated from the society" (p. 237). This means that the military tends to be legislated by formal norms, and exhibit secretive characteristics that are put in place to ensure that outsiders do not have

access to information or artifacts. In enforcing military culture, the military has a clear set of practices, norms and protocols that have to be respected and followed by its members. First, military personnel live in separated barracks and bases together with their families. Second, Cadets and recruits undergo training in specific military training academies that stress the military way of life. Third, military personnel wear uniforms, which makes them distinct from civilian workers. Fourth, the active duty personnel are on a permanent, 24-hour call. That means that they can be deployed anytime on short notice. Finally, since their jobs are dangerous, the military personnel are armed and equipped with protective gear (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006).

Currently, the DoD has over 1.3 million military personnel on active duty, 742,000 civilian personnel, and an additional 826,000 serving in the National Guard and Reserve forces (DoD, 2015). Although civilians work together with military personnel, and actually in some instances live on camps and bases, other scholars suggest that the military instills in its members the belief that the uniform makes them distinct from the civilians (Dyer, 2005; Kier, 1999; Ricks, 1998). Kelty (2009) argues that this is done in part to "establish a sense of identity and solidarity within the military, partially to legitimate service members' role as one who may legitimately use deadly force when engaging with the enemy, and also in part to increase the professional prestige of the institution and its members" (p. 135). But it is problematic to clearly distinguish the civilian contractors from military personnel based on specific tenets of the military culture, especially within the ever changing landscape of warfare. Singer (2011) agrees that as many military functions get transferred to civilian specialists, it is really difficult to draw a clear line between military and civilian occupations. Additionally, many civilian contractors have had prior military experience, or some of them serve as reserve members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air

Force, and Marines (Kelty, 2009). Therefore, given the nature of information and communication systems and technological advancements by the world's modern military, it is likely that many veterans may renegotiate their identities as civilians.

The present study contributes to this ongoing conversation on the similarities and differences between civilians and military personnel. One can imagine the blended relationships between civilian contractors and the military, and how civilian contractors experience assimilation and socialization within an organization that is different from traditional civilian organizations. The military has its own language, rituals, and structure. For example, unlike U.S. uniformed service members, the civilian contractors do not attend military boot camp prior to being deployed to a war zone. Instead, the civilian contractors during the recent conflicts underwent routine corporate training either in the U.S. or at a regional training office in the Middle East which served to educate them on the military protocols in the war zone.

In September, 2007, I sat at the pre-deployment center in Dubai, one of the cities in United Arab Emirates. I was part of a group of approximately 100 civilian contractors awaiting deployment to Afghanistan. While some of the newly hired contractors had previously deployed in Iraq, some as civilians and others as uniformed service members of the military, the rest were returning from vacation. Notably, a vast majority of the people in the group were veterans and members of the U.S. military reserve. However, their previous status made no difference, as they were now civilian contractors, and the military has enacted clear mechanisms for differentiating civilians from serving military personnel (Kelty, 2009). But this notion that soldiers and civilians are separate and distinct has inherent contradictions. In serving the military, civilian contractors have to live and work on the same military base as uniformed service members. Even though civilians are perceived as outsiders, Kelty (2009) further argues that they are also viewed as

being inside the institution specifically taking up some of the roles, hence enabling the military

to focus on its combat mission (Kennedy, Holt, Ward, & Rehg, 2002). Although the roles of

military personnel and civilians are distinct, the line between the two units is increasingly blurred

due to the overlapping nature of contractor missions. Research reveals that when civilians started

to work with the military during previous wars (Lindemann, 2007), lack of clear-cut regulations

to manage the civilian-military relationship presented a gigantic challenge at the organizational

level in terms of the way military supervisors dealt with infraction issues among civilian

employees.

As civilian contractors work within the structure of the military, they might interpret their

role to be distinct, and hence perceive that they should not be governed by military rules and

regulations. To ensure that civilians construct their organizational identity within the military's

jurisdiction, they have over the years become subject to military law. Scholars argue that the

current U.S. Army doctrine emphasizes the regulation of contractor behavior during wartime

(Lindemann, 2007). Prior to the passage of the fiscal year 2007 defense authorization act,

Lindemann, (2007) reports that the civilians working in the U.S. military bases were not subject

to the discipline of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) until the passage of the defense

authorization act in 2007. Lindemann (2007) further notes that prior to the passage of the act, the

military could only ask a "contracting company to fire, demote, or send home an unsatisfactory

employee" (p. 87). But the new legislation empowered the military to manage civilian

employees, and compel them to adhere to the norms and values of the military culture. Indeed,

civilians working within the military culture have to learn the norms and expectations of the

military's organizational culture. Similarly, as part of their socialization within the military

organization, the individuals will be expected to exit their roles and seek employment in other

organizations. Thus, the next section will discuss organizational exit.

Organizational Exit

The socialization process of employees leaving an organization has been researched

widely (Davis & Myers, 2012; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Kramer, 2010). Although a

significant amount of socialization literature focuses on both voluntary and involuntarily

organizational exits, most studies tend to examine the former rather than the latter. Kramer

(2010) conceptualizes a voluntary exit as an exit where an individual leaves an organization by

their own choice. For example, an employee accepts a position with another organization and

resigns from their current job. In contrast, an involuntary exit depicts a situation where an

individual is forced to leave an organization through someone else's decision. For example, an

organization might rely on managers' appraisal performance reports to lay off some of its

employees. Because involuntary exit can be so problematic to an employee, extensive research

has explored the impact of involuntary organizational exits and reasons why it occurs (e.g., Bean

& Hamilton, 2006; Steel & Lounsbury, 2009; Susskind, 2007; Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman, &

Bordia, 2004).

Although voluntary exits tend to be the most studied form of organizational exits, a

review of the literature shows that researchers often tend to use involuntary and voluntary terms

in very ambiguous ways. For example, Davis and Myers (2012) argue that organizational exits

are often neither voluntary nor involuntary, but as "a result of fixed and completed factors:

completion of a project, program, or time period" (p. 195). In fact, they use the terms "*planned*

departure" and "*planned exit,"* arguing that one's organizational exit is often predetermined

prior to entry. This line of thinking is consistent with the current study's argument that involuntary exits and voluntary exits can often be used interchangeably.

Sparse literature on involuntary exits and the lack of comprehensive examination of the involuntary exit processes in terms of how employees communicate their identities during, and uncertainty about, the exit experience, is an indication that there is need for research in this area. Extant research shows that socialization scholars have focused on the communicative behaviors that individuals enact as a result of voluntary exits (see Avery & Jablin, 1988; Davis & Myers, 2012; Jablin, 2001; Klatzke, 2008; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Tan & Kramer, 2012).

Scholars such as Ebaugh (1988) and Jablin (2001) have been at the forefront of advancing our understanding of the connection between voluntary and involuntary exits. Both scholars developed organizational exit models that have been used by communication scholars to analyze the exit process in organizations. Thus, this study utilizes Jablin's (2001) model of organizational exit, and Ebaugh's (1988) model of role exit to explore how civilian contractors experience a layoff. In the next section, I discuss Jablin's (2001) model of organizational exit and Ebaugh's (1988) role transition model.

Jablin's model of organizational exit. Jablin's (1979, 1982, 1987, 2001) contribution to what is known about organizational socialization shaped how scholars in communication analyze assimilation and socialization of individuals in organizations. In his article, *The State of the Art,* Jablin (1979) found that communication played a significant role in the entry and exit of employees in organizational settings. Thus, he extended the term "organizational assimilation" to describe the overall process through which newcomers are integrated into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987).

According to Jablin (2001), assimilation can be divided into two processes: (1) socialization, when an organization attempts to influence an individual to learn the organization's norms and rules (e.g., reporting to work on time); and (2) individualization, the attempts of an individual to change their organization in order to satisfy their personal needs (e.g., negotiating a leave of absence). Although socialization and individualization are often accomplished through communication during organizational assimilation, scholars such as Kramer (2010) note that communication scholars tend to use the term socialization to refer to the overall process of organizational assimilation (e.g., Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). However, the present study will explore organizational assimilation and socialization based on Jablin's definition.

Jablin (1982, 1987, 2001) proposed a stage model of organizational assimilation that described how individuals joined, participated in roles, and exited organizations. The stage model describes four phases of organizational assimilation: (1) anticipatory socialization; (2) encounter; (3) metamorphosis; and (4) exit.

Anticipatory socialization. Researchers have defined anticipatory socialization as a phase which occurs prior to joining an organization (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Van Maanen, 1975). During this phase, individuals form expectations about careers, jobs and organizations that they might join. Jablin (2001) noted that anticipatory socialization can be divided into two areas. The first area is vocational anticipatory organization, in which an individual collects information about an occupation and eventually selects a specific job. During this phase, occupation or career expectations are largely influenced through interaction with family, peers and friends. Other influences include the time spent at an educational institution, media depiction of occupations, and part-time employment. Second, organizational anticipatory socialization depicts the process

by which individuals select an organization that they hope to enter and become members. Jablin (1987, 2001) identified three factors that job seekers would generally consider when selecting an organization to work for: (1) recruiting sources; (2) organizational expectations; and (3) job interviews.

Encounter stage. In the encounter stage, an individual enters an organization, and begins to learn the norms and the organizational culture. It is at this point that a newcomer must not only learn how to perform tasks, but also learn how to relate and work alongside his or her coworkers. Essentially, newcomers learn tasks associated with their role, information about the organization, and compare the culture with their expectations as they strive to become established members of an organization (Waldeck & Myers, 2008). For example, if an individual had anticipated that a role as a waitress with an established restaurant would earn her a decent amount of money in tips, she is likely to expect customers to offer a certain percentage of each tip. However, if that does not happen, during the first weeks or months of her socialization, she might try to make sense of the "tip culture" of that particular restaurant by seeking information from other coworkers or even a supervisor.

Specifically, individuals engage in several communicative behaviors to make sense of their new organization. According to Jablin (2001) newcomers develop and maintain relationships with their coworkers in order to learn about the different aspects of the organization. These relationships are characterized by role negotiation, training, sharing information with coworkers or supervisors, seeking information from coworkers and supervisors, and mentoring. Generally, for a successful assimilation to occur during this phase, an individual has to exchange information with his or her coworkers and supervisor. This means an individual will receive information in regards to a particular aspect, and he or she will share information

with others such as providing a supervisor with the feedback for a particular task. Jablin and Miller (1990) noted that an individual will use the following tactics to seek information: ask for information in direct manner, indirectly get others to give information, ask someone else who is not a supervisor or a coworker about the organization, discreetly watch coworkers' and supervisors' actions, and carefully listen to conversations, which can provide a hint about the organizational culture.

Metamorphosis. Metamorphosis describes the point where an individual becomes an established organizational member (Kramer, 2010). Thus, an individual is fully integrated into the organizational culture, and draws from norms and values that he or she acquired during the encounter stage to fulfill the expectation of a new role. During this phase, an employee feels competent and innovative, and may experience changes such as a job promotion or a job transfer (Kramer & Noland, 1999).

But the key component for an individual to become an established organizational member is that he or she is required to be familiar with the overall organizational culture (DiSanza, 1995; Kramer, 2011). An individual must be aware of any ongoing changes (e.g., change in schedules), and should be willing to adapt to elements of the organizational culture. Furthermore, an individual is likely to cement relationships with their coworkers and supervisors, and these interactions will help the individual to become an established organizational member (Jablin, 1987). The development and maintenance of relationships between the individuals and their coworkers or supervisors confirms that they have become active members and are no longer considered newcomers in the organization.

Exit. Considered as the final phase of Jablin's four-stage communication model of assimilation, the exit stage depicts a time period in which an individual exits an organization.

Organizational exit is an important phase of the assimilation process because individuals ultimately exit the organization for varied reasons (e.g., career change, retirement, termination). However, scholars note that in comparison to the encounter stage, organizational exit is the least studied phase of the assimilation process (see Davis & Myers, 2012; Jablin, 2001, Kramer, 2010). As previously noted, exiting an organization occurs in two ways: (1) voluntary exit, a period when individuals willingly exit the organization (e.g., DiSanza, 1995; Kramer, 2011): and (2) involuntary exit, when individuals are forced to exit the organization. To explore the exit stage more thoroughly, Jablin (2001) explored the communication processes that individuals experience when they are leaving an organization. Jablin (2001) suggested three stages of exit: preannouncement, announcement/exit, and postexit.

Preannouncement. The preannouncement is a phase in which an organizational member gradually becomes less connected to the organizational culture and loses interest in a particular role, and sends discretionary messages to family members, close friends, coworkers or supervisors (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Kramer, 2010). Discretionary messages are verbal or nonverbal messages that individuals willingly share with others at a time they deem appropriate. The discretionary messages might be communicated by the employee arriving late at work, skipping work, or by disobeying a supervisor's directives. At this point, individuals evaluate their commitment to the organization. Scholars note that these discretionary messages are usually a result of cues, signal or shocks (e.g., Jablin, 2001; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996). For example, Jablin (2001) suggests an individual may share specific cues or signals with his or her coworkers for an extended period of time even before the announcement of exit from the organization. Basically, cues serve as indicators of an underlying issue such as job dissatisfaction.

According to Jablin (2001), cues may be directed to one or multiple targets such as family members, close friends, and supervisors. While some of these targets (e.g., family) may notice and offer feedback, others may either blatantly dismiss or inadvertently ignore the cues (e.g., Cox & Kramer, 1995; Jablin, 2001). For example, an individual may express concerns to their family members that they are dissatisfied with a certain supervisor or the way an organization is conducting its workforce reduction program. A family member may recognize the cue, and may encourage an individual to either stay or leave the organization (Cox, 1999). In other cases, a supervisor may not notice a subordinate's cues such as indications of burnout, and may end up not making any needed changes, which might have helped that particular employee decide to remain with the organization.

Essentially, during this period, individuals gather information and frame messages in a manner that would enable them to gain support to justify their intent to leave, especially from family members. An organizational member who is contemplating a possible exit will primarily hint about their intention to exit from an organization by sharing cues, and in return might receive feedback that will either determine whether they will stay or exit. For instance, a supervisor may tell an employee seeking a pay raise, "The company does not have enough money. I am sorry." Such a response may compel an individual to announce his or her intent to quit and physically leave the organization.

