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# Vietnam combat veterans : readjustment through the lenses of identity and social drama

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Michael Scott Slevin  
Vietnam Combat Veterans:  
Readjustment through the  
Lenses of Identity and Social  
Drama

## ABSTRACT

This thesis asks whether Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Victor Turner's theory of social drama can be usefully integrated to help social workers better understand the experiences and challenges of Vietnam veterans. Specifically, this thesis will apply Erikson's phase of identity consolidation and confusion that occurs in late adolescence. Turner's processual social drama will be applied to the rules, roles, and institutions of a changing society. The phenomenon is twofold: first, it comprises the social and ideological upheaval during the decade of the 1960s; second, it comprises the individual stories of challenge and change in the lives of working class white Vietnam combat veterans. Eight veterans selected by Murray Polner from among 204 he interviewed between 1967 and 1969 are considered.

Integrating the two theories, the thesis concludes that society's rules – at work, in school, within the family – were inadequate to contain the intrapsychic and ideological ferment of the returned veterans. There was intense pressure from intrapsychic processes to change the rules and institutions, including those of mental health care, presidential nominating conventions, and foreign policy constructions. Second, there was intense pressure from both traditional and incipient social forms to contain individual crisis. Each was only partially successful. All of the veterans presented, regardless of policy views, experienced difficulty meshing their veteran identities with the extant social

structures, and the society had difficulty changing to accommodate the new generation and its historically and personally unique experiences.

VIETNAM COMBAT VETERANS:  
READJUSTMENT THROUGH THE LENSES  
OF IDENTITY AND SOCIAL DRAMA

A project based upon an independent investigation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2008

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was a decade of dramatic conflict. The post-World War II children were coming of age. They propelled and were thrust about by the currents of civil rights, gender and family role change, and foreign policy. The liberal center consensus of the post-New Deal era was challenged from the left and from the right. While the left seemed more successful during the sixties, as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were joined by landmark antipoverty legislation, a new generation of conservatives was building up a head of steam which led to political dominance in the 1980s.

The anticommunism foundation to United States foreign policy of the 1950s cracked. The radical left challenged the legitimacy of the escalating war in Vietnam; the radical right urged the United States to be more aggressive in that war. Demonstrations, civil disobedience, and violence shook the nation. Distinctions blurred between the forms of protest the left advocated and in which they participated and the street crime and riots which the right campaigned against and condemned.

The soldiers who fought the Vietnam war were members of the generation that came of age in the 1960s. The maul of war was driving a wedge, splitting the country along class lines. The burden of combat was carried most often on the shoulders of the working class and those with less education. When these men enlisted or were drafted

they were largely apolitical. But they had imbibed the rules and ideology of patriotism, service to country, and anticommunism growing up. Their experiences in war – what they did, what they saw, who they bonded with – shook these convictions and commitments profoundly. Then they became short-timers, counting the days to their leaving Vietnam separately. The return home was disorienting, and thrust them back upon themselves psychologically. The family, community, and country they had left was changing, and they had changed. They felt isolated, confused by what they had experienced, anxious, agitated, and angry, glad to be home alive. They thought and felt their fellow citizens to be unwelcoming, indifferent to their sacrifices. Veterans of former wars, fellow students, colleagues, and family members failed to understand what it had been like to fight a guerrilla war with high-powered technology in an alien geography and culture.

Understanding the lives of these veterans challenges the theoretician, the clinician, and the policymaker. The microscope's lens of intrapsychic process and conflict has been used to see into the therapeutic needs of the veteran; the telescope's lens of social rules and process has been used to conceptualize and implement policy. The two phenomena of the individual and society have a common existence and are two sides of the same coin. Yet little theory has combined the two elements.

Erikson and Turner were noted theoreticians. Erikson sought to extend the psychoanalytic understandings of Freud into the social realm. He described the stage of late adolescence as a time in which the individual integrates history and is shaped by ideology. He conceptualized four stages, each containing a challenge and crisis, prior to that of identity consolidation and identity confusion. He understood this time in late



adolescence and early adulthood as the stage at which the individual integrates history and is shaped by ideology. But the stages of identity development he defined are primarily intrapsychic. Turner, a social anthropologist, conceptualizes a processual structure he calls “social drama.” Its four stages of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism were developed in fieldwork with tribes in what is now Zambia. He later applied the theory of change to crises in large-scale societies. He argued that social change is a group process in which individuals contribute differently to a group synthesis. Yet he is primarily a theorist of social rules and processes.

This thesis asks whether Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development and Turner’s theory of social drama can be usefully integrated to help us better understand the experiences and challenges of Vietnam veterans. The phenomenon to be studied is twofold: first, it comprises the social and ideological upheaval of the decade of the 1960s; second, it comprises the individual stories of challenge and change in the lives of working class white Vietnam combat veterans. Murray Polner, a social historian, interviewed 204 Vietnam combat veterans between 1967 and 1969. They were members of the lower middle and working classes. He selected nine – three hawks, three doves, and three whom he called “haunted” – to write about. He listened and probed their biographies, their war time combat experiences, and their lives once they had returned home. These provided case material for the investigation of this thesis.

Both Erikson and Turner wrote about moments of crisis – Erikson in the individual and Turner in society. Successfully integrating them has implications for the social work profession. It would allow clinicians to better understand the pressures of social rules and historical change on the individual life. On the flip side, it would allow

policymakers to better understand the needs of individuals in conflict and how these needs pressure social rules, roles, and institutions. This challenge is at the core of the social work profession.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses the tools of Erikson's theory of identity consolidation and confusion and Turner's theory of social drama to explore the experiences of young adult veterans of the Vietnam war. These veterans entered the war at an age when ideology works to contain and pattern experience. The cohort of working and lower middle class men interviewed by Polner, and notably the eight addressed by his book, *No Victory Parades*, and by this thesis, absorbed a tradition of patriotism through their roots as their young trunks branched in the post-World War II historical moment. They were shaken violently with conflicts of race, class, and gender. These breaks with past ideology evoked confusion and crisis. The authority of leaders, institutions, and conceptual structures was challenged. In this chapter, I will examine why and how the Erikson and Turner theories usefully address the conflicts of soldiers as they reentered United States society after deployment. I will then consider my biases and the limitations of my material and method.

The veterans I consider were in a transition from adolescence to adulthood. They took off the street clothes of their childhood milieu and put on the uniforms of society. One decision, though, did not create an identity. Erikson states that "it is through their ideology that social systems enter the fiber of the next generation and attempt to absorb through their lifeblood the rejuvenative power of youth" (134). But young combat soldiers could not find their ideological bearings in a guerrilla war in an alien country

when they were already shaken by the rumblings of social disorder and change experienced by their generation at home.

Erikson's theory of identity consolidation and confusion is a useful instrument with which to analyze these facts and circumstances. To address their conflicts the veterans had to revisit the preceding stages of their identity formation. I will look at how these eight Vietnam veterans navigated that challenge: whether they had faith in humanity, leaders, and ideas after their combat experiences; whether they were able to commit freely to one of the available or unavoidable avenues of duty and service or did they suffer ambivalence and paralysis; whether they were able to trust others to enable and give scope to their realistic aspirations, and do so without living on the margins a life of unresolved anxiety, guilt, rage, and frustration; whether they were able to find an occupation putting their core metaphors, needs, and values to work. These challenges confront any adolescent; I will explore how they resonated in an era when youth sought large-scale transformations of the ideologies they had absorbed.

