Regaining Normalcy After War: ICT-enabled ‘Transition Resilience’ in Veterans and Refugees

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Abstract
Our research focuses broadly on the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enabled practices that people develop in response to disruption—an emergent phenomenon dubbed transition resilience. In our larger project, we seek to understand the ICT choices that people make, how ICT use changes, and how ICTs enable people to create a new sense of normalcy when undergoing periods of chronic disruption. Here, we explore the transition experiences of United States (US) veterans reintegrating into civil society and refugees integrating into the US social system. Veterans experience multiple transitions at once and institutional support to help them regain normalcy is often poor. Refugees also undergo multiple transitions when integrating into a new civil society. Both groups face unique identity crises in their respective transitions. Our work contributes to the development of new ICT-enabled tools to help people recover and regain normalcy in their lives.

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1 Background
Transitions are an outcome of life disruptions, which are a category of crisis that are often debilitating and invisible to the public. Transitions manifest themselves in a variety of situations, such as getting diagnosed with a disease, struggling through a divorce, experiencing job loss, and becoming homeless (Massimi, Dimond, & Le Dantec, 2012). Following a life disruption, people typically undergo a period of adjustment, referred to as a transitional phase. Here, aspects that people take for granted, such as routines, relationships, and roles, can change immensely (Schlossberg, 2005). As more people have access to an ecology of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), we can better study how ICTs aid in building resilience—the collective set of practices people develop to bounce back from disruption (Mark & Semaan, 2008).

Transpiring from this emerging discourse, research has increasingly used the theme of resilience to examine overlapping themes between disaster recovery and ICTs (Mark & Semaan, 2008; Palen & Liu, 2007; Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird, & Palen, 2010). Here, we shift our emphasis on resilience to a less detectable form of disruption in two distinct cases: the transitions of United States (US) veterans after returning home following a period of military service and the transitions of refugees relocating from their native surroundings disrupted by civil unrest.

1.1 Groups in Transition: Veterans and Refugees
Veterans may experience several transitions at once, which make them a unique case to study. After returning home, veterans are prone to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), become homeless, get divorced, and change occupations (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015; Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2015; US Census Bureau, 2014). Moreover, veterans undergo identity crises from the conflict in norms between civilian and military social structures. Their once quotidian routines of giving commands or executing orders within their tactical units no longer apply in the civilian world; society stresses individualism among citizens whereas the military instills notions of collectivism within its members. There exists a critical need to understand how to aid veterans as they reintegrate into civil society upon completing their military service.

Similarly, refugees resettling into a new civil society also experience a multitude of co-occurring transitions (Ager & Strang, 2008; Montgomery, 1996; Strang & Ager, 2010). The fundamental goal of resettlement (location to a ‘third country’ that is not the country of origin or the country of first asylum or refuge) in the United States is refugee self-sufficiency, early employment, and integration into the host community. However, when refugees settle in a new country, they bring with them physical and psychological scars from their home country, while also seeking new employment opportunities and re-
constructing their community. Furthermore, they also experience severe identity crises when adjusting to a new culture, language, and way of life. Unlike other forms of migration, refugees flee conflict zones due to religious, ethnic, and political persecution with little to no warning, and yet they are expected to adapt quickly and become active contributors to their host society.

Our research examines how ICTs enable the transition to normalcy following a life disruption. Through a qualitative field study, we gain a deep understanding of how various groups use, or do not use, ICTs during the transition to normalcy in diverse contexts. In our study, we look at people who reintegrate back into civil society (veterans) or migrate under forced conditions (refugees), as both groups aim to regain a sense of normalcy after a period of war. Although there is a growing body of literature on life disruptions (Dimond, Shehan Poole, & Yardi, 2010; Massimi et al., 2012; Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2008), there is a clear absence of research on how people appropriate ICTs when maneuvering ongoing disruption caused by multiple transitions and identity crises (Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, & Hayes, 2015).

2 Methodology

2.1 Recruitment

We recruited users from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in varying stages of transition. First, we established partnerships with prominent community and university-affiliated organizations who had access to the populations we wanted to study. We included letters of cooperation from trusted entities in our IRB application to demonstrate our willingness to adhere to proper recruitment protocols and to collect research data in an ethical manner. Secondly, we broadcasted recruitment scripts in both English and Arabic languages via online social media outlets and physical community bulletin boards. Third, we used snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) where we asked our informants to recommend others for interviews.

Our data draws on 13 interviews of US military veterans and 2 interviews with Iraqi refugees, conducted from May 2015 to September 2015. Our veteran participants, recruited through resources from the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University, served in a number of different branches within the military and in multiple deployments in recent conflicts with which the US was involved, such as: Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom.

We also secured the help of organizations affiliated with the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Located in Upstate New York, we partnered with a local refugee agency, Catholic Charities, which provided our research team access to key Iraqi informants in the area who left Iraq due to ongoing disruption and persecution stemming from the 2nd Gulf War which began in March 2003.

2.2 Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews, our study participants described their life histories before, during, and after their transition to civil society (Wengraf, 2001). When participants mentioned their use of ICTs, we probed into how, why, and with whom they connected with through ICTs in the context of their transition; explored their familiarity and usage of mobile media, social media, synchronous rich media, asynchronous chat, online games, and other technologies; and unpacked problems they encountered using these ICTs. Our interviews lasted from 1 to 4 hours, and a couple of our participants particularly recounted the experience as a therapeutic means for them to vent out their struggles from their transition process. After building rapport with our participants, we sought permission to add them to our personal social media networks to analyze their online postings to triangulate with and, in turn, validate our interview data.

2.3 Lack of Institutional Resources

Each of our veteran informants reported how formal organizations, such as the VA, and government-sponsored programs, such as the Transition Assistance Program, failed to address their needs. Along a similarly cynical vein, our refugee informants casted a negative view of the US government, due to the US-led war that has since resulted in their need to take refuge in a new country. As such, refugees may not fully trust and utilize services available to them.
3 Discussion
We are finding that our informants used ICTs to develop identity awareness—whereby they connected with people across digital and offline networks with whom they had shared experiences and histories to engage in collective sensemaking activities to: (1) develop a big picture understanding of the new norms and rules in which they embed new practices and (2) receive support (Semaan, Britton & Dosono, 2016). Our veteran and refugee informants adopted new ICTs, reappropriated ICTs they already used, and developed new practices by reconfiguring ICTs to support their transitions. We then pinpoint ways to help respective institutional resources build trust among the communities they serve.

Our study focuses on how ICTs are empowering veterans and refugees to be resilient while transitioning from traumatic war-torn environments to civil society. Given the large number of veterans who will return to the United States in the coming years, and the ongoing refugee crisis in the Middle East, the implications of our work will influence ICT design for similar groups going through periods of transition. Our work improves our understanding of where people struggle and triumph in restructuring their lives following a major life disruption, and contributes towards the development of new social and technical tools to help people adapt to a new society and regain normalcy.

4 References