Announcement/exit. In the announcement/exit stage, an individual publicly communicates his or her decision to exit, and physically departs the organization. According to Jablin (2001) the announcement and exit stages occur simultaneously. For example, an employee informs their supervisor (e.g., they turn in a resignation letter) as well as their coworkers that they will be leaving their organization. Kramer (2010) notes that the phase duration will be determined by

whether the exit is voluntary or involuntary. For instance, if individuals are slated for a layoff or a merger, they may turn in a resignation letter and quit immediately prior to the actual date of departure from the organization. In contrast, if an individual completes a job search ahead of time, and also had planned to exit the organization due to nonwork events (e.g., retirement, family relocation), they may inform their supervisors (e.g., turn in the resignation letter) in advance of their anticipated departure. In this case, the individual will first announce their departure, and then exit physically at a date that they had initially projected. Although individuals would have communicated with the family during the preannouncement stage seeking acceptance about their decision to leave, generally during this stage the individuals are merely communicating their final decision.

Postexit. The postexit phase describes the period after an individual has exited the organization, and is either unemployed or has assumed a new role in another organization. According to Jablin (2001), individuals in this phase experience uncertainty and stress. To manage the stress in a new work environment, an individual will seek information about the organization's expectation of a newcomer from established organizational members (Miller & Jablin, 1991). In addition, in order to reduce stress, individuals will rely on family members, who will often offer emotional support in instances where individuals are still unemployed and are experiencing stress as a result of lack of income or are just uncertain on whether they would secure employment in the near future.

During this stage, an individual either focuses on their new organization or they keep applying for positions in organizations that they have identified. In terms of new organizations, they may be faced with the task of communicating the reasons for exiting their previous organization (Hanisch, 1994). Interestingly, in the new organization an individual will once

again become a newcomer, and will be required to learn the role expectations and the organization culture (Jablin & Kramer, 1998).

Jablin's model of organizational exit elucidates how individuals use communication to move from inside (ingroup) to outside (outgroup) the organization. Given that individuals in an organization engage in distinct communicative behavior at various phases, the model is a useful framework for classifying the communication processes during newcomer socialization, as well as organizational exit. Similar to Jablin's model, which examines organizational exit from a communication lens, Ebaugh's (1988) role exit model can be used to provide further insights as to how individuals maintain and change their identity during organizational exit.

Ebaugh's model of role exit. Ebaugh's (1988) concept of role exit provided scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, management, and communication with a framework for understanding the way individuals negotiated their identities as they exited a role. Ebaugh's objective was to examine how individuals who leave a role (e.g., doctor, nun, or convict) experienced role exit. Ebaugh (1988) believed that role exit was a basic social process that could provide insights into the understanding of human behavior with regards to socialization, social interaction, and even role conflict in the society at large. Against that backdrop, Ebaugh paid close attention to societal issues such as divorce, widowhood and unemployment, and sought to address how individuals manage and/or form their identities as they transition from one role to another one.

Ebaugh examined people who had exited from occupational roles, such as police officers, nuns, teachers, physicians, air traffic controllers, and dentists. In her research on nuns, for example, she found that the turnover rates in American convents had increased since the 1960s, and that the number of nuns who were exiting their organizations was on the rise. Because of

these staggering statistics, Ebaugh was concerned with how these individuals cope with the pain

of disengaging from their organizational role and becoming what she termed as an "ex" of that

particular role (e.g., ex-police officer, ex- teacher). Therefore, driven by the desire to better

understand this phenomenon, Ebaugh (1988) interviewed a variety of individuals in the midst of

role transfer including ex-nuns, ex-police officers, ex-teachers, ex-physicians, ex-convicts,

divorcees, and ex-alcoholics, many of whom were grappling with their identities during their

transition. Ebaugh (1988) noted that identity was largely determined by previous roles and not

necessarily by what an individual was currently doing. For Ebaugh, becoming an ex was a

unique sociological experience as individuals struggled to derive meaning from societally

defined positions that they no longer had. Thus, Ebaugh conceptualized role exit as a process

wherein individuals leave a role that is at the core of their self-identity, and formulate an identity

in a new role while still deriving meaning from the ex-role. As a result of her research, Ebaugh

advanced a four-stage model that includes (a) first doubts, (b) seeking alternatives, (c) the

turning point, and (d) creating the ex-role.

First doubts. First doubts occur when an individual begins to evaluate his or her role

commitment. A person attempts to reinterpret reality, as they come to a reawakening that their

judgment of the current situation may be different from what they had initially envisioned.

According to Ebaugh (1988), these doubts may be precipitated by job burnout, disappointments,

drastic changes in relationships, specific events, and organizational changes.

Seeking alternatives. In seeking alternatives, the individual evaluates the costs and doubts

associated with an alternative role. Typically, during this period, individuals engage in a

behavior in which they begin to compare alternative roles to the cost and benefits of the current

one. For example, a person may seek information from family members, close friends,

coworkers, supervisors, and perhaps other sources, such as searching for the pros and cons of each alternative on the Internet (e.g., online journals, news websites, social media).

Turning point. A turning point entails the process in which individuals announce to others the decision to quit a role. According to Ebaugh (1988) and Ashforth (2001), precipitating events may cause an individual to make a decision to exit a role. For example (Ebaugh, 1988) found that physicians cited health problems and police officers provided injuries as their justifications for exiting their professions. Similarly, civilian contractors may focus on layoffs as their justification for exiting their professions in the war zone. Ebaugh (1988) also contends that specific events such as death in the family may result in an individual exiting a role. In the context of an organization, a person might decide to leave their jobs suddenly. As they communicate their intention to leave, an individual in an organization may either hand in a resignation letter or inform a spouse or close friends that they are quitting their job hoping that they will receive affirmation that the decision they made is correct.

Creating the ex-role. Lastly, in creating the ex-role, individuals become emotionally removed from their prior role, and create an identity based on a new role (once they have actually left). During this period, an individual comes to grips with issues pertaining to their identity in their previous role. They experience tension in terms of what parts of their identity should be retained or shed, and how they should incorporate a previous role identity into the current role. But the desire to retain or shed past role identities is primarily determined by society's expectations. Contingent upon the circumstances of their new role, a person experiencing this (re)production of identity is still expected to perform certain role behaviors in relation to their previous identity. For example, retired university professors continue to be addressed as "professors." These professors will explain to other members of a new organization

or society at large that they are still teachers. Harris and Prentice (2004) found that some retired professors continued to identify as part of a "faculty" or "teachers" of their previous organization.

Jablin's and Ebaugh's respective models provide communicative and sociological perspectives regarding the exit of individuals from a role within an organization. Specifically, Jablin explores organizational exit as a communication process, and seeks to identify the stages of exit, while Ebaugh examines role exit through the lens of one's self-identity, which can be applied to the identity associated with exiting an organization. Despite other scholars (e.g., Kramer, 2011; Lee, Mitchell, Wise & Fireman, 1996; Rhodes & Doering, 1983) exploring organizational exit paths that are similar to Jablin and Ebaugh, the two models created by Jablin and Ebaugh provide important insight into analyzing and understanding the organizational exit of employees, civilian contractors included.

During Jablin's preannouncement phase, individuals develop feelings of dissatisfaction from their role and begin to discreetly gather information with the possible intention of making an exit. Similarly, Ebaugh describes these activities in the context of first doubts and weighing alternatives. However, Ebaugh's focus is on how individuals evaluate their role commitment. Moreover, individuals weigh their alternatives as they compare their current role to the one to which they hope to transition. These phases examine the tensions which individuals experience when they are contemplating an exit from an organization or a role, which may include searching for another job or, in the case of marriage, another partner. Second, Jablin's exit phase aligns with Ebaugh's turning point stage. The primary characteristic of these phases is that individuals publicly and clearly declare or announce their decision to leave. Last, Jablin's postexit phase and Ebaugh's stage of creating the ex-role explore how individuals (re) create and redefine their

identities in a new role. Both scholars point toward the way individuals manage change in relation to their previous role.

Taken together, the models created by Jablin and Ebaugh provide a useful framework through which scholars can examine organizational exit. This study seeks to use these two models to gain a better perspective on how civilian contractors experience organizational change as they progress through the stages of organizational exit while attempting to manage their identities.

As conceptual frameworks that have been used extensively by other scholars in examining organizational exit, the two models enrich this study in two ways. First, this study is designed to further investigate any tensions experienced by civilian contractors as they navigate the process of organizational exit. Second, this study seeks to examine role exit identities, with a specific focus on how individuals negotiate their self-identities once they have left their previous role. The interplay of communication and society in managing identities offers a solid framework for examining the exit of civilian contractors. The two models balance each other: What Ebaugh's model lacks in terms of process and communication, Jablin's model supplements. Jablin's model is compensated by Ebaugh's model, which focuses on identity management during organizational exit. Based on these two models, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How does the lived exit experience of civilian contractors correspond with Jablin's model?

RQ2: How does the management of identity by civilian contractors correspond with Ebaugh's role transition model?

Chapter Three: Methods

To explore the lived experiences of civilian contractors, this study utilized a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of lived experiences with a group of individuals who have experienced a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenological approach has been used by researchers to gain a deeper understanding of a participant's experience in terms of their narrative, or context (Van Mannen, 2003).

The phenomenological approach has been used to allow the voices of other persons to be heard, and has therefore permitted researchers to understand the phenomenon being investigated from a participant's perspective. Thus, this study used the phenomenological approach to examine the lived exit experiences during involuntary organizational exits as expressed in stories of civilian contractors. The following section will first describe the participants for this study. The second section will discuss the procedures that this study adhered to. The third section will discuss the analysis, and lastly the chapter will provide an insight into the role of the researcher.

Participants

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained IRB approval from the Ball State University Institutional Review Board. Nine former civilian contractors, who had experienced involuntary organizational exit in Afghanistan, were interviewed. A criterion sampling was used (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to determine the criteria that those interested in participating in the study should meet. To be eligible to participate in this study, an individual had either to be a U.S. resident or a foreign national aged between 18 and 70, and satisfied the following criteria: (1) had worked as a civilian contractor with the main U.S. DoD military contracting companies (e.g., AEECOM, DynCorp International, Exelis International, Fluor, KBR, PAE) in Afghanistan

between 2001 to 2015; (2) was a former or current employee of any of the aforementioned companies, they were on the layoff list, and didn't initiate resignation for motives not associated with the layoff; and (3) were either laid off or chose to resign before the actual day of departure from work. Because the study focused on an involuntary exit, individuals who were not affected by the layoff were excluded.

Participants were recruited in the following ways. First, the researcher contacted two acquaintances who knew someone who had worked in Afghanistan and fit the criteria. Second, individuals who were recommended to the researcher were contacted through an e-mail that specifically asked them whether they would be interested in participating in the study (see Appendix A).

Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest that a researcher can gather data by approaching an individual who is available and willing to participate in the study. Three participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013) in which participants recommended individuals that they either worked with or knew from Afghanistan. Snowball sampling allows a researcher to reach out to a marginalized group of people (Noy, 2007).

Twenty-six individuals were contacted, and only 16 reached out to the researcher. Although seven of the individuals expressed interest to participate in the study, two of them said that their current involvement with the U.S. Government prohibited them from participating in the study. Another two had initially scheduled an interview with the researcher but withdrew from the study the last minute. The other three participants kept postponing the interviews and ultimately dropped out citing irreconcilable time differences (they were located in Dubai, Kabul, and Sydney, Australia respectively).

The participants consisted of seven males and two females. Eight were Americans, and one was Kenyan. Six had served in the U.S. military before becoming civilian contractors, while three did not have any military background. The length of time working in the war zone ranged from two to 10 years. Their previous careers as civilian contractors in Afghanistan included site management, operations and maintenance, fire services, morale, welfare and recreation, and logistics.

Procedures

This study employed qualitative interviews in order to gain understanding into the way civilian contractors communicated their lived exit experiences, and how they managed their identities during the role exit process. Qualitative interviews were chosen because qualitative data is suited for exploring and situating lived experiences in individuals' narratives (Tracy, 2013). Additionally, interviews play a central role in qualitative research (Creswell. 2013), as they provide researchers with an opportunity to understand participants' voices and stories, as well as the meaning of certain issues (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

A total of nine interviews were conducted by Skype and phone. Given that some participants were located overseas, while others were located in various parts of the United States, it was not feasible to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants. Three participants did not have Skype accounts. In those cases, phone interviews were selected as the data collection method.

Once the participants had confirmed their willingness to participate in the study (via email), the researcher emailed them an informed consent form in English (see Appendix B), which the participants were required to email back to the researcher a dated and signed copy prior to the interviews.

In order to address the research questions, nine semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted (see Appendix C for the interview protocol). Semi-structured questions allowed for flexibility in probing, enabling the researcher to ask participants questions based on their specific experiences and incidents (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The interviews lasted between 20 minutes to two hours, and were conducted in English. Skype interviews were video calls recorded using open broadcaster software (OBS), a recording software, and phone interviews were recorded using a standard audio recorder.

Analysis

The data analysis entailed three processes: 1) transcribing, 2) initial coding, and 3) identification of the main themes.

Transcribing. After conducting the interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview, which resulted in a total of 77 single-spaced pages. Any identifiable information used on the audio recordings was changed within the transcripts so as to protect the identity of participants. The audio files were uploaded on the researcher's password - protected laptop, and the hard copies of the transcripts stored in a secured filing cabinet that was only accessible to the researcher. Following data analysis, the audio recordings and transcripts were destroyed.

Initial coding. Data were analyzed using primary-cycle coding, which involves assigning words or phrases that mirror the meaning of the data. Three columns were created within the transcript so as to allow for the writing of emerging themes on the margin. The first column was labeled "concepts," the second one "transcriptions," and the third one "open coding."

The data were placed in the transcriptions column. The transcripts were critically examined one by one. The data was analyzed based on Jablin's (2001) organizational exit model and Ebaugh's (1988) role exit model. After carefully reading through each transcript, words and

phrases were annotated in the open coding column next to the lines that captured the intended meaning by creating first-level descriptive codes.

Examples of the words and phrases included "time to go home," "timing," "family support," and "self-definition." Additionally, the primary cycle of coding revealed in vivo codes such as *descope*, *customer,* and *FOB*. In vivo coding refers to a particular language used by participants. In this study, participants used language and vocabulary that was commonly used in the war zone organizational culture, particularly by the military. Each word and phrase was compared with others to see if there was a coding activity that occurred more than once (Tracy, 2013).