The ideological culture of the post-war generation can also be conceptualized as a societal plane. The impact of social rules held in common by the cohort who came of age in the 1960s can be observed across individual lives. Turner conceptualizes a process of social drama with which to understand social transformation. It develops in time in successive stages of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. The post-war contract that had crystallized around anti-communism and the ideal of a white suburban nuclear family was breached and a crisis erupted. Ideological markers of the rupture will be located in the social rules by which the veterans lived. The concept of redress will bring into focus the manner in which civilian society negotiated with veterans a

resolution of the crisis. Finally, this thesis will consider whether the social drama ended with a reintegration or schism between the combat veterans and their society.

I will use a textual analysis of the stories told in the first and third person to elucidate these theories and explore their intersection in the motif of ideology. I will apply a point-by-point analysis, using the nodal points indicated above augmented by an overall contextual discussion.

Each author brings to the table different perspectives with individual advantages and individual blind spots. Acknowledging them will hopefully help the reader to see around the corner of my limitations came of age in the 1960s. I had a foot in the radical left camp and a foot in the camp of the liberal center. Early on I had been engaged by the struggle for black civil rights. Assassination, urban riots, and Black Nationalism were then stirred into the cauldron of the sixties. These were lived experiences. I struggled to oppose the war my father – internal, actual, and cultural – vehemently supported. This, too, was lived experience. I was only marginally – and dismissively – aware of the groundswell of conservative culture, politics, and ideology. I lived through its fruition and its exhaustion in the quarter century following the election of Ronald Reagan as president. But I only recently became thoughtful about its historical roots. In conceptualizing and writing this thesis I have sought to stand on the fifty-yard line, but I know I have not always succeeded. Having worked for a newspaper for many years, I know the struggle to be objective – its difficulties and its limitations. The historical moment, the rules structuring the journalistic enterprise, and the audience always influence the stories. Also, I grew up in an upper middle class family. Despite my early interest in immigration and unions, despite my experience living in lower middle class

neighborhoods, I have not lived the working class experience. I have, however, been trained in literature, which is transformative, and clinical social work, which demands an awareness of countertransference and an ability to identify and empathize with clients from many different backgrounds. I hope these skills have enabled me to at least mitigate the limitations of my biography.

The biographies Polner reports are rich and revealing. However, he is a social historian, and they do not provide the data of an in-depth psychological case analysis. So looking at them through the lens of identity consolidation and confusion Erikson provides, which he explicitly states does not yield a diagnosis, is both a strength, in that he works close to the line of intersection between psychological and sociological evidence and interpretation, and a weakness, in that the accumulation of psychological detail required to sort out the presence of ideology is less present than one would wish.

Chapters four and five, respectively, discuss Erikson's and Turner's theories. Both theories were incubated in the 1960s. Erikson's book, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, was published in 1968. It rode the crest of the baby boom generation. Turner's work adapting to large scale societies theories developed in work with small tribal societies, was published in 1974. But he did his original fieldwork in Zambia in the 1950s, publishing influential books from the perspective of small-scale societies in the 1960s. These scholarly works, though written by members of the previous generation, responded to the conflicts and concerns of the sixties, which will be discussed in the chapter on the phenomenon, which follows.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PHENOMENON

Our country's warriors who fought and died in Vietnam were predominantly young working class men. Those who survived were profoundly affected by their time in combat; their worlds, inner and interacting, were permanently unsettled. They were young: The average age of soldiers in Vietnam was 19. Most were civic soldiers; they did not make the military their career. Rather, they had taken advantage of the Army to live out a psychosocial moratorium. The hierarchies of authority and meaning in which they had trusted were radically undermined during their service, regardless of their positions on the war. They reentered a society in conflict. Understanding the interaction of the historical moment with their individual psyches helps us reframe this time and this generation in our history. We are still living it out. As this thesis is being written, the United States is caught up in different wars – in Iraq and Afghanistan. What we learn about the impact of war trauma at the intersection of history and the individual might help us better serve our new young veterans' psychological needs and, in a different direction, better understand the trajectory of our own history. To this end, the phenomena of this thesis, which will be addressed in this chapter, are the world of social conflict in the sixties and the experiences of eight young working class veterans of that decade's – and that generation's – war.

## Political and Social Divides

The 1960s was a decade in which the liberal center of the United States was challenged from the left and from the right. From the left, the affluence of the post-war years – television, teen music, and suburban homes – did not provide meaning. Camus was influential: “individual action in defiance of the order of things would make life worth living” (Steigerwald, 2008, p. 11). From the right, a permissive upbringing had undermined authority – that of the government and the church, but most centrally, that of the nuclear family, the bedrock of civilization.

### *Challenge from the Left*

Sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that the young intelligentsia, not the workers, would lead the charge from the left for fundamental change in a society in which consumption was valued over work, leisure over labor (Steigerwald, 2008, p. 12). The civil rights movement, founded on civil disobedience and the exposure of societal violence, was given a high voltage shock when four black college students sat in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. The southern-based Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed in 1963.

By choice and by conviction, SNCC believed that protest had to be relentless.

Thus they plunged into a five year hell that began with the Freedom Rides and ended with the battle of Lowndes County and the Selma march for voting rights in 1965. During the Freedom Rides SNCC activists endured a Klan firebombing, the frightful beatings in Birmingham and Montgomery, and eventual arrest and imprisonment in Mississippi’s infamous Parchman Prison, where they were again physically abused. (p. 21)



SNCC challenged an older generation of civil rights leaders who believed that legal processes would end segregation and inequality. John Lewis, a SNCC leader who adhered consistently to Martin Luther King's creed of nonviolence, excised part of his speech at the 1963 March on Washington at the pleading of Bayard Rustin to keep from offending moderates. He cut language stating that we will "march through the South, the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did" and "burn Jim Crow to the ground" (p. 23).

The demonstrations in the South pushed Presidents Kennedy and Johnson into forceful civil rights actions and legislation. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was followed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Johnson, challenged by the inspiration of the New Deal and by his ambition to surpass President Franklin D. Roosevelt, pushed through Great Society programs of Medicare, Medicaid, the Appalachian Redevelopment Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the National Housing Act. Each of these confronted entrenched interests in favor of the poor. The War on Poverty, which included establishing the Office of Economic Opportunity and VISTA, sought to empower the poor to challenge existing social and economic arrangements. When money flowed to community groups directly, rather than through the entrenched politicians, in the words of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "all hell broke out all over the place" (Steigerwald, 2008, p. 35). And the liberal center was shaken. When Tom Hayden, author of the Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS),

surveyed the Newark project in 1965, he found it bogged down in the hypocrisy of an antipoverty program designed, he said, to ensure "the dominance of established interests, especially those with the Democratic Party machine and middle-class reform groups" – the dominance of liberals in other words. (p. 39)

Domestically, from race to poverty, society had been unsettled institutionally and ideologically. Then came the Vietnam war. In 1966, 150,000 troops were deployed in Vietnam; the number doubled in 1967, and reached a peak of 536,000 in 1968. The New Left was radicalized by the war. Demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience followed. The New Left challenged the core anticommunist structure of the liberal center.

Social culture was also changing swiftly. The Pill, first marketed in 1960, allowed women unprecedented sexual freedom. Sexual expression exploded in popular culture – movies, music, and literature. Steigerwald (2008) wrote,

In many respects, cultural radicals focused less on America's harsh repressiveness than on its liberal permissiveness. They railed...against the hypocrisy of liberal values that preached individual freedom while circumscribing that freedom with demands for "reasonableness." (p. 59)

Feminism, which challenged the role of women in society, entered the fray. The National Organization for Women was formed in 1965, and organized around equal pay and equal work opportunities for women. However, some of its theoreticians and student adherents conflated Vietnam anti-imperialism with feminism. Robin Morgan, for instance, argued that women's bodies were colonized territories (p. 63). Gay rights activists began to organize against the norm of heterosexual sex, arguing that they too were oppressed and colonized. Black nationalists, under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, among others, pushed back against nonviolence.