Themes. The next step focused on secondary cycle coding (Saldana, 2011) that examined if there was a specific pattern within the first level codes and created a secondary-level code that represented the categories already from Jablin's model of organizational exit and Ebaugh's role exit model. For example, categories within the Jablin model included preannouncement, announcement/exit, and postexit. Categories under Ebaugh's model included first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning point, and creating the ex-role.

The categories were annotated in the concepts column next to lines that fit the description of that exit phase. Given that the conceptual categories were already available, the study engaged in a third level of analysis that involved identifying sub-categories by writing analytical memos (Charmaz, 2002) that connected the categories and the first level codes to the emerging themes (sub-categories).

As a result of this coding system, 18 themes were identified. The themes were written down in a codebook that already had the seven phases of Jablin's and Ebaugh's models. Some categories had three sub-categories while a few had two sub-categories (see Figure 1).

Category (Stage)	Sub-category One:	Sub-category Two:	Sub-category Three:
a. Preannouncement	Garnering family support	Increased communication	Framing the message
b. Announcement/Exit	Decision making	Reframing the reasons for leaving	Timing the announcement
c. Postexit	Adjusting to change	Defining the transition	
d. First Doubts	Organizational concerns	Burnout	Disappointment
e. Seeking Alternatives	Job search	Weighing the options	
f. Turning Points	Work environment	Family ties	
g. Creating the Ex-Role	Self-definition	Social expectations	Tension between old and new role

Figure 1 Codebook.

Role of the Researcher

Given the nature and sensitivity of my job in Afghanistan, I had the opportunity to interact with former as well as active service military personnel. I made friends and established a very reliable network with my coworkers and superiors, some of whom had served in the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, U.S. Navy and the Marine Corp. Thus, maintaining relationships with these groups helped the researcher gain access, and aided in the design of the study.

However, the highlight of my career in the war zone was when the drawdown of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan started, I played a critical role in conducting exit interviews and processing exit documents for civilian employees who were exiting the war zone. At some point, I was also scheduled to be laid off by the organization. But when a vacancy was created, I survived, and was moved to a U. S. Air Force/Army base where I continued to work with the base managers, including the base security office in overseeing employee issues until June, 2014 when I decided

to resign and return to school. Thus, my professional experience laid the foundation of this study, particularly in identifying key areas of focus in terms of the interview guide.

Chapter Four: Results

After examining data from interviews with nine participants, several themes emerged corresponding with Jablin's model of organizational exit and Ebaugh's model of role exit. The data analysis was primarily guided by two research questions that provided an understanding of how individuals experienced the process of exiting the war zone and how they managed their identity. The first research question examined how the lived exit experience of civilian contractors corresponded with Jablin's model, and the second one explored how the management of identity by civilian contractors corresponded with Ebaugh's role transition model. The findings unfold in two ways.

First, Jablin's model, which has been discussed extensively in chapter two, represents three stages of organizational exit: 1) preannouncement, 2) announcement/exit, and 3) postexit. The analysis of participants' communication during Jablin's three stages of organizational exit revealed eight communication sub-categories: Garnering family support, increased communication, framing the message, decision making, reframing the reasons for leaving, timing the announcement, adjusting to change, and defining the transition.

Second, Ebaugh's model, which has also been discussed extensively in chapter two, represents four stages of role exit: 1) first doubts, 2) seeking alternatives, 3) turning point, and 4) creating the ex-role. Coding under the four stages proposed by Ebaugh yielded ten sub-categories: Organizational concerns, burnout, disappointment, job searching, weighing the options, work environment, family ties, self-definition, social expectations, and tensions between the old and the new role. The main categories under Ebaugh's model focus on the period when an employee withdraws from a behavior that corresponds with a role to the time that they are socialized into a new role in another organization. The interviews with the ex-civilian contractors

revealed that Ebaugh's role exit model is applicable to the role exit of civilian contractors. Some civilian contractors followed stages one through four of Ebaugh's model, while others skipped a stage because they never experienced first doubts as the organization announced the intended layoff, hence not giving members adequate time to psychologically prepare for the exit. In some cases, employees foresaw a layoff, which means that even though the exit was an involuntary one in nature, they started searching for jobs weeks, or even months, in advance of the exit date.

The analyses of data revealed specific terminologies used by civilian contractors during the organizational exit process. They predominantly used the term *going home* to refer to their exit from the war zone. They also used the term *descope* to describe the layoff, and the term *customer* to refer to the military. This study acknowledges that the use of this type of language is grounded in the organizational culture of a war zone – something I discuss in the conclusion.

In what follows, I first describe the lived exit experience of civilian contractors by providing the necessary communication context that corresponds with Jablin's model. Second, I examine how civilian contractors manage their identities in relation to Ebaugh's role transition model.

Jablin's Model of Organizational Exit

Preannouncement. Coding of participants' communication during the preannouncement period yielded three sub-categories: 1) garnering family support, 2) increased communication, and 3) framing the message. Although Hinderaker and O'Connor (2015) found that a member gradually becomes less connected to the organizational culture during the preannouncement period, findings in this study reveal that some civilian contractors did not experience the feeling of losing interest in an organization. This result could be as a result of the organization severing the connection; not the individual initiating separation when it is a voluntary exit. However, they

did make sense of the layoff and communicated with family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors. Participants discussed how they learned about the layoff and ways in which they gathered more information about the layoff either from their coworkers or supervisors. In this category, participants spoke about how they reacted to the layoff and the discretionary messages that they sent to family members as well as messages that they received from their families. Essentially, participants narrated how they communicated to their families when they learned that they were on the layoff list. Although in some cases participants received advance notice (one to three months), in most cases participants had less than two weeks prior to their already determined date of exit from the organization. Most of the participants' narratives reference the following three factors: garnering family support, increased communication within the organization, and framing the message.

Garnering family support. All participants indicated that they actively sought family support in the wake of the layoffs. A majority of the participants noted some way in which the family influenced the way civilian contractors used different communication strategies to gain support. Specifically, interaction with the family determined whether the affected individual would try and look for other open positions within the organization, or leave the organization and go home altogether. Seeking family support involved directly asking family members their opinion about the layoff, talking about finances, and discussing future plans. When discussing communication to their families (i.e., spouse, sibling), participants revealed strategies that they used. Jeffrey, a U.S. Navy veteran who had worked as a civilian contractor for 10 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, noted:

> The first person that I had to let know was my wife. I let her know, "Hey! I will be here
> to close this thing out. I should be home before Christmas." I knew that when that base

closes and stuff like…that was going to be about it for me because my wife was excited

that was gonna be it. Stateside, the people I contacted was my wife and my parents. And

so for them, they were glad actually I was coming home. You know, to them it was a kind

of a relief; just for me to know that I was gonna come home, and that was gonna be it.

Before Jeffrey talked with his wife about the layoff, he was not certain how she was going to

react to the news. As expected, his wife communicated encouragement and was excited about

Jeffrey's return from the war zone. In general, it is not surprising that most of the civilian

contractors turned to family members as they waited to exit the organization. Likewise, Brandon,

who worked as a civilian contractor for six years, indicated that he apprised the family of what

was happening in the war zone. He stated:

Any decision I made, I would always check with the family – get their opinions.

Ultimately, I would do what I think would be best for continued employment. But I lay it

out…here are the facts. We are descoping, I know where I fall in the seniority list per se;

it's my estimation that I need to be looking. And my family would concur.

In both instances of seeking family support, we see Jeffrey and Brandon informing the family

about the layoff. Given that civilian contractors work far away from home, they are aware that

turning to family would result in them receiving support for leaving the war zone and going back

to the safe haven. As illustrated by the previous two excerpts, families offer emotional support

considering that layoffs can cause distress. Furthermore, families listened to the civilian

contractors' layoff experience, and soothed the participants with words of encouragement. The

findings revealed that families expressed love and support for their homecoming. Jimmy

recounted how at the time of his exit his mother was ill and his son was about to join college. He

noted:

My mother was not doing well, and it affected me emotionally, thinking that, oh I need to

get back and be around her. She passes on…Also my son was getting ready to go to a

four-year college. He had just completed a two year college and he was getting ready to

go to a four-year college to play baseball. And so I was talking to him and he was looking

forward to me coming back to the states to see him off to college. I think it was a big

relief to my family when I did come back to take care of things; the day-to-day basis of

running the household, of being in charge of the finances, and being in charge of the

maintenance of everything and of the house.

The explanation by Jimmy indicates that at the beginning of the layoff cycle most families view

the return of their loved ones as "a blessing." Jimmy's narration reveals that the family views

him as the breadwinner, and his return home is going to help the family in the running of the

household. Thus, by seeking support selectively from family members rather than friends,

civilian contractors are likely to receive support for coming home. In addition to communicating

with family members, the findings also revealed that civilian contractors will increase their

communication within the organization, by gathering information and seeking feedback from

both their supervisors and coworkers.

Increased communication. Whereas seeking information during a voluntary exit entails

gathering information about career changes, participants in this study asked supervisors about the

entire layoff process and its implication prior to their exit. Civilian contractors gathered

information to help them make sense of the exit and gain a sense of when the various military

bases in Afghanistan would be closing. Jeffrey noted:

It was pretty apparent and well known that they were drawing down. The company tried

to keep you fairly informed. You know what FOBs are gonna be closed and in what order.

You would know, it is back on the wall…project dates. And you had communication with the other managers and people around you. I would call them and be in the proximity and say, "Hey, what's the status? What are my chances of remaining? "So, you kind of knew what was going on. You knew what was coming down.

Like other employees, Jeffrey proactively sought more information about the layoff process from his supervisors. He inquired about his chances of securing another position within the company. By talking to his managers, Jeffrey obtained specific and general information that provided insights about the choices he had. Participants also recounted talking to their coworkers and friends about the layoff, and the conversations focused on future plans once they exited the organization. For example, Brian recalled talking to his friends:

We were always discussing what you will do after this. Some people were not prepared to go back home. Some people had projects, but for me my projects were set.

Because the layoffs were often spontaneous and solely based on the instructions issued by the U.S. DoD, most of the participants had little time to plan for their exit accordingly. Brian's narrative resonates with my work in the human resources office. Most of the time, we would receive instructions to enact a layoff process as quickly as possible (e.g., three days). It was a decision that had to be made in a day or two so that the organization does not contravene the contractual agreement it had with the U.S. Government. Like Brian, Melanie, who had worked as a civilian contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan, talked to her coworkers about her being on the layoff list.

For me, I made it loud and clear that I was on the descope list. People had presumptions because of the position I had, or the people I knew… "You know senior leaders, basically you would be saved." So, one of the things that I made loud and clear to coworkers is that

my name is on the descope list. And I would be laid off. If someone offered me a

position, I am on the descope list along with you.

Melanie offered social support to other employees who had been slated for layoff. Instead of

keeping it to herself, she decided to tell others about her exit and empathized with those who

were affected by the layoff. Additionally, despite talking with supervisors, coworkers, and

friends, employees often avoided communicating with the military, whom they referred to as

"the customer." Jeffrey said:

> The only people that you really don't talk about with is the customer. You don't want to
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> sound like a whiner. You don't want to do anything subversive. I don't mind who I talk
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> to, but ethically if you are working with a company, you do not raise any issue with the
>
> customer, which was the military.

Jeffrey strategically avoided talking to the military about his slated exit from the organization.

We see from the excerpt that employees were cautious about sharing their feelings about the

layoff with the military.

Framing the message. In addition to seeking family support and increased

communication within the organization, participants tried to change the way others viewed the

layoff. Although the company was severing ties with the employees, they created a positive

connotation for the involuntary exit. For example, Brian tried to associate his exit with a calling.

He said: "For me, I told them that I am ready. It is like a calling and when a calling comes, I see

we had to do what we had to do." Nathan, who had been in constant communication with his

wife since the outset of the layoff process, also strategically framed the exit in the context of a

calling from God. To create a positive connotation to justify his exit from the war zone, he said:

Honestly, I felt like it was God telling me it was time to go. I had been contracting a little over seven years straight. I got out of the military December 2005, I was in contracting January 2006. I did three years in Iraq, and then I took like two months break, and then I was in Afghanistan. I left Iraq in October 2008, then I was back in Afghanistan January 2009. I, like I said, I wasn't angry, I would probably have been perturbed if I would have little or no notice like the other people did, one week, two week, three days…you know, you are leaving. Having three months really helped. I didn't fight it, the rest of the time I was personally preparing myself.

In this example, we see a positive framing of an impending layoff. Nathan describes his reaction in such a way that depicts the exit as a voluntary one. Brian's communication pinpoints specific behaviors engaged in by civilian contractors within the war zone as a justification of their exit, and his comment underlines that when civilian contractors are faced with a layoff they have to justify that they are not being fired. Like others, Nathan tried to associate the layoff with going home. A second reframing strategy involved referring to the war zone as a dangerous environment, and home as a site of safety. Justin, who worked as a civilian firefighter said, "The best thing to do was to get out of there." Janet, another civilian contractor, did not struggle to justify her exit from the war zone. In fact, she tried to align the layoff with her financial situation, including having a house, by saying:

I had no emotion. I wasn't like anybody else. Losing a job didn't mean that I was going to be destitute. I already had a home…my home….I don't have a mortgage. I was not devastated or feeling depressed or anything. I felt really nothing.

In this example, Janet displays no shock and clearly articulates that losing her job will have no profound impact on her income because she has a home which has been paid for. Interestingly,

rather than amplify her frustration about being kicked out by the organization, Janet downplays the exit. In this case, we see that when forced to exit the organization, the employee demonstrated being content rather than being defiant.

Announcement/exit. In terms of the second phase of Jablin's model, announcement/exit, three sub-categories were evident in this data analysis: 1) decision-making, 2) reframing the reasons for leaving, and 3) timing the announcement. In most cases, civilian contractors accepted that they were on the layoff list and made a decision to exit the organization as planned, and did not try to search for another job within the same organization. In other cases, although the civilian contractors accepted the fact that they were on the layoff list, they hoped that a position would become available in another camp and that they would be able to stay longer. In both cases, after making the decision to leave, individuals communicated that decision to their family, friends, and coworkers.

After a period of making sense of the first stages of the layoff process, civilian contractors communicated to family, friends, coworkers and supervisors and publicly announced their decision to exit the organization. The greatest number of accounts indicated that civilian contractors focused on communicating their departure as their own decision to leave, reframed their reasons for leaving, and strategically announced the decision at a time they deemed appropriate. What follows is a discussion on how individuals communicated their decision to leave, how they reframed the reasons for the exit, and how they strategically timed the announcement of their exit.

Decision-making. As civilian contractors' exit day approached, many focused their attention on communicating their decision to leave with family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors. Most of the time, civilian contractors would try to look for other positions within the

organization, and if they were successful, they would stay instead of leaving, though in a different position. The data indicated that in most cases individuals publicly announced that they would be exiting the organization as planned. Melanie recounted how she announced her decision of the final exit to family, friends, and coworkers. She reported:

> I made it loud and clear that when I was coming home, I was coming home. I can't remember anybody that I did not tell that I was coming home permanently.

In this example, Melanie communicates her decision for exiting the organization. She stresses that she had already made the decision to go home, and that "everybody" knew about it. Indeed, Melanie felt the urge to publicly announce her final exit to the family. Basically, departing members' communication with others focused on the decision they had made. Melanie further explained how she announced her final exit to the family:

> It was Easter of 2014. We had a family girls' trip – some of my family and friends. And so I spoke to a lot of family members. Everybody knew that I was going back and that I would be home at the end of July. So, they knew this was my last trip. You know going back over and this would be it. I also started sending stuff home. Shipping my personal stuff back home. When I accepted the position to move to headquarters, I knew that was going to be the last one.

Melanie made sense of her move to the headquarters, and anticipated that it would be her last posting. This comment reveals that even though Melanie did not initially have a specific date for her exit, she had a feeling that she would be laid off while working at the headquarters. Indeed, this feeling of preparing for the future could have been as a result of what she was observing during the layoff process. Melanie's story illuminates cases where some employees had several

months to reflect and speculate on an involuntary exit even when they were not yet slated for a layoff. Similarly, Jeffrey recalled communicating his decision to leave the war zone:

> At that point I was ready to go because you know, they already had me on the home-bound thing. I was not gonna change my mind at that point. The last thing I was gonna do was to call my wife and say, "Hey I am gonna stay longer." Actually, it was about a week before I left the organization that I was offered to go to another camp. I said there is no thinking about it. At that point I was mind-set that this is it. My wife knew, my parents knew…And that point there was no turning back from what I had already told them. I already knew that we had already made our mind and it was just one of those things that at that point it was time to go home and call it retirement from fire services.

So it seems Jeffrey had already made a commitment to his wife that he would be going home. Jeffrey's comments indicate that decision-making is an active communicative process that includes conversations with the family. Interestingly, Jeffrey turned down the job that would have seen him stay longer. Civilian contractors reported managing their decisions in the context of the family. Likewise, Nathan provided an example of the importance of factoring in the family when making a decision:

> I talked with one of the senior directors, and he just gave me, "You know, what's gonna happen, we gonna fight to get your name back." That was the talk, "You can't leave, we need you to stay." But in my mind I was done. Because I knew, if I would have been chosen the director, most likely I would have stayed. But would that have been good for my marriage and home life? I had been gone for years.

Nathan's narrative illustrates the concern that most civilian contractors reported when announcing their decision to exit. While being reinstated by the organization and earning a

promotion would have translated into continued employment, Nathan, on the other hand, thought that would have been detrimental to his marriage and family. By making a decision about whether to leave the war zone or stay, most civilian contractors had to consider family ties and the time that they had been separated from their loved ones. As such, decision-making served as a vehicle through which civilian contractors communicatively interacted with their families, especially spouses.

   Reframing the reasons. The analysis provided insight into the several distinct ways that departing employees communicated reasons for leaving the organization. Although it was apparent that the organization was cutting ties with an employee, affected employees subtly shifted the main reason, and in turn provided reasons for the exit in terms of searching for greener pastures and family pressures. This communication tactic allowed employees to (re) construct their departure from the organization as a voluntary exit. The data suggests that civilian contractors avoided discussing the layoff as the main reason for the impending exit. In most cases, the individuals stated that they were ready to go back home and be with the family. For example, when asked why he left Afghanistan, Justin said:

>   I enjoy being home. To be able to be with the family. To come home and stay with my sister. She has like two bedrooms. I had a good time, I got to spend a lot of time with my niece, you know…she was two and a half. I wasn't thinking about going back over there. It was cool for me to be home.

In this excerpt, Justin reframes the reason in the context of being home and being able to spend time with the family. In fact, he does not connect his exit to the layoff. By reframing the reason in terms of being able to spend time with the family, Justin controls the interpretation of the exit. Because often layoffs conjure up the notion of being forced out of an organization, it is possible

that most civilian contractors did not want to associate the exit to a layoff. Thus, connecting the reasons for exiting to going home, Justin ensured that others would not understand the layoff in terms of termination by an organization. Still other participants described reasons for exiting the organization without indicating any connection to going home. For example, Nathan stated:

When I was on the conference call I told my subordinates that I would be leaving the organization due to circumstances beyond my control. That I was informed that my position was being eliminated. There was actually a way that I could have stayed on the project.

In this situation, Nathan cites the layoff as the main reason for his departure from the organization. However, he still tries to justify that he could have stayed with the organization if he had wanted. Nathan went on to say about his service to the soldiers, "I really liked being there for the soldiers. I missed the work, but I did not miss the politics." It is difficult to directly link Nathan's reasons for leaving to the layoff as he hints that his main reason for leaving was the organizational politics. While other employees struggled to explain their reasons for leaving the war zone, Brian recounted how he communicated with his family:

I just told them, "Hey, the contract is ended." I was pretty straight forward with my family. We understand how short life is and stuff like that. We appreciate each other's time. You understand. We don't really hold a lot of punches with each other. I told my dad and mom that, "Hey, I would be coming home. I will be done with Afghanistan."

Brian made it apparent to his family that the organization would be terminating the contract with him and hence he would be going home. However, Brian did not offer a clear explanation stating that he was being forced out of the organization against his wishes. Brian's communication with his family made the layoff appear as a planned exit. I recall instances when employees refused to

renew their annual contracts, especially when it was clear that they would be laid off in a few months after signing a new Foreign Service Agreement (FSA). Other participants often cited communication with a recruiter in another organization and subsequently a job offer as their main reason for leaving the organization. Melanie explained:

> The first week of August I had my first interview with HR. Then the following week I was offered the formal contract and job offer. I was fortunate in the sense that I had an onward position.

Melanie used the job offer to downplay her reason for exiting the organization. By pointing out that she had an interview with HR and had received a job offer, she avoided talking about the layoff in entirety. Thus, most civilian contractors frequently used language that made them look desirable and not that the organization was forcing them to exit.

Timing the announcement. Most departing civilian contractors did not announce their departure until they were closer to the actual exit date. In some cases, such as Brandon's, departing employees did not publicly announce their exit until they had received a job offer from another organization. Brandon reported:

> Everyone was always looking. If someone got a job offer, they started asking whether you had heard about that company. Once you get the job offer, you let everybody know. As soon as you have your job offer that is when you tell your supervisor so that they are aware of it because they have to plan for a back-up as stated.

As this example shows, Brandon's announcement occurred after he had received a job offer. Brandon recognized that it would be premature to announce his exit prior to obtaining a job offer. By communicating his exit at that particular time, Brandon felt that it would give his supervisor ample time to look for a replacement. Brandon was also aware that an employee could

leave prior to the determined last day of work. By talking with others about a job search, Brandon was basically setting a stage for the final announcement. In other cases, while departing supervisors primed their family about their final exit, they strategically did not tell their subordinates during the early cycle of the layoff. For example, Jimmy was cautious about sharing any information regarding his exit with his subordinates as well as coworkers:

> It was about four weeks before I left when I told my family members. I didn't tell my coworkers, and then I didn't tell those who worked underneath me until two weeks I was to leave. Because they were a good group, I did not want to see a fall in their productivity. I did not want them to think "since the boss is leaving, so we can slack off here."

Brandon's concern exemplifies the communication strategy that most of the departing supervisors used to keep their subordinates informed. His comment demonstrates how supervisors communicated during a layoff and how they did not want to create an atmosphere of uncertainty. This situation also provides a window into the communicative process through which supervisors collectively and intentionally avoided talking to their subordinates about the exit until at a later time. It is evident within the data that most supervisors, such as Nathan, controlled the timing of the announcement. He said:

> I did not wanna tell any of my subordinates because I felt like that would have caused a little bit of chaos. They were just notified that a new director was coming, and to me everybody needed to focus on receiving him well. Nobody in my directorate knew until thirty days after the new director had settled down. I really didn't want them to know early on. Basically, a month before I was supposed to leave, I told them via the conference call. They were pretty silent. I told a few people on the ground there, but they

were not in my directorate. I didn't want them to know anything until we got a new

director.

In this example, we see Nathan using the absence of a director as the justification for controlling

the timing of the announcement of his exit. In this case, we see that Nathan is concerned that

announcing his exit during the early stages of the layoff could potentially cause feelings of

discontent among his subordinates. Similar to other supervisors, by avoiding communication

about his exit, he limited the ability of his subordinates to speculate, or even celebrate, his exit.

Beyond the organization, the data revealed that some civilian contractors avoided

communication with the family as well, especially when they were certain that they would be

departing. As illustrated in the following comment by Justin, some civilian contractors managed

the timing of their exit announcement by avoiding constant communication with the family.

I didn't mention anything to them about that. I didn't say anything because I didn't want

them to be all happy because I was trying to stay. So, I didn't want them to be all happy

that "oh, my baby is coming home," and "mama I got contracted." Then she would say,

"You liar." I just wanted to keep my business over there. If I see them, I see them. When

I am in Dubai, I would say, "Hey, I am about to come home." I would say, I will be home

in two weeks, and then I will be home in three days or something like that. I didn't really

communicate with my family. Some of them didn't like that I was there anyway, they

would be happy that I was being laid off.

By not communicating with his family, Justin creates a situation in which his family is not aware

about his exit plans. Because he is trying to look for another position within the organization, he

strategically avoids communicating with family members, whom he thinks might not support his

bid to try and stay in the war zone. Furthermore, Justin engages in a communication behavior

that misleads his family; he avoids telling his family about his actual date of exit from the organization. Overall, civilian contractors used several communication strategies to control the timing of the announcement to family, coworkers, and friends.

Postexit. A significant number of accounts revealed that civilian contractors were focused on adjusting to change after leaving the organization. Participants recounted that communication with friends and new coworkers reflected on their war zone memories as well as the need to provide more explanation about their exit from the organization. A majority of civilian contractors primarily communicated to enhance an understanding of their reasons for exiting the war zone. Yet in some cases, civilian contractors engaged in communicative behaviors that helped them justify that their exit was as a result of free choice. The narratives in this category indicated that most civilian contractors used several communication strategies to make sense of the postexit period. Analysis of the data yielded two sub-categories: 1) adjusting to change, and 2) defining the transition.

Adjusting to change. Tales of adjusting to change were plentiful in the data. Civilian contractors talked about how they struggled to acquaint themselves with a new environment – an environment that was in sharp contrast to the war zone. In some cases, civilian contractors referred to life after leaving the war zone as a *normal life* and *moving on with life*. In discussing her life after exiting the organization, Melanie explained:

> I was very relieved, and I don't think I realized that after I had left. I think I was very happy to leave with a potential job offer within a couple of weeks of being home. I was able to go home and relax, go swimming, you know being with friends and family. One of the things was coming back home and have a normal life. So, I was really excited to come back.

This example indicates that civilian contractors were able to participate in activities that they were not able to do while working and living in a war zone. This comment suggests that the notion of "normal life" helped civilian contractors to manage stress after leaving the organization. Many civilian contractors spoke of the long working hours in the organization, and how they were ready to leave the war zone and get ready for the next chapter of life as demonstrated by Brian in the following excerpt:

> In Afghanistan, we worked many hours - 13 hours a day, seven days a week. The one thing you want to do is to go home. So, for me it was time to summarize and wrap up things and go back home and move on with life.

In this case, Brian sees his exit from the war zone as a relief. He expresses his desire of wanting to go home and in the process portrays the war zone as undesirable. In contrast, Brian went on to state how his transition to the postexit period was chaotic. He said:

> I was always scared when I got home. Because when you hear sirens back in Afghanistan you know what it is all about. But when you come to relate that thing to civilian life it becomes a total mess for you. You hear a tire burst you go down. You hear balloon burst and you go down. Because when you hear that in Afghanistan, it tells you that you must get on the ground.

This comment illustrates that the transition from a war zone must be uniquely challenging because a majority of civilian contractors have to try and fit into what some termed as *civilian life.* It is evident within the data that although civilians are not uniformed service members, they have to make sense of their new environment just like military members. Most civilian contractors said it was a good feeling leaving the war zone, but they also acknowledged the fact they had to adjust their lifestyle once they returned back home. For example, Jeffrey narrated

how he had to watch his spending and how he had to communicate the change of his lifestyle. He reminisced:

> Actually, I guess it was kind of a good feeling in a way. Once I got home it is kind of those things like you feel…I am not going back. It was good knowing that you are not going back, then on the other hand, you thought about, ok, I don't have a job…I better find a job here, and you don't have that income anymore. It was you know, reality kind of set in. One, you have to watch your money. Like now you live with what you make. While I was working over there, you know a lot of times, a birthday comes around or something, I would buy my wife a nice purse, a ring, or a piece of jewelry. But now it's kind of cards, dinner, maybe we will go out of town and do something. Yeah, the biggest thing would be finance-wise. You know, you now learn to live on a budget. When we were working over there, you'd make enough money; your money and the savings. That if you wanted to save and do something you can do it. Now you kind of plan for that. That's really the difference between life in a war zone and life here.

Like others in unemployment, Jeffrey was cautious about spending money the way he used to while he was still employed. Among unemployed ex-civilian contractors, postexit conversations often focused on the uncertainty associated with the lack of income. Indeed, Justin felt similarly after exiting the war zone. He said, "The negative part is that you got to start paying for things. You gotta start paying for rent, paying for food, paying for this, paying for that. You know if you don't have anything to supplement your income then you won't have anything left." This comment illuminates that change of lifestyle is a communicative process that includes sensemaking where individuals talk about their budget constraints with family and friends. However, some ex-civilian contractors experienced challenges in communicating with their

spouses and also had to learn how to move around again. Nathan, who had been away for seven

years, recounted:

> I had really been gone for a long time for my wife. I really needed several weeks to get
>
> acclimated with her. For almost over that time, I was really busy. There was stuff that
>
> needed to be fixed around the house. We had to travel and go see the family. I bought the
>
> house in 2009, and I had never lived in it. I was like, oh my God, there is much we have
>
> to do. There was a lot I had to learn. I had to learn where I lived at. I have GPS here, and
>
> it is like there was time if I didn't have the GPS, going to church was a challenge. I didn't
>
> know where I was going.