### *Challenge from the Right*

The center was challenged from the right as well. The prolonged battle was captured by the assertion of one young conservative of what the sixties meant to him.

The '60s were the decade not of Kennedy but Goldwater; not SDS but YAF [Young Americans for Freedom], not *The New Republic* but *National Review*, not [radical philosopher] Herbert Marcuse but [conservative scholar] Russell Kirk...not Lyndon Johnson's Great Society but Ronald Reagan's Creative Society, not a "meaningless" civil war in Vietnam but an important battle in the protracted war against communism. (Flamm, 2008, p. 107)

The power of these forces can be seen in the election in 1980 of Ronald Reagan as president, the election of Newt Gingrich speaker of the House of Representatives in 1994 on the platform of the Contract with America, and the conservative alterations of the liberal center that followed. Scholars differ as to whether the conservative movement were essentially the same or different in the early and late 1960s. Between those years the country had experienced urban riots, huge political demonstrations, expansion of the welfare state, and challenges to the nuclear family.

Communist aggression was no longer the threat which unified the conservative movement politically and ideologically. Instead, it was street crime and urban riots. The country was splitting at the seams. Authority was everywhere questioned: in the family, in the classroom, in the capital. Liberals had difficulty distinguishing between criminal behavior and civil disobedience, lawful demonstrations and unlawful riots, actual crime and irrational fear of crime (Flamm, 2008, p. 144).

## Vietnam

This was the cultural mix in which Vietnam soldiers lived, before and after their tour of duty. While in Vietnam their minds were in yet another way conceptually challenged. The war occurred in a climate and culture alien to the soldiers. This was a guerrilla war. It had no front lines, no safe retreats in the rear. It was often unclear who was a friend and who was an enemy. And the elderly, women, and children were often, and unpredictably, enemy combatants.

The Vietnam war officially lasted from the date of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, August 4, 1964, to the day the last troops left Vietnam, March 28, 1973. During that time 26,800,000 men came of draft age. Of those, 8,615,000 served in the military; 1,600,000 served in combat; and 550,000 served in Vietnam in noncombat roles (Baskir & Strauss, 1978, pp. 3-5). 58,202 died, 47,378 in combat; another 303,704 were injured, roughly half requiring hospitalization ('Vietnam Warriors: A Statistical Profile,' quoted in DeGroot, 2000, p. 285).

In 1977, the University of Notre Dame Press published a study on the Vietnam era draft by Baskir and Strauss titled *Reconciliation after Vietnam*. As part of their study, they conducted a survey of 1,586 men of draft age during the Vietnam War. Neighborhood spot samples were made in South Bend, Indiana, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Washington, D.C., with a special effort to obtain representatives from low income and minority neighborhoods. They used their samples to justify generalizations about the entire generation, but emphasized that it was not a national sample.

Their results revealed that a significantly greater percentage of those of lesser income and education served in the military, served in Vietnam, and fought in Vietnam.

They put their results in the following table:

Table 1

	Military Service	Vietnam Service	Combat Service
Low-Income	40%	19%	15%
Middle-Income	30%	12%	7%
High-Income	24%	9%	7%
High School Dropouts	42%	18%	14%
High School Graduates	45%	21%	17%
College Graduates	23%	12%	9%

A study by Badillo and Curry analyzed casualties suffered by residents of Chicago neighborhoods with different socioeconomic characteristics. They found that youths from low-income neighborhoods were three times as likely to die in Vietnam as youths from high-income neighborhoods. And those from neighborhoods with low-educational levels were four times as likely to die in Vietnam as youths from better-educated neighborhoods (Horne, 1981, pp. 11-12).

A more recent study by Barnett et al., who argued that there were not sharp class distinctions in service and death in Vietnam, showed that while the difference between the highest (7.8 percent) and lowest (9.6 percent) deciles was not large, the second poorest decile suffered 13.1 percent of the deaths (DeGroot, 2000, 275, n12). This is

especially noteworthy since, according to DeGroot, the least capable soldiers were often sent to rear areas where they would not endanger their fellows. Barnett et al.'s statistics further show, DeGroot (2000) points out, that West Virginia, one of the poorest states, experienced the highest Vietnam death rate at 84.1 per 100,000 males, the national average being 58.9 (p. 275). Further, 55 percent of the deaths in Vietnam were suffered by the poorest half of the population sample, 45 percent by the richest half (275, n2).

#### Vietnam Veteran Adjustment

Two significant publications in the early 1980s addressed adjustment issues experienced by Vietnam veterans. One, *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and Their Peers*, was an independent work prepared at congressional directive for the Veterans Administration and published by the Committee on Veterans Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives. It comprised four separate studies, on “Educational and Work Careers: Men in the Vietnam Generation” (Rothbart & Sloan); “Post-War Trauma: Social and Psychological Problems of Vietnam Veterans in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War” (Laufer); “Long Term Stress Reactions: Some Causes, Consequences, and Naturally Occurring Support Systems” (Kadushin); and “Dealing with the War: A View Based on the Individual Lives of Vietnam Veterans” (Egendorf). The studies are drawn from 1,380 interviews in 1977 and 1978 in the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West; the volume was published in 1981.

The second book, *Lives after Vietnam: The Personal Impact of Military Service*, (Card), was published in 1983. It was a longitudinal study whose foundation was the extensive Project TALENT study of the career potential and achievements of ninth grade students in 1960. The subjects were reinterviewed seven and eleven years later. Card and

her colleagues selected from this database 1,500 subjects to reinterview in 1981. Of these, 500 were Vietnam veterans, 500 were veterans who did not serve in Vietnam, and 500 never served in the military. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions about of the entire population of Vietnam veterans from its results, given that only one age cohort was studied from a war whose characteristics in the field and at home changed over time, it offered the great advantage of being a retrospective study based not on memory but on earlier interviews.

Card (1983) found no demographic difference between those who served and those who did not. She did find that the poor and the nonwhite were overrepresented in the Army and Marines, and so were more likely to see combat.

These are the men who served, and the five principal investigators of the *Legacies* study (Rothbart, Sloan, Laufer, Kadushin & Egendorf, 1981) stated, among their many conclusions, that,

- The main types of readjustment problems described by combat veterans are related to the trauma of combat, loss of support offered by the military milieu, lack of interest in normal activities, explosive anger, confusion, loss of confidence, recurrent memories of war in nightmares. (p. 24)
- Most Vietnam veterans, especially those involved in heavy combat, feel that their experiences in Vietnam affected them profoundly. (p. 24)
- Although comparatively few Vietnam veterans (16.6%) believe the war had a distinctly negative psychological impact on their lives, heavy combat veterans are much more likely to make this assessment (29.6%). (p. 24)

- Although combat veterans had had considerably more stress symptoms in the previous year, these were largely confined to those who served between 1968 and 1974 – when the United States was profoundly polarized on support for the war – but for these, “the effect is large” (p. 24).

The Veterans Administration contracted for a survey of veterans that was conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in the summer of 1971. The Harris firm found that a substantial number of veterans felt “alienated” on their return home (Laufer, 1981, p. 332). The *Legacies* investigators noted that three times as many combat veterans as Vietnam era veterans suffered from stress during their year of service and for one year after. Further, at the time of the interviews, in 1977 and 1978, the investigators found that 30 percent of combat veterans, in contrast to 20 percent of era veterans and those who did not serve, suffered from stress (Rothbart, Sloan, Laufer, Kadushin & Egendorf, 1981, p. 47). Card (1983) added to the discussion about psychological difficulties that Vietnam veterans had a significantly higher average score on the combined anxiety, hostility, and depression scale (p. 84). She also reported that combat veterans were much less likely to have someone to whom they were emotionally close than were era veterans or nonveterans. Almost 45 percent of combat veterans reported difficulties in this area, in contrast to about 30 percent for era veterans and nonveterans (pp. 96-97). Overall, many more Vietnam veterans than non-Vietnam veterans blamed their experiences in the war for their problems. Looking at her longitudinal data, Card concluded that the evidence is “overwhelming” that combat leads to symptoms indicative of psychological difficulties, and that these difficulties were often present 10 years later (p. 114). Further, those who



saw heavy combat were twice as likely as era veterans to have emotional distress more than a decade after their service ended (p. 115).

The employment picture differed, too, for Vietnam veterans. Over the 1961 to 1981 time period veterans were unemployed more often (Card, 1983, p. 63). She also wrote that military service powerfully disrupted career development. Vietnam veterans' job prestige peaked in 1974, at which point it leveled off. Card reports that there is "no indication that they will ever catch up with non-Vietnam veterans," who were close to nonveterans in 1974 and caught up with them in 1979 (pp. 73, 76). Job prestige, unemployment, and income are unrelated to the intensity of combat experienced. However, veterans who returned after 1970, when antiwar sentiment in the United States was highest, worked in lower prestige jobs. Interpretations for this result include the possibilities that Vietnam veterans were discriminated against or that those veterans were more alienated, and so withdrew, restricting their job pursuits. It is clear that they thought their welcome less warm than that received by veterans of earlier wars and date more medical and psychological problems to their return – conclusions that will be elaborated in the next section (Card, Laufer).

Egendorf (1981) wrote,

Virtually all of the men we interviewed and selected at random for our case-by-case review voice discontent with the Vietnam war and its aftermath. Among both veterans and nonveterans, and along the entire political spectrum, a nagging malaise is pervasive: "We should've gone all out in Vietnam"; "We shouldn't've been there at all"; "The problem was the Vietnamese didn't want to fight"; "We were the problem, the real oppressors"; "The politicians lied"; "The army didn't

know what they were doing”; “The vets got screwed”; “The demonstrators lost it for us”; and so on. Although some men may also value their war experiences, the evidence from our sample is that Vietnam is still far more commonly associated with pain, or at least discomfort, than it is with satisfaction or even neutrality.

(p. 714)

### *Harris Survey*

In late 1979 and early 1980 Louis Harris and Associates under contract with the Veterans Administration conducted four major surveys of the general public, Vietnam era veterans, employers, and educators, to better understand the problems Vietnam veterans faced and how the public characterized these veterans, among other concerns. In-depth, in-home interviews were conducted with 2,563 members of the general public and 2,464 Vietnam era veterans, and in-office interviews with 510 educators and 1,000 employers. The Harris firm defined the general public as “the total noninstitutionalized civilian adult population of the 50 United States and the District of Columbia”; it defined Vietnam era veterans as “those men and women who served on active duty in the United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam era – that is, between August 5, 1964 and May 7, 1975”; and Vietnam veterans as “Vietnam Era Veterans who *served* in the Vietnam theater (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand or the South China Sea) while on active duty with the United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam era” (Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, United States Senate, 1980, p. xxiii).

Two key concerns of Louis Harris and Associates were: one, the homecoming accorded Vietnam era veterans and those who served in the Vietnam theater, as perceived by both veterans and the general public; and two, the degree of alienation experienced by

the study populations. They found that World War II and Korean War veterans experienced their homecomings differently than did Vietnam era veterans. Nearly three-quarters of veterans from the earlier two wars felt “that people their own age gave them a friendly reception home” (Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, United States Senate, 1980, p. xxxix). Less than half of the Vietnam era veterans felt the same way. Interestingly, Vietnam era veterans were hostile toward their peers at home but this negativity was not reciprocated (p. 83). This difference might indicate the size of the psychological burden carried by Vietnam era veterans. That burden is freighted by the 1971 finding of an earlier Harris survey that 41 percent of the public agreed with the statement that, “veterans of the Vietnam war were made suckers, having to risk their lives in the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time” (p. 80). This percentage had increased to 64 percent five years after the war ended.

The Harris firm found evidence that while 90 percent of Vietnam era veterans, 91 percent of Vietnam veterans, and 90 percent of Vietnam veterans who experienced heavy combat agreed with the statement that, “Looking back, I am glad I served my country.” However, in the 25 to 34 age bracket, 46 percent of Vietnam veterans “were not always proud to wear their uniforms in public places,” 33 percent “think what America did to the Vietnamese people was shameful,” and 29 percent say that “they are happier when people do not know they are Vietnam veterans” (Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, United States Senate, 1980, p. 16). The Harris firm noted that it is unlikely this shame and guilt would be the experience of veterans of World War II or the Korean War.

The Harris firm reported that, “Vietnam Era Veterans are, on the whole, significantly more alienated than people their own age in the general public” (Committee

on Veterans' Affairs, United States Senate, 1980, p. 121). "While only 32 percent of the public fall into the High Alienation group, among Vietnam Era Veterans that proportion is a full 50 percent" (p. 123). And, "heavier exposure to combat is linked to higher levels of alienation across all age cohorts" (p. 126). Further, "These data reveal a generation of veterans who, though proud of their own experiences, resent many of their peers, superior officers, and political leaders. Well-educated and upwardly mobile Vietnam era veterans are less likely to rate their feelings toward either of these groups warmly than are less well-educated veterans of the Vietnam era" (p. 84).

Finally, with particular relevance to the cohort whose biographies will be discussed next, the Harris firm concluded that the young age at which Vietnam veterans served correlated to their alienation. This thesis will suggest that they served at an age when authority was both sought and contested, and when their adult identities had not yet consolidated.

### Case Histories

The discussion chapter will apply the identity conceptions of Erik Erikson and the social ritual formulations of Victor Turner to the cases of eight Vietnam veterans portrayed in Murray Polner's study, *No Victory Parades: the Return of the Vietnam Veteran*, published in 1971. Polner has divided his nine subjects<sup>1</sup> into three groups of three each: hawks, doves, and haunted. All chose to enter the armed forces, either by enlisting or by passively accepting the draft, and served in Vietnam between 1964 and

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<sup>1</sup> Polner presents nine cases; one was not used in this thesis as the soldier was several years older, starting his Vietnam service in 1961.

early 1969; none were career servicemen; all experienced heavy combat. Beginning in 1967, Polner interviewed 204 Vietnam veterans as well as their families and friends (p. xii). Although the sample was unscientific, he interviewed people from every region of the country. They were all from the lower middle or working classes and entered the armed forces within a couple of years of leaving high school. He interviewed a large number of minorities, but most declined to be interviewed in depth. Polner believed that their experiences were sufficiently different that they required a separate study. The nine white men he chose for his book, represented a “microcosm” of their cohort (p. xii). However, they were also selected because “their stories were the most forceful I had heard, their lives the most significant in terms of what the future may bring” (p. xii). As Polner (1970) wrote:

All expressed vague longings and some dissatisfaction with their pre-service lives, but all were prepared to live out those lives had Vietnam not come along....Indifferent if not hostile to trends among the young and rebellious before they went to war, all nine originally identified, as [Edgar Z.] Friedenberg has written in another context, “with the more powerful and frustrating of the forces that impinge upon them, as the way life is and close their minds against the anxiety of perceiving alternatives.”