Nathan's account sheds light on the emotional effects of separation from the family for an

extended period of time. Because he had been away from his wife for seven years he wanted to

make up for the lost time. Nathan had to learn to interact with his wife again, and get acquainted

to his environment. Like others struggling with the change, he expressed the challenges he was

facing while trying to fit into the "civilian" environment.

Defining the transition. Civilian contractors described the postexit in similar ways. Most

of the civilian contractors spoke about their postexit in terms of freedom, moving on, and

drawdown. Narratives included their exit experiences and communication that they would still be

working in the war zone were it not for the military drawdown. Like other civilian contractors,

Brandon found himself trying to verbally convince other people that as a result of the U.S.

military drawdown, he had to search for a job that guaranteed longevity:

> When I went to Kuwait, at first I was star struck. I had been living in Kabul in a safe
>
> house because as a house manager I was able to have my own room. In Kandahar I had a
>
> 20-foot container. When I went to Kuwait there was like everybody is put up in like a

hotel. I was on the fifth floor overlooking the Persian Gulf. And that was part of the

discussion with my family. It was less salary, but theoretically it would have been

continued. I was ready to take a salary cut for a potential longevity.

Brandon made a point of leaving the war zone, even if it meant taking a cut in salary. Thus, it

would be perceived as seeking job security rather than trying to stay in the war zone and getting

laid off sooner. Furthermore, individuals defined their transition in subtle ways to improve

people's perception of the postexit period. Nathan described the phase as "just moving on" and

"flipping the coin," while Justin stated, "I am all about being free and trying to better myself, and

you know not trying to work for somebody, you know." Here Nathan uses the metaphor of

flipping the coin and Justin equates life after leaving an organization to freedom. By using the

metaphor of freedom, Justin creates a more positive perspective of his current situation by

hinting that he is better off than when he worked in the war zone. These data indicate that ex-

civilian contractors enacted a communicative behavior that made them seem like they were war

zone ambassadors. Most of the ex-civilian contractors were preoccupied with explaining to

others what life in the war zone entailed. In some cases, they had to explain what the postexit

period meant to them. Jimmy had to often explain to his friends and new coworkers about life in

Afghanistan:

The first camp I was at we were getting a lot of soldiers killed there. And I knew some of

them on a first name basis. And some of them that I did not know that the soldiers that I

worked with knew of. Going through the hurt that they were going through when one of

their friends was killed…it would drain them emotionally. So, when people complained

to me about living conditions back in the states, I would tell them that I spent a year in

Afghanistan and I would never complain about living or working conditions. And after a

lot of the ones that had been complaining hear a little bit of what we went through, they

say, "Yeah, I am thankful for what I have here."

Jimmy's comments show that ex-civilian contractors reflected on their life in the war zone,

reminiscing about the battle field experiences. Jimmy's conversation acknowledges that the

conditions in the war zone were harsh, enabling him to communicate his emotions associated

with the war zone experience. Such communication reveals most ex-civilian contractors' struggle

to define the period after exiting an organization. In other cases, many ex-civilian contractors

spoke of how others reacted to their return. Jeffrey noted:

Some of the neighbors and people like that you know they would say, "Hey, you are

home now. When are you going back?" I would say there was a reduction in force over

there. I was part of that. I am not really looking to go back, so they were ok. A lot of

them would be like, "You are happy you gonna be staying home now." Stuff like that. I

basically told them that they started shutting the bases down. Started reducing services

you know…they cut us. Basically it was a layoff, you know.

It seems Jeffrey's neighbors were trying to make sense of his extended stay at home. In this

instance, the neighbors helped Jeffrey to define his postexit period as they expressed their

support. Jeffrey enhanced the postexit sensemaking message that he will not be going back to the

war zone. Data revealed that many ex-civilian contractors sought social support by talking to

family and friends during the postexit period.

Ebaugh's Role Exit Model

The interviews with ex-civilian contractors revealed that Ebaugh's role transition model

corresponds with the role exit of civilian contractors. Most civilian contractors followed the four

stages of this model. Some followed stages one through four of the model. Others did not

experience a particular stage. For example, while some civilian contractors gradually started to doubt their commitment to the organization, others did not express any form of disappointment. Some civilian contractors skipped the first doubt period because the exit was unexpected and abrupt. Yet other civilian contractors began weighing their options and searched for jobs during the seeking alternatives period. The following discussion examines the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data based on the categories that Ebaugh (1988) proposed: 1) first doubts, 2) seeking alternatives, 3) turning point, and 4) creating the ex-role.

First doubts. In this category, three sub-categories emerged: 1) organizational concern, 2) burnout, and 3) disappointment.

Organizational concerns. Most civilian contractors reported experiencing some challenges at the organizational level. In particular, the findings revealed that some civilian contractors experienced first doubts as a result of the way the organization conducted the layoff process. The following statement by Brandon, who exited the war zone in 2013, fits the first doubts.

> You knew what was coming down. So, I could contact headquarters and try and get information. I talked to the director to find out what are my chances. One of my colleagues was the HR manager down there. So, I talked to him and just try to get a sense of what was going on, and the writing was on the wall.

The above statement reveals that Brandon's curiosity as well as the uncertainty surrounding the layoff process, prompted him to contact his colleague so as to gather more information. After talking to his HR friend, Brandon became unsure of whether he would stay on the job for an extended period of time. When asked how being on the layoff list affected the way he identified with the organization, Brandon added:

I felt like the organization was so big. It was compartmentalized. And so it appears

especially in the hiring process there is not a lot of cross-thought and there has been cases

if you seem to get into the right clique that they always would take care of you. But for a

majority you were a commodity. You had to realize that when the time came, you should

be looking in advance. There were people that would be recruited and brought over, and

not told that the contract will be ending in two months. Again we are a commodity and it

is all about the dollar.

In this example, civilian contractors' identity illustrates how most of them started to develop

feelings of less commitment during the layoff. Data revealed that civilian contractors had

mistrust toward the organization, especially in cases in which they continued to recruit more

personnel while, at the same time, they were getting rid of others. By using the metaphor

commodity, Brandon expresses an emotion that helped most civilian contractors to make sense of

the first doubts phase of "becoming an ex." The term commodity serves to complement the

emotion of self-doubt and make it appear that former civilian contractors had figured it out that

the organization did not value them anymore. Indeed, first doubts influence the way an employee

starts losing trust in their organization. Ex-civilian contractor Justin added: "I was trying to save

as much money as I could because I knew the check was going to be limited. You know, it didn't

bother me that much personally. Some of the guys were worried. I don't know why. I was like,

you should have saved your money, if you were worried about money because you never know

what is going to happen." This comment reveals that most civilian contractors were afraid that

they would no longer have a sustainable source of income. Jeffrey recalled how he experienced

first doubts:

Our camp was not scheduled to close until June of 2014; so everybody on the base

figured out that we gonna be there until June. So that was the kind of our deadline date.

By September/October 2013 the rumor started to float around the base that they gonna

get rid of the fire department. I had actually gone to the site manager and I had asked her

about it, and she knew nothing about it. She claimed not to know anything about it. It

wasn't long after that she was replaced by another site manager, and him coming in I

thought he might have an insight of us going away. He said he knew nothing about it.

The site manager was in a meeting with the military and the military had pointed out that

the fire department does not have many calls; they don't respond to many calls on base.

In this example we see how ex-civilian contractors began to perceive that their role in the war

zone was only temporary. The findings reveal a difference in patterns of how civilian contractors

experienced first doubts. Some of the civilian contractors, especially the ones who had either

worked in Iraq or survived a previous layoff, did not experience first doubts because they were

aware from their past experiences that they would be exiting their roles at a certain time.

Burnout. Most civilian contractors reported experiencing burnout, a factor that

significantly contributed to them feeling detached from their roles. Interestingly, most civilian

contractors pointed out that their work in the war zone was characterized by long working hours

and they were ready to return home. For example, Brian stated:

I felt relieved to get out of that place. Because one thing - the working hours were too

long. The climate was getting tougher. The attacks were increasing. You know, we had

more troops leaving than civilians at first. So the insurgents were taking advantage of

that. So for me it was better to leave the war zone.

Brian's comment pinpoints the specific fear that most civilians had in the wake of a U.S. military drawdown. His comment underlines the fact that when civilian contractors working in the war zone perceive that the environment is no longer conducive or they experience fatigue, their morale declines. Janet, a civilian contractor who was grappling with her role as an ex-military, and now an ex-civilian contractor, offered further insight: "Every job has aspects that you don't wanna do, but you know you gotta do it. Working twelve hours, seven days a week is something that I did not wanna do." Others, such as Melanie, noted:

> My family understood the experience, how it is difficult to be away that long. That you work twelve hours a day, seven days a week with no break. While on the other hand my friends feared for my safety. The last thing you didn't want to do was be on skype and talk to your family. Working in the war zone, the amount of communication reduced. So what I am trying to say is that I lost very strong friendships because a lot of my friends expected the same level of communication like when you are in the states – it is immediate, it is daily. But when I went overseas and I am working twelve hours, there is a time difference. Sometimes I worked 14 to 15 hours because of the job I had. So it was difficult, you did not have the time to invest in those friendships.

The data indicated that the first doubts period was infused with concerns about burnout, struggle to maintain relationships, and whether it was productive to continue working in the war zone. Some reported time constraints that affected their relationships with others while others spoke of the depression associated with the war zone. As civilian contractors experienced feelings of burnout, they started to consider exiting the role. Most of the individuals spoke of "working long hours" given the nature of their work in the war zone. They indicated feeling fatigued by the duties associated with their respective roles.

Disappointment. A majority of the civilian contractors reported dissatisfaction with the way the organization managed the layoff process, or how some employees were treated as the main motivation to consider exit. Some of the complaints included incidents of how some managers fought hard to have their friends reinstated and making decisions in total disregard of the layoff criterion such as an employee's seniority. Janet reported how disillusioned she was with the way the management conducted the layoff process:

> I wanted to stay longer, so I looked for another job within the organization. At first I was affected by the layoff until I started seeing how they chose who stays and goes. When I started experiencing that, I only got angry for the simple fact that they were not using the seniority system in place. They were not using it fairly; they were using it for the buddy system.

It is clear that the perception of lack of fairness in the process prompted Janet and many others to contemplate exit. Some civilian contractors witnessed some of their colleagues, who either had disciplinary records in their files or were juniors in terms of the years served, secure another position with the company. Additionally, lack of consistency in the way the layoff information was relayed prompted many to begin to consider a possible exit. Jeffrey recounted:

> We were shocked. We were the only department getting cut, and it was like, "why would you cut emergency services of all the things?" Now I had a large task of taking care of the people and then packing up the equipment. Taking care of the people was the hardest just for the fact that we had some that wanted to stay and some wanted to leave early. So we had to start making adjustments for our staffing for people to leave.

Jeffrey expresses his frustration with the way the decision to lay off his department was made. He tries to make sense of the layoff, and in the process he hints at his disappointment in terms of

what needed to be done for his subordinates. Most former civilian contractors reported that an abrupt decision by the military and their organization to cut services was a motivation to consider exit. Other civilian contractors such as Melanie cited relationship tensions. When asked why she did not consider turning in a resignation letter prior to her actual day of exit, she said:

> We wanted to make sure that the right thing was going to happen. In the middle of that, I was very disheartened. I had a difficult time with our manager. At the headquarters you suffer, and you are like, "Why am I here?" But I was not gonna let this person push me out. I am not gonna let these negative behaviors derail me from my plan.

Here we see Melanie proving an account of the difficult relationship she was having with her supervisor, and that she just wanted to stay until her last day. She wanted to stay and see if the organization would take any action against her manager. According to the data, some individuals had doubts even before they were formally informed of the layoff. Thus, civilian contractors in this group began planning for another occupation role before the first cycle of the layoff process. Basically, although it was an involuntary exit, they often began planning for their role exit as early as six months before the organization informed them about their fate.

Seeking alternatives. This category yielded two sub-categories: 1) job search, and 2) weighing the options.

Job search. Many civilian contractors experienced this phase in one way or another. Some civilian contractors acknowledged that their role in the war zone was coming to a close and they began to search for other jobs in other organizations. While some secured employment within the same organization, those who did not get selected had to exit the organization as planned. Interestingly, some civilian contractors did not consider planning for the future as they instead planned for a vacation or travels. However, most of the civilian contractors considered

applying for jobs that were related to their present roles. The following statement by Brandon represents a typical scenario of how some civilian contractors planned and prepared for a future career while still in the war zone:

> It was time to find other work. So, even though I am cognizant that we are just a commodity, you get a bit apprehensive because this point in my life, what I do is send the money home. I didn't want to hear, "Oh there is not enough money." For most people that have been in this game for a while always have their CV out there.

Afraid of losing his job, Brandon began searching for another work role. While others considered finding another unrelated role within the organization, Brandon considered a role related to what he had been doing in Afghanistan. Brian, who worked in the MWR (Morale, welfare, and recreation) facility, when asked if he looked at any alternatives to his role, responded:

> I searched for lots of jobs. I searched for jobs in companies that were still going to be in Afghanistan. Not all companies were leaving at the same time. I posted my CV on LinkedIn. Life had to continue. When one thing has stopped it doesn't mean that life has stopped. So, I had to get ready for the next chapter. This was way before we started to close the camp. So, I started preparing for the future because life goes on.

In this example, Brian discusses his future plans and job searches, and clearly hints at his withdrawal from the organization. The data would suggest that his participation within his role decreased as a result of focusing on a future-career and anticipating a postexit role. Although they would still perform their duties within the organization, the participation of most civilian contractors waned as they realized that soon they would leave the war zone.

> ***Weighing the options.*** Upon being informed that they would be laid off by the organization, most civilian contractors planned for the future and weighed their options. Most

civilian contractors reported considering a variety of options as they contemplated exit from the war zone. While leaving the war zone was the most frequently mentioned alternative, some civilian contractors tried to stay till the day of their actual exit date instead of turning in a resignation letter.