Until Vietnam. (p. xii)

## *Hawks*

This thesis will consider three “hawks”: David Chamber, Steve Harper, and George Ryan.<sup>2</sup> David Chambers was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1947. His maternal grandparents were Main Line Philadelphians. However, his father and mother believed fiercely that no one deserved a special break. His father, who grew up in a Catholic orphanage, began work as a cop and, at the time of the interview, was a security consultant who had lectured at Rutgers and was about to teach a course on human rights to police officers at a community college.

Polner (1971) quoted Chambers as follows:

Sometimes I wonder whether [the Vietnam war] was all worth the price of one of those guys. Mostly I doubt it. And then, I always seem to stop, take stock of what happened, and think that my father was, in his peculiar and sometimes offensive way, absolutely right. This country, this kind of life, is worth fighting for, and yes, because I came so close to it, dying for. Despite the opposition at home, the business-as-usual and draft and job deferments, and National Guard and Reserve draft havens, and all that; despite my inability really to hate the enemy; despite everything I may never understand about that crazy war. Maybe the only damn thing I got out of it was life. (p. 16)

Steve Harper’s parents fought. His father would occasionally fly into great rages and strike out, at Steve’s mother, his sister, Steve himself, or the trailer they lived in. His father walked out when Steve was 15; he says, “It nearly killed me” (Polner, 1971, p. 20).

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<sup>2</sup> Polner changed names and geographic locations.

His mother took him to a fundamentalist church regularly, and wanted him to become a missionary. After the war, Harper says,

Now I'm changed. No doubt about it. I think about it a lot. If I come face to face with a peace symbol, my temperature rises. Sometimes, deep down, I know all wars are stupid. But then I also know that God's word said certain wars were just, and this one was. And when I see a hippie with a VC flag, right away I remember seein' those little girls, killed by the VC. (p. 29)

Harper and Chambers, although hawks, were ambivalent about the war. Ryan was angry about the country, from the president to the protestors to the indifferent. Despite a steady girlfriend in high school, whom he married shortly after graduation, he was "introspective, a loner, insisting repeatedly that he was a coward. All men, he believed, had to face up to grave and personal tests in their lives; that was their true worth" (p. 33).

He enlisted in the Army to prove himself. He said,

When I got home I hated LBJ and the draft dodgers. I felt the guys still in Vietnam – nobody here cared about them really – were like an outpost. Everyone in the States had forgotten us, left us to live or die, anything, so long as they weren't involved. All those protesters; you got the feeling the country is coming apart. At least in Vietnam we were a team; I was respected, we cared for each other, me and Walter [a buddy who was killed in Vietnam] we loved each other without ever saying it. And my buddies are still back there. When I see people protesting, they're saying, 'Fuck your buddies, fuck you.' If I could only get my hands on them. (p. 36)

## *Doves*

John Durant, Harry O'Connor, and Mike Pearson were doves. When Durant returned, he was “afraid, out of touch, and bewildered” (Polner, 1971, p. 47). He had grown up in a small town in Maine. His parents worked in a shoe factory. He is not quite sure, but thinks that there had been trouble in 1947 or 1948 when a group of workers tried to organize a union. His mother and father, along with some others, had been fired. A year later, they reapplied, after a failed attempt to run a gas station, and were rehired.

Durant worked hard to get an appointment to West Point, but failed the math exam. He joined the Army in an effort to try again. While in Vietnam he received an appointment, matriculated, but quit after four months, disillusioned, with the war and with West Point. “He despised the cynicism of the school and the indifference of almost everyone he met to the morality posed by different problems” (Polner, 1971, p. 58). While in Vietnam, he said, “All I wanted was to get home alive. And the more I was in combat the more I became convinced that the war was a crock of shit” (p. 51). Of the interview Polner wrote, “Gradually, however, time and distance has turned his militancy into a more quiet but very determined kind of disillusionment. He feels he is different from his father’s generation of veterans – they were not deceived and deliberately misled” (p. 62).

O'Connor was born in Boston and went to Catholic schools. He attended a community college for part of one semester, but found it uninspiring; he wanted to know what excited young men at elite colleges, and quit. He enlisted for three years, hoping to become an officer – which he did. Increasingly opposed to the war, he came to the viewpoint that, “Who are we as a people to make other societies do what we want them to



do, just because we're more powerful and have troops to send to fight?" (p. 73). After being discharged, his relationship with his conservative younger brother was strained over the war; he found he could not tolerate a favorite aunt's passivity about the war; and he was alienated from his friends at Flynn's, a local bar: "Here I was, sitting around with draft dodgers and flag-waving sons of bitches, none of whom took the trouble to go out and fight for the country they say they love so much, and all a bit drunk and holding their girls' tits, and my men, my buddies, far away, abandoned, left to decay in a place that didn't exist for me anymore" (p. 77). Restless and ambitious, he got a good job in sales and promotion in a major corporation, became the assistant to the president, and worked on his own time for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Mike Pearson told Polner, "I will never again serve any cause that is contrary to my beliefs" (Polner, 1971, p. 85). The Irish Catholic son of a truck driver who had immigrated in 1933, he quit high school at age 17 to join the Army. He intended to get a job as a truck driver and join the union when he was discharged. But he accuses himself of being a murderer, particularly for having killed with a carbine a young boy with a three-inch penknife. At the time of the interview, Polner wrote,

Mike thinks he may never again be able to settle down with a regular job. In the past four years he has turned sharply away from the lifestyle of a trucker, marching with antiwar demonstrators while wearing full-dress military uniform, including his many decorations, and clashing again and again with police. Despite frequent arrests he has traveled all over the country speaking to student audiences, always hammering on one simple theme: the South Vietnamese leaders are tyrants, and this country has copied many of their reprehensible acts. (p. 80)

“I’m like a missionary and I’m goin’ to be lookin’ for converts the rest of my life,”  
Pearson said (p. 92).

### *Haunted*

Fred Schoenwald was “haunted” by his experience of the war. Born in Germany, brought to this country when he was two years old, he grew up in his parents’ delicatessen – working in the front, living in the back. He says of his upbringing, “It was instinctive with us, not making any waves, never asking many questions” (Polner, 1971, p. 97). He was a medic in Vietnam and saw very heavy combat. Schoenwald told Polner,

I was always nervous...in fact, I can’t remember not being afraid. For one thing a combat medic doesn’t know what’s happening. Especially at night, everybody screaming or moaning and calling out, “Medic, medic.” I always saw myself dying, my legs blown off, my brains splattered all about, shivering in shock, and talking madly. This is what I *saw* in reality. I used to tell myself that anyone wanting to send eighteen and nineteen year olds to fight ought to try it on himself or his own sons. But that was crazy talk, and I soon stopped myself. (p. 100)

He said,

Yet I can’t put it together. I hate to see any kid get sent to Vietnam, particularly if he’s going to be a rifleman or a medic. If I’m asked, I can’t honestly say “I did good.” I can’t say I’d ever want to go back there – and anywhere – “to stop communism.” I can’t say that at all. All that I think I did was take care of a lot of people when they needed me. No more. (p. 105)

He earned a degree in engineering and started studying the Lutheran faith in which he had grown up.

Peter Cohen, born in Florida, signed on with the Army when he turned 19, “to get it over with” (Polner, 1971, p. 122). He served seven months as a combat medic in Vietnam. He had two “tremendous friends” in Vietnam. One was killed retrieving the wounded; the other became a wandering magician and musician in Europe and North Africa, unable to face America. Cohen fell apart. His wife wanted a separation, and he was given a compassionate leave to return home to see to his life. He never returned to Vietnam.

Erikson’s theory of identity consolidation and confusion, taking place in late adolescence and early adulthood, is a useful tool for understanding the crisis and challenge confronting these veterans.

CHAPTER FOUR  
ERICKSON'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Sigmund Freud, on one of the rare occasions, according to Erik Erikson (1968), when he used the word “identity,” wrote of the impress of his Jewish heritage:

But plenty [other than national enthusiasm] remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible – many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of *inner* identity, the safe privacy of a *common* mental construction. [italics added] (p. 20)

In using the words “inner” and “common,” Freud worked with the concepts of the individual and society, remaining, however, within the intrapsychic realm. Erikson, in defining his concept of identity, appears to stick quite closely to the intrapsychic. He wrote, “It is a configuration gradually integrating constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations, and consistent roles” (p. 163). Psychoanalytic theory has been challenged since Freud to incorporate a conception of the influence of society. Erikson’s break with Freud and concern for the social and the communal he makes clear elsewhere:

In discussing identity...we cannot separate personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate...the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other. (p. 23)

Erikson wrote that, because of its capacities and expanding involvement,

Adolescence...is a stage in which the individual is much closer to the historical day than it is at earlier stages of childhood development. While the infantile antecedents of identity are more unconscious and change very slowly, if at all, the identity problem itself changes with the historical period: this, in fact, is its job.

(p. 27)

### Ideology

The historical structure Erikson points to is that of ideology. In the next chapter, we will see that Turner approached history from the perspective of social rules and processes. Erikson's concept of identity is useful in understanding the impact of the Vietnam war experience on the male combat veteran. The veteran's average age was 19 during his tour. This is a critical age for the continuum between the poles of identity consolidation and identity confusion. The simplifications of ideology are critical for adolescents working to tame torrents of new experience, internal and external. The post-World War II surge of prosperity and opportunity on landfall broke into discontent and ferment as a new generation in a new historical moment sought and demanded new political institutions and policies and new social patterns. The ideologies which shaped the working class veteran growing up in the fifties and sixties were brought under extreme stress by experiences of war and by encounters with their families and society when they emerged.

The developmental and social moratorium between adolescence and adulthood is a time during which the individual works to integrate the historical landscape which is his fate and responsibility with the intrapsychic world. Ideology at this time provides

structure and extension for the relative paucity of integrated life experience. The veterans who are the subjects of this thesis were largely apolitical at the time they enlisted or were drafted. However, their intellectual and emotional freight included a large bundle of anticommunism. George Ryan said, “Communism has to be stopped somewhere, far from home” (Polner, 1971, p. 32). The ideology continued into combat zone interpretations for Steve Harper:

Maybe guys against the war, wherever they were, were more humanitarian and better educated, but they’d never seen what the communists did to people.

Somebody had to stop them. Somebody had to show poor people better ways of livin’, like sewer disposal and sanitation and things like that. (p. 25)

Chambers also voiced the ideology of communism’s opponent, Western industrial democracy: “We were helping a people who were still in the Dark Ages.... trying to show them our way of life and democracy” (p. 11). For him, patriotism was one of the pins that held his American world together: “My father respects what I respect: patriotism, independence, self-reliance, and personal responsibility” (p. 4). It condenses into American individualism.

The soldiers experienced in Vietnam a conflict far more complex than any they had been taught or imbibed back in the States. Some soldiers were drawn to the Vietnamese, turning against them only after discovering they could not distinguish friend from foe, and that apparent friends could turn into foes. Searching for bodies following an ambush, Fred Schoenwald found a girl he had befriended – “the only Vietnamese I ever got close to” – dead with an automatic next to her (Polner, 1971, 102). Racist ideology condensed into epithets entered the picture. Ryan said that after a bullet tore off

the front of his best friend's face, "I threw up and I began hating anybody with slant eyes after that" (p. 36). Some soldiers started to refer to the Vietnamese as "gooks" and "slant eyes." Some carried the freight of homegrown racism, as is indicated by Chambers' explicit inclusion of Negroes as those for whom there would be no special breaks.

Class also entered the picture. Harry O'Connor attended for one semester Suffolk University, which he called "the workingman's college" (Polner, 1971, 64). He yearned for a way out of the parochial world in which he grew up. Harper angrily said of the war critics,

Where were their sons? In fancy colleges? Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war? Not in my platoon. Our guys' people were workers and things like that. We were like a family, all colors and religions. Not like in the States, everyone killin' each other. (p. 27)

The benign vision of the United States engagement was challenged by Harry O'Connor, who said, "Who are we as a people to make other societies do what we want them to do, just because we're more powerful and have troops to send to fight?" (p. 73). He turned "bitterly antiwar. I started to get angrier at the [government and Army] untruths I heard all the time and the stupid waste of lives" (p. 67). He found ideas he could condemn and hope to destroy; his deployment created a rage that was palpable in other combat veterans across the political divide. Polner said of Ryan that "He remains a quiet man, but there seems to be an earthquake stirring within him" (p. 41). Ideological fracturing occurred at times along the fault line of class as working class soldiers speaking with rage about which class fought the war reflected doubts about whether their leaders truly thought the war mattered.

All of the men experienced confusion about why they were in Vietnam, regardless of where they came down politically. Cohen said, “I’ll never understand what I did in Vietnam and what happened and why” (Polner, 1971, p. 128). Chambers said, “I haven’t yet unraveled my feelings” (p. 7). John Durant remembered saying, “I’ve been here seven months and never met a guy who knew what it was all about” (Polner, 51). Harper said, “I don’t think anyone could write a poem or a song of anguish better than an American who just lost his friend in war. He’s watching his own security, his own youth, everything he ever believed in, just ooze away” (Polner, 22). His ideological underpinnings oozed out with the dead soldier’s blood.

Their war experiences affected their ability to shift from the compromise resolutions of their childhood stages – as described in the chapter on methodology and applied in the discussion chapter – to those same resolutions, revisited and re-imagined, in the identity consolidation and confusion stage.

The Vietnam veteran of the working class, as I believe the Polner narratives revealed, had each of these tasks of identity formation shaken at a time of especial individual flux, choice, and transition. This stage of “moratorium,” as Erikson calls it, is a liminal stage between the dusk of the latency age of childhood and the dawn of adulthood. Into it fell the night of a war with no clear front lines or safe rear areas, uncertainty about who was friend or foe, and significant domestic opposition. So the liminal time of adolescence, for which the military has often been a place for unconscious as well as conscious syntheses and choices, was for many, deeply disrupted.

During this psychological space of uncertainty, Erikson (1968) said, “the social institution which is the guardian of identity *is* what we have called *ideology*” [italics in



original], a system of ideas organizing a world view (p. 133). The veteran struggled when he re-entered the United States to make sense of himself. The staves of identity needed the encircling bands of ideology as they were pressured by the fermenting brew of experience. This was true even for those whose identities consolidated around political commitments consonant with those with which they grew up.