Referring to relational issues that she was experiencing with her supervisor, Melanie stated that she wanted to stay until her determined day of departure. She said, "I did consider turning in my resignation when the incidents I was going through with our leader. I had considered, you know what the best thing is to leave. One of the reasons for staying was to get through." Because Melanie was having challenges relating to her supervisor's behavior, she lost trust in her supervisor and began to see herself as a civilian contractor who would soon leave her role. For Melanie, the best option was to leave instead of trying to find other roles within her organization. Furthermore, a majority of the civilian contractors mentioned wanting to go home and support the family. Some members in this group often turned in their resignation prior to the actual date of departure. However, others such as Justin were reluctant to end their role abruptly and exit the war zone. Justin described his options:

> I was not gonna quit. I have never quit contract. I never wanted to quit. I was never going to let them fire me. If they were to call me back right now, I would go. I didn't want to be this guy who quit. "We are not going to call him back." That is the reason that I never turned in my resignation.

In this case, Justin is providing his main reason for wanting to stay till his already determined day of exit. This comment reveals that most civilian contractors interpreted their exit as a voluntary one yet they were being forced to leave by the organization. Most indicated that they

did not want to quit because they would be perceived as having deserted their role. For others, staying till the actual day of exit meant an extra paycheck, as described by Nathan:

> For me personally, I already had a plan. Thank God I had three months' notice. I knew if I stayed till when I was supposed to stay, August 10th, that I would get one more pay check. There was no need of me leaving early.

Thus, the need to optimize income was reflected when individuals considered options of whether to leave early or as planned. Additionally, some civilian contractors were reluctant to leave because organizations back in America were not paying as much as those in the war zone. Hence, this group hoped to look for a position within the organization. Justin added:

> You kind of feel like, "I wish I was somewhere they could transfer me," you know, instead of me having to go home because I really didn't wanna go home. Some people wanted to leave or whatever, but when they got home and found out that no one is paying like over there, they wanted to go back like quick.

Justin was concerned that his income in the war zone was nothing comparable to the salary offered by organizations physically located in the U.S. Several individuals reported experiencing layoff-related fears such as finances and loss of identity. Yet others did not seek alternatives. Consider the following example of Janet, who did not seek alternatives, and, thus did not plan for her life after the war zone:

> I had no emotion. I wasn't like anybody else. Losing a job didn't mean that I was going to be destitute. I already had a home. I don't have a mortgage. I was not devastated or feeling depressed or anything. I felt really nothing.

This civilian contractor was financially stable and had her house paid for. Given that she did not have any financial obligations, she did not necessarily have to worry about life after the war zone. Thus, she did not have to seek alternatives as she contemplated her exit.

Turning points. Several turning points reinforced civilian contractors' decisions to exit the war zone. Although the (involuntary) decision to exit had already been made by the organization for the affected civilian contractors, this was reinforced by specific events that accelerated that decision as well. For example, given that some employees could apply for other positions and stay with the organization, they would often change their mind and focus on the exit. Two major turning points marked this period for the civilian contractors: work environment and family ties.

Work environment. Specific incidents within the war zone were the deciding factor for most of the civilian contractors who were contemplating exit as a result of the layoff. Many of the civilian contractors, despite having opportunities for securing other jobs within the same organization, reported that incidents such as rocket attacks were the turning point in their decision to exit as planned. Jimmy noted:

> My job right now is not nearly as exciting as my job being there in Afghanistan. I mean after surviving the rocket attacks; I mean the adrenaline rush, or when you are at the base and small fire would come in. I survived the year in Afghanistan through the hardships. It was a difficult time. You know the living conditions weren't the best, and where I was, we got rocket attacks on a daily basis.

Jimmy's comment illuminates specific incidents that cemented individuals' decision to exit the war zone. Given the austere living conditions, some civilian contractors decided to leave as planned instead of trying to fight and stay. For example, a specific incident like a rocket attack

resulting in either deaths of soldiers or civilian contractors, marked the turning point in civilian contractors' decision to leave. I recall a month when we had an increase in rocket attacks at the U.S. military base that I worked. We were in the middle of the layoffs and some employees had been informed about their actual date of exit. It was not surprising that as a result of the increase in rocket attacks, some civilian contractors had asked to be released from their work roles earlier than their expected day of departure. Similar to my experience, Brian reported: "The climate was getting tougher. The attacks were increasing. You know we had more troops leaving than civilians at first, so the insurgents were taking advantage of that. So, for me it was better to leave the war zone." Brian expresses a sentiment expressed by many civilian contractors. Some civilian contractors said they decided to exit because the environment was increasingly becoming hostile.

For some civilian contractors, a specific occurrence within the organization prompted them to consider or accelerate their exit as planned by the organization. Such incidents included perceived injustices in the workplace. Recounting the turning point during the layoff, Melanie said:

> We went through a difficult period as a staff with my coworkers with a gentleman who was the second one in charge, for sexual harassment issues. There was this huge complaint and investigation. So, my last moments solidified my decision to leave. Between the gentleman who was not qualified that got a job in our department - that we should have been considered - and the problems that we had with the gentleman who was second in charge, it was a battle to do the right thing. Again, it solidified the need that we were going home. Some of the staff even left early. Having negative experience with the management, I knew I had to step out of that environment.

It appears that some civilian contractors were compelled to make a decision to exit the organization when they perceived that unqualified individuals were given jobs that they did not deserve. In this instance, Melanie reported that she and her colleagues knew they were ready to leave after management hired someone else for a position that they could have been considered for. In addition, a few civilian contractors said they exited early to protest violation of the laid down layoff criteria.

Family ties. Most civilian contractors reported the family as the turning point for their exit from the war zone. Civilian contractors' interaction with the family influenced whether they were going to keep their roles till the actual day of exit. In some cases, civilian contractors were compelled to leave their role and go back home. Individuals spoke of how family events marked the turning point in their decision to exit. For example, the observation below highlights the way Jimmy made a decision to leave his role:

> My wife had told me that my mother's health was really declining. She thought her health was at such a stage that she didn't have much time left, and with that thought there, I decided that it was best for me to go ahead and return to the states in June instead of staying longer in Afghanistan.

In this example, Jimmy provides the main turning point for making the decision to leave his role. Because most of the civilian contractors lived and worked away from their families, they believed that they deserved to return home and be with their families. Civilian contractors indicated that they communicated with the family more than anybody else during the role exit. Some even reported that their families looked forward to their return. Melanie reported:

> When I said I would be coming home, they understood that I had had it all. I have a family that is really supportive. Again everybody was excited that I was coming back.

Here we see the role of family support that serves to encourage civilian contractors to exit their roles and go back home. Because Melanie (as previously discussed) had challenges at work, family served as the second turning point. Therefore, increased family support encouraged Melanie to exit her role and go back home.

Creating the ex-role. Many of the civilian contractors struggled with accepting that they were no longer working with the military in the war zone. The data analysis revealed three sub-categories that were relevant for the role exit of civilian contractors: 1) self-definition, 2) social expectations, and 3) tension between old and new role.

Self-definition. Many civilian contractors defined their roles based on their careers prior to going into the war zone, or their work role within the war zone. In some cases, civilian contractors never exited the previous work role completely. They tried to define their previous role to family, friends, and even strangers. Brandon's example below illustrates how civilian contractors struggled to define their previous work role:

> The first four years I was the senior adviser to the police general facilities in Afghanistan. The last year I was Operations and Maintenance Manager for three different camps in Afghanistan. There were some instances because of the frequent rotation of the military, it would deflate you. The military would come in, they were young, and intimidated by your corporate knowledge and maybe just the way you carried yourself. So, they would kind of undercut you. So, there was always a younger military. Contractors make a lot of money, but I would try and quell that by telling them that if you spend 34 years in the military you would probably get a job like this, and it cost a million dollars to bring one soldier per year for all the support and everything in Afghanistan.

Brandon describes his two previous work roles and how they affected the way he related to the younger military. In this example, although Brandon is highlighting his role as an ex-civilian contractor, he capitalizes on his military experience and uses it to prove how more knowledgeable he is than the younger military. Other civilian contractors spoke of how they defined their identity. In the following excerpt, Melanie reflected on how she incorporated her past identity into the civilian contractor identity:

> Before I went into contracting, I did a lot of presentations. So, I had a lot of sales presentations. I think it was at a different level, but I think the fact that I could write the presentations and be able to present the document in a certain way you know and be able to sell. I mean the thing that I had to learn was my expectation. That experience made me a stronger person.

In this case, Melanie believed that her previous role determined how she managed her identity in her subsequent roles. She uses her previous identity to define who she is as a person. For most civilian contractors, their new roles were often defined within the context of what they did before they entered the war zone. However, others defined their roles based on their current identity. Consider the following example by Brian who was a Moral, Welfare and Recreation coordinator when he was asked how he described himself:

> Right now I describe myself as a fitness instructor. I really try to avoid the Afghanistan part. I just say that I am a fitness personal instructor. In Afghanistan it depended with where I was working. If I were in the gym I would do the fitness bit. If I were in the cyber café, I would be attending to the computers.

It appears that Brian is grappling with the loss of his past identity in Afghanistan. Although Brian is trying to remove his past identity, he is struggling to learn how to cope with it. Jeffrey's case best exemplified this aspect as well:

> I guess I never really thought about this as much as being an ex-contractor. What I was doing there was the same thing I had been doing in the states even though things were being operated a little different. It was still fire service. For me it wasn't thinking much about it. I guess you know I was an employed contractor for ten years. I guess I was like I had retired from the fire service. I did for many years, almost thirty years. Now it's over. Sometimes people would ask me what I did when I was working. A lot of times I would say overseas contractor. So, I never referred to it as being a contractor. Somebody would ask where I worked and I would say fire emergency services. They would be like, "is that fire department?" I would say yes, fire department.

Another ex-civilian contractor, Janet, felt that there was no significant difference between her previous role as an ex-uniformed service member and her role as an ex-civilian contractor:

> It is hard for me to describe because it was not any different from the military days. The only thing was that I didn't wear uniform; I was in civilian clothes. To me it was a typical day. I didn't do what the military do that much. That's the only difference. I am a retiree person. That is how I describe myself. A retiree that happened to work in Afghanistan.

The data from those civilian contractors interviewed for this study indicates that civilian contractors struggled in describing their current identity. In most cases, they used varied coping mechanisms to incorporate a previous role into their new identity.

Social expectations. Within their new role, civilian contractors reported experiencing societal reactions to their role. Ex-civilian contractors reported that family and friends brought up

their previous roles into their conversations. Brandon, who served in the military for 34 years before leaving, and served as a civilian contractor in Afghanistan, said:

> My family sometimes sits there, and because I am usually pretty quiet, they would be
>
> like, "Oh, you used to be a drill sergeant. Why are you so quiet?

Brandon's comment demonstrates how family influences the way civilian contractors manage their identities. Because the family is familiar with Brandon's past identity, they do expect him to interact based on his old identity. For Brandon, it seems that losses of his past identity have occurred as a result of transition from the military role to civilian role. Many civilian contractors reported that most of the people could not differentiate between a civilian contractor and a uniformed member of the military. Justin, who has never served in any branch of the U.S. military, said:

> I try to explain to people and family and stuff all like that is not really bad there. The stuff
>
> you hear in the news you know is scripted, but is not necessarily true. They associate
>
> what we do with soldiers, which is pretty cool. We are along the same lines, but we are
>
> not in the military. So, if you say firefighter in Afghanistan…being in Afghanistan is
>
> dangerous by itself. So, they are imagining in their mind because of what the media tells
>
> them you know, you are fighting fire and the Afghanis are shooting at you.

The data revealed that most ex-civilian contractors reported explaining to others what their role in the war zone entailed. The following statement by Nathan echoes the notion of societal expectation:

> I don't let people into the aspects of my job function and what I was before. I focus on
>
> them learning and knowing me as a person. Because I am the kind of a person I want my
>
> presence to command respect, not my mouth demanding that. So, in the roles I was in,

those are just titles. I feel like when you are over there you are seen as military person.

Like a senior contractor, that's what you are. If I let those jobs define who I am, I would

be that job.

In this case, Nathan avoids talking about his previous role and refocuses on his identity as an individual. By refocusing to manage his new identity from a personal perspective rather than the role, Nathan diverts attention away from his previous role. In some cases, civilian contractors diverted attention away from a previous role as a coping mechanism. A majority of the ex-civilian contractors reported that some people still referred to them using their previous identity. Consider the following comment by Nathan:

My wife had little nicknames for me. She would call me Chief. Even when I came home

for leave, she would tell people, "Hey, this is my Chief." She would send text messages

with cartoon characters, she had like an emoji.

The teasing by his spouse, served as a vehicle for Nathan to manage his previous identity. Most ex-civilian contractors recounted how others, including family and friends, still referred to them using their previous job titles.

Tension between the old and new identity. This sub-category was the most salient within the data. Civilian contractors reported establishing a new role after exiting the war zone, but residuals of their previous identity remained. In some cases civilian contractors did not accept the fact that they had exited their previous role. For example, Brandon offered:

Contractors are contractors. It is just the environment change. During the time I was in

Afghanistan with three companies, the training changed considerably. When I went over

the first time in March 2007, I flew to Alexandria, got a bunch of papers in the morning

and got on the plane and went to Dubai and stayed the night and flew to Kabul. Needless

to say that there is a lot of online training to do. We did a lot of online training, my guess

is that is kind of punching a ticket to me; making sure the company shows that you had to

train. I was with them till they lost the contract February of 2011, and I just transitioned

over to kind of stay on the same job with the new company.

This comment shows that Brandon refuses to let his previous identity go. Instead he emphasizes

that it was only the environment and company that changed, and not his work role. In this case,

Brandon is in denial that he no longer holds the previous identity. Many of the ex-civilian

contractors reported experiencing tension between their previous and new identities. Melanie,

who had previously worked as a civilian contractor in Iraq, said of the training prior to being

deployed to Afghanistan: "The training was repetitive because of contractors coming from Iraq.

Nothing was new to us except the company. The training wasn't much different from what I had

already got." Most civilian contractors continued to cling to their old identity after exiting the

war zone. Justin made it clear that his previous identity as a firefighter in the war zone had not

been lost:

I am still a firefighter. I work for the City of Columbia as a firefighter. You know that

won't change. That's something at my heart. You know you watch news, people would

be like you worked in Afghanistan, you almost got killed. But it is not like that for

everybody. I always say I was not in the military, I was a civilian firefighter.