Erikson proposed a theory of eight phases of identity development. Identity consolidation and confusion, the fifth phase, was for him the crucial age. Each stage required a reconsideration of the conflict resolutions in the preceding stages. This stage and its reconsiderations will be addressed specifically in the discussion in chapter 6.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TURNER'S SOCIAL DRAMA

Victor Turner, a Scottish-born social anthropologist of the third quarter of the twentieth century, conceptualized a model of societal change he called “social drama.” Kathleen Ashley (1990) wrote, “Turner argues that social drama is universally the form of political action and social transformation” (p. xiv). It is a model which seeks to explicate and schematicize the condensation of cultural conflict in political rituals subject to the creative shaping of politically powerful individuals. These might be leaders of small scale African tribes or leaders, such as Thomas Becket in England or Miguel Hidalgo in Mexico, in complex nations. In a 1980 essay, Turner (1981) quotes Edward Sapir’s “celebrated” 1934 essay, ‘The Emergence of the Concept of Personality in a Study of Cultures’:

In spite of the oft asserted impersonality of culture, a humble truth remains that vast reaches of culture, far from being ‘carried’ by a community or group...are discoverable only as the peculiar property of certain individuals who cannot but give these cultural goods the impress of their own personality (140).

Social theory, however, has made a transition from foregrounding the great men of the Romantic era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the interdigitation of the influential individual and society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the up-from-the-grassroots theories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Turner writes about the creation of cultural symbols from the lives of

Hidalgo and Becket, in referencing “models of what people ‘believe they do, ought to do, or would like to do,’” he says,

Perhaps in individual cases these are more fragmentary than structural, but if one were to look at the whole group one would find that what ideas or norms an individual lacks or fails to put into systematic relation with other ideas, other individuals do possess or have systematized (1974, p. 36).

In this Turner makes a transition from the intellectual history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to that of the 21<sup>st</sup>. His thesis will be discussed in the context of the ordinary men Polner profiles.

### *Breach*

Turner, in various writings, proposes a four-stage ritual of social change: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. The breach is of a norm or the “infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette, in some public arena” (1981, 146). To apply this to the Vietnam veterans, one must first look at the norm of patriotism with which these men were endowed by their class, race and age. Mike Pearson, who dropped out of high school to join the army, said, “My whole family...and everyone I knew – friends, neighbors, the priests, the teachers, everyone believed in the glory of the country; we were to do whatever our leaders wanted us to do” (p. 83). While serving in Vietnam he turned against the war. Harry O’Connor, a man who also became a dove, said, “I had a romantic notion that Elvis Presley, my kind of hero then, was a real man. He had served his country” (p. 65). The three combat veterans who ended up supporting the war were each ambivalent about their experiences in Vietnam. Each of the three speaks of his identity as a soldier: David Chambers says, “My father respects what I respect: patriotism, independence, self-reliance, and personal responsibility” (p. 4). When he

enlisted, Steve Harper says, he told his mother, who opposed the choice, that “we owed it to our country.” As an American, a citizen of a developed country, Steve Harper, unconsciously ambivalent about the war, justified his role in the war as one of bringing modern civilization to citizens of an underdeveloped country. “Somboddy had to show poor people,” he says, “better ways of living, like sewer disposal and sanitation and things like that” (p. 25). This was his ideological contract with a benevolent America. George Ryan says, “We’re all supposed to support our country and our President” (31). “Above all, George said, [his mother] and his father wanted the children to grow up ‘respectable,’ to dress neatly, to defer to their elders, to believe in their church and civic responsibilities” (p. 33). The contract each of the three “hawks” signed conveyed a righteous America. It is the contract each of the five felt had been breached on his return from a controversial war.

### *Crisis*

While the breach may begin on a small scale, Turner argued, it has the potential to escalate as it courses through the fissures of cultural conflict.

During the crisis phase, Turner wrote, the pattern of current factional struggle within the relevant social group – be it village or world community – is exposed; and beneath it there becomes slowly visible the less plastic, more durable, but nevertheless gradually changing basic social structure, made up of relations which are relatively constant and consistent (1981, pp. 146-47).

Factional struggles over Vietnam war policies in the United States at the time laid bare differences over race, class and gender, about which values, institutions and behavior

were slowly changing, at times along generational lines. Chambers, Harper, and Ryan returned to a United States that did not understand the unique characteristics of their war. In reflecting on their actions during the war they had to grapple with the fissures of the United States polity. Steve Harper says,

Now I'm changed. No doubt about it. If I come face to face with a peace symbol, my temperature rises. Sometimes, deep down, I know all wars are stupid. But then I also know that God's word said certain wars were just, and this one was. And when I see a hippie with a VC flag, right away I remember seein' those little girls, killed by the VC (p. 29).

In conflict, he also says,

It was only then, in my bein' so far away from my home and my buddies, that I began to get angry, at Asians and at my own country. Why couldn't they take care of their own problems? (26)

### *Redress*

Turner's (1981) next category is the redressive phase, There, "The mechanisms may range from personal advice and informal arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery and, to resolve certain kinds of crises, to the performance of public ritual" (p. 147). Different social structures offered redressive rituals in American society. For some veterans, it was the trip to the hall of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. For others, it was the rap group or the antiwar demonstration. For most, it was sharing the experience with other veterans of the Vietnam War, whatever their views about that conflict. David Chambers said,

What probably saved me for college at least were the other vets on campus. I started palling around with them and we all felt different from the civilians and the old vets. One of the vets was an out-and-out 'dove,' but I could take that very easily from him because he had been there, too, and drew an honest conclusion.

The only test we had was: were you there?

The rest of us looked at the war in varying ways: some wanted to get out, others said stay, and there were a dozen variations. But we had had it with blind authority, with stupid orders, and with guys who loved or hated us because we had been there, but cared for little else about our group. (p. 13)

Of O'Connor, a dove, Polner wrote,

It was impossible for him to talk to anyone who had not been there, or if they had, had not been on combat. It was a brotherhood of blood, even though the cause offered not a single idea he would care to give his life for. Outsiders were pariahs and he didn't want them peering in, asking questions, watching them as if they were naked and exposed. Say nothing to them, he kept reminding himself, the better to shield those with whom he shared hell (p. 67).

#### *Reintegration or Schism*

The final phase of Turner's (1981) theory

consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group – although the scope and range of its relational field will have altered, the number of its parts will be different, and their size and influence will have changed – or the social recognition of irreparable breach between the contesting parties (p. 147).

Polner's wrote about one of the parties, the combat veterans,

These young men left military service with doubts about the kind of war they were forced to fight, about their country's leaders, and about the sanctity of their America. Regardless of their convictions about the war, practically every veteran I spoke with indicated in a variety of ways his suspicion that he had been manipulated; the government was nothing but a faceless "them" (p. xiv).

About ritual, Turner (1981) writes:

[It] does not portray a dualistic, almost Manichaeian, struggle between order and void, cosmos and chaos, form and indeterminacy, with the former always triumphing in the end. It is, rather, a transformative self-immolation of order as presently constituted, even sometimes a voluntary *sparagmos* or self-dismemberment of order, in the subjunctive depths of liminality. (p. 160).