In short, Justin could barely accept that he was no longer a firefighter working in the war zone.

By not putting his current firefighting role into the context of a transition from the war zone to

the U.S., Justin makes it seem that his role will always remain the same. Other ex-civilian

contractors reported experiencing difficulties adjusting to their new roles. Jeffrey reported:

For me it was hard to get a job because my time working in contract, we moved to Texas. I had never worked here in Texas. So really, like I didn't know anybody here. So that made it even harder to try and find a job. I was not trying to get into fire department because I was looking at my age and I knew coming back to the states you had to start at the bottom. At the time I was 48. I was like I am not going back to start at the bottom of fire service. I don't feel like putting on all that fire equipment. I started looking at other types of jobs and found out that it is really competitive here because it is kind of a close-knit group of people within the state and especially locally, and I tried, honestly at this point I am trying to get into maybe safety, something like that. So, I picked up a job kind just to satisfy needs. It brings in a little money, but it is not what I wanted to do most definitely. I miss the fire service because that's what I had done for so long, especially here a lot of times I would hear emergency vehicles moving on the highway, and if I am driving around somewhere and they come to the intersection, I would be like, "Man! I miss those days."

This situation reveals the tension that most ex-civilian contractors experienced when they exited their war zone roles. We see that Jeffrey still has a previous role "hangover" of the fire services, and even though he does not want to start at the bottom as a firefighter, he is looking for a role that is related to firefighting. Some ex-civilian contractors reported that they enjoyed their current roles, and the previous roles had become less important. For example, Brian said: "Life goes on. That is the past. That is gone, when one thing is gone, is gone. Actually most of the guys were focusing on what do we do next other than what did we do." In this instance, Brian refocuses attention from his previous role, to what he plans to pursue in the future. By refocusing on his future role, he enhances his new identity as opposed to the old identity. Many civilian

contractors believed that their previous role was a significant aspect of their identity. Others who did not identify with an ex-civilian contractors' role in the war zone had established new identities and refused to identify with their previous identities.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study examined how civilian contractors working in U.S. military bases in Afghanistan managed their social identities during an involuntary organizational exit. Interviews with nine former civilian contractors revealed the several ways that these individuals (re) constructed their identities and how they communicated their organizational lived exit experience to family, friends, coworkers and supervisors.

The results of this study indicate eighteen sub-categories that emerged pertaining to how civilian contractors communicated their lived exit experience and how they managed their identity during the organizational exits and after exiting the organization. In the following sections, I will first discuss the two research questions based on the results, and theoretical implications of the findings. I will also discuss the implication of this study as well as areas for future research.

RQ1: How Does the Lived Exit Experience of Civilian Contractors Correspond with Jablin's Model?

The first research question asked: *how does the lived experience of civilian contractors correspond with Jablin's model*? This research question uncovered several strategies that civilian contractors used to communicate during an involuntary organizational exit. Emergent themes from the three paths of organizational exit (i.e., preannouncement, announcement/exit, exit) proposed by Jablin (2001), suggested that civilian contractors talked to family members and framed the layoff message in a way that often portrayed the involuntary exit as a voluntary one. For example, in the preannouncement period, most civilian contractors sought family support in the wake of the layoffs, and cited that the main reason of leaving was to go home. The findings

indicate that the family was a primary source of social support and significantly influenced the decision that individuals made, as explained by Brandon:

> Any decision I made, I would always check with the family – get their opinions. Ultimately, I would do what I think would be best for continued employment. But I lay it out…here are the facts. We are descoping, I know where I fall in the seniority list per se; it's my estimation that I need to be looking. And my family would concur.

Because civilian contractors worked far away from home, all of the nine civilian contractors interviewed for this study noted family as having a significant influence in the way they experienced the layoff. The results indicated that communication between the family and civilian contractors seemed to be very strategic. Additionally, individuals increased their communication within the organization and gathered information from their supervisors and coworkers. One employee who exemplified this communicative behavior is Jeffrey, who relentlessly inquired about the status of the layoff with his seniors:

> It was pretty apparent and well known that they were drawing down. The company tried to keep you fairly informed. You know what FOBs are gonna be closed and in what order. You would know, it is back on the wall…project dates. And you had communication with the other managers and people around you. I would call them and be in the proximity and say, "Hey, what's the status? What are my chances of remaining? "So, you kind of knew what was going on. You knew what was coming down.

It is also important to note that civilian contractors tried to change the way others viewed the layoff. Although the company was severing ties with the civilian contractors, they created a positive connotation for the layoff. As explained by Nathan, civilian contractors found ways to justify their exit from the war zone:

Honestly, I felt like it was God telling me it was time to go. I had been contracting a little

over seven years straight. I got out of the military December 2005, I was in contracting

January 2006. I did three years in Iraq, and then I took like two months break, and then I

was in Afghanistan. I left Iraq in October 2008, then I was back in Afghanistan January

2009. I, like I said, I wasn't angry, I would probably have been perturbed if I would have

little or no notice like the other people did, one week, two week, three days…you know,

you are leaving. Having three months really helped. I didn't fight it, the rest of the time I

was personally preparing myself.

As Nathan offers above, civilian contractors did not want others to perceive their exit as being

forced to leave the organization, but rather wanted it to be seen as a personal choice. According

to the findings, most civilian contractors followed the preannouncement stage. However, it is

worthy to note, as found by other studies (e.g., Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), most civilian

contractors did not report becoming less connected to the organizational culture. This could be

because previous studies have examined exit from a voluntary perspective; where individuals

leave the organization out of their own volition.

In the case of an involuntary exit as the one examined by this study, individuals had no

choice. Additionally, this study revealed that similarly to a voluntary exit, individuals

experiencing an involuntary exit can as well follow the three paths of exit proposed by Jablin

(2001). For example, the findings indicate that similar to the voluntary exits, civilian contractors

had the opportunity to make a decision about whether to stay or leave. As discussed in the

previous chapter, most organizations in the war zone offered individuals an opportunity to search

for open positions in other military bases.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that most civilian contractors strategically timed the announcement of their departure from the organization and formally announced to either family or friends at a time they deemed appropriate. These findings correspond with Jablin's (2001) announcement/exit period prediction that individuals will communicate the decision to finally exit the organization. In the postexit period of sensemaking, which is the last path of Jablin's (2001) model, civilian contractors struggled with adjusting to the change and defining the transition.

Similarly, the findings corresponded with Jablin's (2001) assertion that individuals will experience uncertainty and stress. Individuals' description of their struggle to adjust in a new organization reflects Jablin's (2001) notion of managing stress in a new environment. Overall, the Jablin (2001) communication model illustrates how civilian contractors communicate their lived exit experiences with others. Although often times some of the communication activities reappear in some of the phases (Tan & Kramer, 2012), Jablin's organizational exit model provides an understanding of the exit processes in an untraditional organizational culture such as civilian contractors working in a war zone.

RQ2: How Does the Management of Identity by Civilian Contractors Correspond with Ebaugh's Role Transition Model?

The second research question asked: *how does the management of identity by civilian contractors correspond with Ebaugh's role transition model?* Civilian contractors described various ways in which they managed their identities. Most civilian contractors followed the four stages of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit model, while others did not experience a particular stage. In the first doubts stage, civilian contractors discussed having organizational concerns, experiencing burnout, and feelings of dissatisfaction. For example, findings indicate that organizational

concerns determined how individuals managed their identity during the layoff. The way an organization conducts a layoff is important because it will determine how civilian contractors identify with their work roles and whether they will withdraw from those roles as they contemplate exit, as explained by Brandon:

> I felt like the organization was so big. It was compartmentalized. And so it appears especially in the hiring process there is not a lot of cross-thought and there has been cases if you seem to get into the right clique that they always would take care of you. But for a majority you were a commodity. You had to realize that when the time came, you should be looking in advance. There were people that would be recruited and brought over, and not told that the contract will be ending in two months. Again we are a commodity and it is all about the dollar.

The layoff standard operating procedures seem to be at the core of civilian contractors' identity, and if implemented and followed to the letter, a process that is perceived to be fair could ensure a smooth transition for civilian contractors leaving the war zone. Some civilian contractors reported that they began to feel less connected to their roles once they found out that some of their managers were trying to vouch for the friends to stay instead of following the due procedure of the layoff. Additionally, most civilian contractors expressed burnout as one of the main reasons for first doubts. This group doubted whether their continued stay in the war zone would be beneficial for them. The findings indicated that fatigue and increase in rocket attack was also a key factor that made individuals doubt whether they were fit to stay longer in the war zone, as explained by Brian:

> I felt relieved to get out of that place. Because one thing - the working hours were too long. The climate was getting tougher. The attacks were increasing. You know, we had

more troops leaving that civilians at first. So the insurgents were taking advantage of that.

So for me it was better to leave the war zone.

Brian's doubt was reinforced by the fact that he worked for long hours, and he was focused on his physical safety. By evaluating their role commitment, especially after expressing fatigue, increase in attacks, and disillusionment in the way the layoff process was being conducted, civilian contractors' situation supports Ebaugh's (1988) findings that certain incidents such as burnout and disappointment may lead individuals to contemplate exiting the role. However, this study found that some civilian contractors did not experience the first doubt period because the exit was unexpected and abrupt. In some cases, civilian contractors often received at least a three-month notice, while others had a week or a three-day notice. It is possible that those who received at least a month notice had ample time to make sense of their layoff. Additionally, the findings show that other civilian contractors had either worked in the war zone and were familiar with the layoff experience or they had survived an initial layoff, which in the process prepared them for a future layoff.

The results also support other findings regarding managing identity during the role transition exit. In the seeking alternatives phase, most civilian contractors noted that they had to weigh their options and looked for a job as they prepared to exit their roles. The data revealed that a majority of the civilian contractors started to search for other opportunities either inside the organization or outside the organization, as explained by Brandon:

It was time to find other work. So, even though I am cognizant that we are just a commodity, you get a bit apprehensive because this point in my life, what I do is send the money home. I didn't want to hear, "Oh there is not enough money." For most people that have been in this game for a while always have their CV out there.

For those who sought opportunities inside the organization and secured continued employment, they continued to work in the war zone. The organizational culture in the war zone allowed individuals to search for an open position in camps that were not scheduled to close any time soon, or in departments that were not targeted for reduction in workforce. In some situations, civilian contractors weighed their options whether to quit prior to their already determined day of exit or continue to work till the last day. As they contemplated exit, most civilian contractors were hesitant about abandoning their roles, as explained by Justin.

> I was no gonna quit. I have never quit contract. I never wanted to quit. I was never going to let them fire me. If they were to call me back right now, I would go. I didn't want to be this guy who quit. "We are not going to call him back." That is the reason that I never turned in my resignation.

Ebaugh (1988) notes that individuals will evaluate the costs associated with an alternative role. This notion supports Justin's experience of not wanting to quit, but instead stay till the end. In the turning point stage, findings showed that a specific incident influenced civilian contractors to make the decision of exiting their role. Some civilian contractors reported that increase in rocket attacks and deteriorating living conditions were the main triggers for their decision to leave, as explained by Jimmy:

> My job right now is not nearly exciting as my job being there in Afghanistan. I mean after surviving the rocket attacks; I mean the adrenaline rush, or when you are at the base and small fire would come in. I survived the year in Afghanistan through the hardships. It was a difficult time. You know the living conditions weren't the best, and where I was, we got rocket attacks on a daily basis.

Jimmy hinted that even though his current job is not as exciting as the one in Afghanistan, he was glad that he survived the hostile weather and rocket attacks. However, Melanie struggled with the relational conflicts with her manager. As a result, by choosing to depart, Melanie supported Ebaugh's (1988) assertion that during this period individuals make a decision to leave and thus announce their role exit to others. In the creating the ex-role stage, which is the last part of Ebaugh's role transition model, the findings indicate that residuals of the civilian contractor's former identity remained. There was slight variation regarding the responses to the period of creating an ex-role. Findings showed that civilian contractors managed their identity in three ways. First, most civilian contractors strived to define their previous role to family and friends. Brandon, for instance, defined his identity based on the roles that he held in Afghanistan, and Melanie went further to define her identity incorporating a work role that occurred prior to entering the war zone, as she explained:

> Before I went into contracting, I did a lot of presentations. So, I had a lot of sales presentations. I think it was at a different level, but I think the fact that I could write the presentations and be able to present the document in a certain way you know and be able to sell. I mean the thing that I had to learn was my expectation. That experience made me a stronger person.

Brandon's and Melanie's experience supports Ebaugh's (1988) argument that individuals will experience tension in terms of what parts of their identity they should incorporate into their new identity. Second, the findings revealed that the society expected civilian contractors to perform a certain behavior by incorporating their previous identity. Brandon found that family members expected him to continue to perform the role of a drill sergeant, as explained here:

My family sometimes sits there, and because I am usually pretty quiet, they would be

like, "Oh, you used to be a drill sergeant. Why are you so quiet?"

Nathan also experienced this societal pressure, and found himself having to consistently explain

about his previous identity. Additionally, his wife often used his previous title to introduce

Nathan to strangers. Brandon's and Nathan's experiences are highly relevant for the role exit of

civilian contracts, and correspond with the notion of the societal reaction as advanced by Ebaugh

(1988). Third, the study revealed that most civilian contractors do not exit their previous role

completely. A majority of the civilian contractors struggled to live with their previous identities

as they establish new identities. Most civilian contractors did not accept that they had exited their

previous role, as explained by Brandon:

Contractors are contractors. It is just the environment change. During the time I was in

Afghanistan with three companies, the training changed considerably. When I went over

the first time in March 2007, I flew to Alexandria, got a bunch of papers in the morning

and got on the plane and went to Dubai and stayed the night and flew to Kabul. Needless

to say that there is a lot of online training to do. We did a lot of online training, my guess

is that is kind of punching a ticket to me; making sure the company shows that you had to

train. I was with them till they lost the contract February of 2011, and I just transitioned

over to kind of stay on the same job with the new company.

Justin and Jeffrey also demonstrated that it was difficult for civilian contractors to shed past role

identities. However, Brian did not struggle in incorporating his previous role into his current

identity. For Brian, the previous role had become less important, as he explained: "Life goes on.

That is the past. That is gone, when one thing is gone, is gone. Actually most of the guys were

focusing on what do we do next other than what did we do." These findings correspond with

Ebaugh's role transition model. The model provides an understanding into the process of becoming an ex-civilian contractor. The findings revealed that Ebaugh's (1988) model can be used to examine involuntary exits occurring in untraditional organizations such as those within the war zone. However, given that the organization determines the exit for the individual, some civilian contractors might skip the first doubts and seeking alternatives periods.

Reflecting on the two research questions, it is apparent that communication and construction of identity are at the core of how civilian contractors make sense of their exit from the war zone as well as their roles. As discussed in chapter four, some communication activities reappear in Jablin's and Ebaugh's respective models. Although scholars such as Tan and Kramer (2012) have argued that neither of the models provide a clear description of the communication process, this study has found that these models are applicable in analyzing an involuntary organizational exit in the war zone. The results support other findings regarding how civilian contractors manage their identity during an involuntary organizational exit (see Harris & Prentice, 2004; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Tan & Kramer, 2012).

Theoretical Implications

This study relied on Jablin's organizational exit model and Ebaugh's role exit model as the framework of analysis. The study has several important theoretical implications. First, this study provides a clear understanding of the organizational socialization among civilian contractors exiting their organizations in the war zone. While there have been many studies that have examined organizational exit using Jablin's model and Ebaugh's role exit model, no studies have explored how civilian contractors communicate their lived exit experiences as they exit a war zone such as Afghanistan. Additionally, no study has integrated two interdisciplinary models

to study how civilians embedded with military personnel in an organization such as the U.S. military.

Second, past research has focused on uniformed service members of the U.S. military, particularly how they adjust to the post-deployment period. By focusing on uniformed service members, researchers have ignored civilian contractors who play an integral role in supporting U.S. military. Despite civilian contractors' contribution and supporting the "war fighters," most of the attention is diverted to the war zone exit of the uniformed service members. On that basis, it is enlightening that while applying Jablin's and Ebaugh's models, this study found that the civilian contractors communicate and manage their identities in almost similar ways.

According to Jablin's model, communication with the family determines how civilian contractors will communicate their decision to leave the organization. Additionally, unlike individuals involuntarily exiting organizations that are not located in the war zone, civilian contractors have to return home after being away from their family for a long time. As such, it is not surprising that one of the most prominent communicative behaviors that this study found is talking to the family so as to garner support. Jablin's model revealed that individuals will use several communication strategies to interact with family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors. For example, individuals will frame the message so as to create a positive connotation of the layoff as a voluntary exit during the first cycle of the layoff. Similarly, civilian contractors reframed the reasons for leaving to create a positive message to others. Indeed, these communication strategies demonstrate how communication is enacted during an involuntary organization exit.

Third, by explicitly examining how civilian contractors manage their identity as they exit organizations in the war zone, this study shows how a previous role could actually influence

individuals' future identity. The role exit transition of civilian contractors is different from their counterparts who involuntarily exit traditional organizations; because exiting a war zone is heightened by unexpected and abrupt decisions by the military. Thus, this makes it difficult for the civilian contractors to transition to a new role. For example, the findings show that some ex-civilian contractors are yet to come to terms with the fact that they have exited the role. In other words, Ebaugh's model provides insights into the management of identity during an involuntary exit, and the implications once these individuals exit the organization.

Fourth, and finally, this study extends past research on organizational exits. Given that most studies have examined voluntary exit, this study used Jablin's and Ebaugh's models, which have extensively been applied to the voluntary exits context. The study found that the two conceptual models were applicable to the lived exit experiences and the role exits of civilian contractors. Although some individuals skipped a phase, in most cases, civilian contractors chronologically followed the paths of these models.

Past research on organizational exits has extensively used Jablin's (1987, 2001) and Ebaugh's (1988) models to examine how individuals make sense during organizational changes such as the layoff. Also, research has shown that individuals do not necessarily follow a specific path. Even though this is the case, our study shows that the path that individuals follow is primarily dependent upon the context and organizational culture. For instance, first time civilian contractors in Afghanistan may experience involuntary exit differently from civilian contractors who had previously served in Iraq. Thus, our study adds to this literature by arguing that certain paths as proposed by Jablin (2001) and Ebaugh (1988) overlap. This study therefore suggests a framework that will integrate both models. First, Jablin's *preannouncement* period could be combined with Ebaugh's *first doubts* and *seeking alternatives* stages. Second, Jablin's

announcement/exit stage could be incorporated into Ebaugh's *turning point* stage. Finally, Jablin's *postexit* stage could be combined with Ebaugh's stage of *creating the ex-role*. Integrating these models would help future researchers understand the organizational exit from a single lens. For instance, researchers may use the integrated model to examine how individuals communicate their identities during an involuntary organizational exit.

In sum, these findings are not only applicable in the war zone, but in a range of other organizational contexts that might differ from a "typical traditional" organization. For example, this conceptual framework could be used to examine returning diplomats exiting their duty stations abroad. This study serves as a platform to encourage future research on identities during involuntary organizational exit.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, although the study's sample provided insights into how civilian contractors manage their identities during an involuntary organizational exit in a war zone, it was limited in terms of its diversity. A majority of those interviewed identified as American. Also, only two of the participants were females. Such an imbalance may affect the results of the study as experiences may differ between men and women as well as among nationalities. Future analyses could examine how different groups experience involuntary organizational exit in an untraditional organizational context.

Second, this study could be extended by examining the process using a theoretical lens that is pertinent to an individual's identity. Although both models provided valuable insights into the process of involuntary organizational exit, neither provided a theoretical explanation of the process. Future research could cautiously tease out how organizational change theories cohere with the two models.

Despite these limitations, this study identified the communication processes and strategies for managing identities that civilian contractors enacted during an involuntary organizational exit. Future research could explain the specific strategies in relation to specific behaviors such as intent to leave. Additionally, this study focused on civilian contractors' viewpoints. Future studies could consider examining identity from the perspective of family members. Given that the findings show that most of the civilian contractors communicated with their families, understanding (re) construction of identity from the perspective of the family would be fascinating. In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of better understanding the communication and identity forming processes that play out during involuntary organizational exits. Hopefully, Jablin's (2001) and Ebaugh's (1988) models herein might stimulate additional studies of involuntary organizational exits.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Hello,

Thank you for taking the time to read this message.

My name is John Makeni. I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I have been referred to you by (name withheld).

I am conducting a research study on how civilian contractors working on U.S. military bases in Afghanistan negotiate their identities during involuntary organizational exit. I am looking for an individual who has worked with a U.S. military contracting company in Afghanistan, and was laid off as a result of the U.S. DoD drawdown of the U.S. Military troops.

I am specifically looking for an individual who meets the following criteria: (1) worked as a civilian contractor with the main U.S. DoD military contracting companies (e.g., AEECOM, DynCorp International, Exelis International, Fluor, KBR, PAE) in Afghanistan between 2001 to 2015; (2) is a former or current employee of any of the aforementioned companies, they were on the layoff list, and didn't initiate resignation for motives not associated with the layoff; (3) he or she was either laid off or chose to resign before the actual day of departure from work; and (4) they are either U.S. residents or foreign nationals aged 18 and above.

The main focus of the study is how civilian contractors experience the layoffs, and how they manage their identities after leaving their jobs in Afghanistan and moving on to other jobs or organizations.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be invited to take part in a phone or Skype interview that would last between 45 to 90 minutes. Prior to the interview, I will send you an informed consent form highlighting the objective of the study, confidentiality, risks, procedures and my contacts. Following the first interview, I may ask you to participate in an optional follow-up interview that may last between 10 to 20 minutes.

If you are interested to participate in this study, please feel free to contact me at jmmakeni@bsu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

John Makeni

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Study Title Constructing Social Identity During an Involuntary Organizational Exit: The Case of Civilian Contractors on U.S. Military Bases in Afghanistan.

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this research project is to examine how civilian contractors construct social identity during involuntary organizational exit in a war zone. Findings from this research may help create an understanding of downsizing in untraditional organizations such as the military.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be either a U.S. resident or a foreign national between 18 and 70 years of age. You must also meet the following criteria: (1) have worked as a civilian contractor with the main U.S. DoD military contracting companies (e.g., AEECOM, DynCorp International, Exelis International, Fluor, KBR, PAE) in Afghanistan between 2001 to 2015; (2) you are a former or current employee of any of the aforementioned companies, they were on the layoff list, and didn't initiate resignation for motives not associated with the layoff; and (3) you were either laid off or chose to resign before the actual day of departure from work.

Participation Procedures and Duration
For this project, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview regarding your personal experiences during your exit from the war zone (Afghanistan). The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be conducted by phone or Skype at your convenience.

Audio-recording
For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded. The researcher may take brief notes during the interview, and may ask follow-up questions. Pseudonyms will be used in place of any identifying information when the interviews are transcribed. The audio files will be stored on a password-protected computer until the end of May 2016 and will then be erased.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity
All data will be maintained as confidential. No identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Storage of Data
Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office until the end of May 2016 and will then be shredded. Electronically stored data will be kept on the researcher's password-protected computer until the end of May 2016 and will then be erased. In order to protect the identities of the participants, all consent forms will be stored in a secure location that will only be accessed by the principle researcher. All collected data will be coded and any identifying information will be changed to minimize the risk of breach of confidentiality. Results will not be released or reported in any way that might allow for the identification of individual participants, unless otherwise required by law.

Risks or Discomforts

The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is that you may not feel comfortable answering some of the questions. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may quit the study at any time.

Benefits

This study affords you with an opportunity to tell your story, which will offer insights into the understanding of involuntary organizational exits such as a layoff in non-traditional settings such as a war zone. Additionally, the findings of this study will provide useful information to researchers and professionals on how best to manage personnel during involuntary organizational exits.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information

For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at irb@bsu.edu.

Study Title Constructing Social Identity During an Involuntary Organizational Exit: The Case of Civilian Contractors on U.S. Military Bases in Afghanistan.

****

Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "Constructing social identity during an involuntary organizational exit: The case of civilian contractors on U.S. military bases in Afghanistan." I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator: Faculty Supervisor:
John M.W. Makeni, Graduate Student   Dr. Glen H. Stamp
Department of Communication Studies   Department of Communication Studies
Ball State University   Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306   Muncie, IN 47306
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Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and sharing your experience. I will be asking you questions related to your experience as a civilian contractor, your exit from the war zone, and how you managed your identity after leaving your organization. I will audio-record the interview, take brief notes during our conversation, and may ask you follow-up questions. Pseudonyms will be used in place of any identifying information (names and organization) in the transcript and written findings. Do you have a preference for the name you would like to be referred to as during the interview and within all written copy? Please also know that you may choose not to answer any questions and may stop participating at any time. Do you have any questions? Ok, let's begin, I will start recording now.

1. How would you describe yourself in relation to your role as a civilian contractor in Afghanistan?

- Probing: In what area did you work?
- Probing: What were your specific responsibilities?
- Probing: Which company did you work?
- Probing: Which FOB (Forward operating base) were you stationed?

2. Did you serve or are you a current uniformed member of the U.S. Armed Forces (i.e. reserve)? If so, which branch of military?

3. Tell me how you ended up working in Afghanistan?

- Probing: Why did you decide to work for the U.S. military in Afghanistan?

4. Now that we have talked about how you ended up in Afghanistan, tell me about the training process prior to your deployment.

- Probing: How were your first days like?
- Probing: How would you describe your training?

5. What was it like to work for the U.S. military and its coalition partners as a civilian contractor?

- Probing: Walk me through a typical day in Afghanistan.

Transition: Now that we have talked about your typical day in Afghanistan, let's talk about the period before you left your job and the time after you left your job.

6. Tell me about your departure from the war zone.

- Probing: How did you learn about being on the layoff list?
- Probing: How did you feel when you learned that you had been slated for a layoff?
- Probing: How did the layoff affect the way you identified with the organization?

7. Please tell me about the conversations you had when you first learned that you would be leaving your organization in Afghanistan.

- Probing: Who did you talk to? Why?
- Probing: What did you say?

- Probing: Who did you not want to tell about leaving the company? Why?

8. What were your expectations when you talked to your family and friends about leaving the organization?

9. What are some of the memorable messages from family members and friends, and how did these messages affect your identity as a civilian contractor?

10. Taking into consideration that you had been slated for a layoff, did you begin to search for any jobs? Why or why not?

11. In your view, do you think your coworkers (ones who were not affected by the layoff) treated you differently when they heard that you would be leaving the organization?

- Probing: Tell me of a time you felt that your departure from the organization influenced the relationships you had with your coworkers.
- Probing: Do you think that they treat you differently now that you are not part of the organization?

12. Tell me about the time when you physically left the organization.

- Probing: Did you ever think of turning in your resignation prior to your already determined last day of work?
- Probing: If so, what were the factors that made you consider leaving?

13. At what point did you tell your coworkers/family/close friends that you were finally leaving the organization?

- Probing: How did you break the news about your exit?
- Probing: What did you tell them?
- Probing: When did you tell them?

Transition: Now that we have talked about your exit from the organization, let's talk about the period after you left your job.

14. Tell me about your experience moving on and into other organizations.

- Probing: How did you feel once you were out of the organization?
- Probing: Did you join another organization immediately? If not, how long did you stay without a job?

15. How would you describe life after leaving an organization?

- Probing: How does it compare to when you are still an employee?

16. Did you find yourself being asked by others why you left the organization?

- Probing: What reasons did you provide?
- Probing: Did you feel that you owed them an explanation?

17. At the time you left the organization, how did you feel about becoming an ex-civilian contractor?

- Probing: How did leaving the organization affect the way you viewed yourself and your role as a civilian contractor?
- Probing: How did you describe yourself to family, friends, and even strangers?

18. How did you describe yourself to your former coworkers?

- Probing: What aspects (e.g., title) of your old job did you talk about?
- Probing: What aspects of your old job didn't you talk about? Why?

19. Tell me about a time that others asked you about your previous role.

- Probing: Are there any aspects of your previous job that you wanted to keep?
- Probing: Are there any aspects of your previous job that you did not want to keep?

20. In your opinion, do you think that people use your previous role to define you as a person?

- Probing: Can you think of a specific moment when you felt that people brought up your old job in your conversations?
- Probing: Do you believe that your previous job really determines how you manage your identity in your subsequent jobs?
- Probing: Do you also believe that your previous role determines the way how the society views you as an individual?

21. Is there anything else that you would like to share before we conclude?

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. Again, I want to reiterate that everything we spoke about today will be kept confidential.