This clearly happened to the post-World War II order. Turner's theory describes a process of social change rooted in shared rules and group action. As even he seems to have recognized, he set off sparks with his theoretical innovations, backed by, in his field work, rich detail, but was more ludic in his interdisciplinary work (Grimes, 145). His concept of liminality, a phase of indeterminacy in which multiple structures and processes are viable, fit the historical moment in which Polner's subjects were living and in which Turner was writing. Gender roles, race relations, and the international role of the United States were caught up in a conflict in part intergenerational as the baby boomers came of age. Turner (1974) wrote:

In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen. In this interim of 'liminality,' the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own

social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements (pp. 13-14)

However, Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas* – anti-structure – countering structure is inflected by a utopian moment and impulse. As Mathieu Deflem wrote, “Turner noted that the ritual subjects during the liminal phase in a ritual performance are all treated equally, deprived of all distinguishing characteristics of social structure, constituting, ‘a community of comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions.’” (p. 14) The ambivalence and partisanship coincident with a time of deep change, hardened by the intergenerational conflict, denied the utopian impulse of the generation. Clifford Geertz, a noted anthropologist of the same generation, argued that Turner applied “his mode of analysis too generally to rituals of all kinds, times and places” (p. 20).

Perhaps Turner (1974) had a sense of this. He himself wrote, coincident with Levi-Strauss' concept of *bricolage* of the same era, that,

Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systematic context and applied to scattered data. Such ideas have a virtue of their own and may generate new hypotheses (p. 13).

Although it is perhaps not as a creator of systems, but as a series of flashes – “like shining from shook foil” as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote – that we must attend to his



insights, I believe Turner's schema of change is productive when applied to the experiences of returned Vietnam War combat veterans.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

Speaking about a combat buddy of his, Cohen said,

I think he really knew what he was before he went to war. It happens to a lot of us. You know you have to find out all over again who you are. You aren't what you thought you were. You're changed and you have to find out why. (p. 123)

Chapters four and five discussed Erikson's theory of identity formation and Turner's theory of social drama. Erikson's and Turner's theories complement each other. Erikson pivoted on the crisis of the adolescent phase of individual development as it shapes and is informed by the "ideological structure of the environment" (Erikson, p. 27). Social dramas, Turner states, "represent the phased process" of the contestation of social paradigms, which themselves are "sets of 'rules' from which many kinds of sequences of social action may be generated but which further specify what sequences must be excluded" (Turner, p. 17). They maintain that as the historical context changes so do, respectively, individual identity and social rules. Separately, their schemas enrich our understanding of Murray Polner's eight case histories of Vietnam combat veterans. At the extended phase of homecoming for Vietnam veterans we will see how they intersect.

## Erikson

The soldiers Polner selected revisited the previous stages of their identity development as conceived by Erikson. Parts of the challenges of reintegration faced by late adolescents are embedded in the words of these men.

### *Faith in Men and Ideas*

In a re-imagination and reintegration of basic trust and mistrust, many of the Vietnam combat veterans had difficulty finding leaders, ideas, and institutions in which they could have faith and to which they willingly would dedicate themselves. Chambers said, “We had had it with blind authority, with stupid orders” (Polner, 1971, p. 13). They had had it with their platoon leaders, their generals, politicians, and the platitudes of the previous generation. Of O’Connor Polner wrote: “It was a brotherhood of blood, even though the cause offered not a single idea he would care to give his life for” (p. 67). He lost faith in ideology, but found it in the social rules of brotherhood. Their particular part of the challenge to authority rampant in the 1960s was exposed; roles, values, and beliefs of preceding generations became suspect, regardless of the veteran’s politics.

### *Ideals of Service and Duty*

Second, the soldiers had the challenge of reinventing the stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt as ideals of service and duty. Harper said, “I don’t like war. Maybe it’s a necessary evil; maybe it’s somethin’ that had to be done. Maybe” (Polner, 1971, p. 24). Durant said, “I wanted desperately to believe in my government’s claims. But what I saw kept intruding” (p. 54). Chambers, who supported the war, said,

Sometimes I wonder if it was all worth the price of one of those guys. Mostly I doubt it. Then I always seem to stop, take stock of what happened, and think that

my father was, in his peculiar and sometimes offensive way, absolutely right. This country, this kind of life, is worth fighting for, and yes, because I came so close to it, dying for. Despite the opposition at home, the business as usual and draft and job deferments, and National Guard and Reserve draft havens, and all that; despite my inability really to hate the enemy, despite everything I may never understand about that crazy war. Maybe the only damn thing I got out of it was life.

(Polner, 16)

He shifted from doubting the war were worthwhile, to supporting the tradition he grew up with in his family, to confusion about the meaning of it all, to an affirmation of life only, without ideology. Harper also expresses powerful doubt and guilt: “I never did anythin’ wrong other than obey my country’s orders” (Polner, 24). His phrasing reveals a fierce concern that his country’s orders were wrong.

### *Aspirations and Choice of Occupation*

Erikson’s stages of childhood identity development also involve the dyads of initiative versus guilt and industry versus inferiority. In the identity consolidation versus confusion stage, these were reconceptualized as imagination of a future and a desire to make things work. They translate into finding peers and mentors to give direction to the choice of an occupation and into making the choice itself. I will discuss this in the section on the integration of Erikson’s and Turner’s theories.

### *Turner*

Turner was concerned with social rules in public action. Durant decided the war was “a crock of shit” (Polner, 1971, p. 51). In words revealing a concern for social structure and process, Polner wrote of him,

Today he believes that the mediocrities in power were manipulating and ultimately destroying those boys [who drifted away from the classroom] in order to perpetuate themselves. He has extrapolated this experience into the entire maze of the war, the draft system, and the resistance to both” (p. 50).

Schoenwald remembered thinking that those who wanted to send young men into battle should first try it on themselves or their sons (p. 100). Cohen said he had no goals anymore. But he also said that,

I’m not anti-Establishment at all. I just want this country to get back on the right foot. I’ll do anything to make it happen. I thought our country was always doing the right thing. Now I know it wasn’t. It has to be set right again. (p. 137)

### *Breach*

Cohen’s father was bewildered by the upheaval he saw in the returned soldiers. His rabbi was concerned and attentive. Chambers’ parents were bursting proud of him. But mostly, the veterans were struck that life went on as if there were no war. Chambers recalled the intensity of his experiences:

For months after [I returned home] I kept daydreaming about the rain back there, and the ants. To this day I can’t get myself to leave the house when it starts to rain. But most of all the heat rotted everything. Never again would I have to smell the stink of the jungle, or look down and see one of my friends dead, or hurt, or wade across muddy gray rice paddies and sleep in a poncho in a puddle of water. That goddamned rain. I had malaria twice and then chills, even in ninety degree heat. My guts still twinge when I think of the spasms of dysentery and the itch I still have from jungle rot. (p. 10)

The veterans were little noticed and less understood. Schoenwald was stunned by the money, the bustle, the numbers of people engaged with their own lives at a large shopping center. He thought, angrily, “Why the hell were guys getting hurt? Why didn’t these people care?” (Polner, 1971, p. 105). Ryan said,

When I got home I hated LBJ and the draftdodgers. I felt the guys still in Vietnam – nobody cared about them really – were like an outpost. Everyone in the States had forgotten us, left us to live or die, anything so long as they weren’t involved (p. 36).

The expectation that their country would welcome them home and honor wartime sacrifices of service and patriotism, had been breached.

### *Crisis*

Many of the returned soldiers, who had grown up in the ideological center of their country, were alienated from the society they had left. As they worked to sort through their experiences, they were hit from the center, the right, and the left. Members of the American Legion thought the United States should bomb Hanoi. O’Connor, who returned opposed to the war, lived with a brother who “tries to ignore my arguments and concentrates instead on Yippies and hippies and ‘niggers’ and Jews and communists and things like that” (Polner, 1971, p. 66). Harper, barely home and barely aware of the war protest, was asked by a kid, “What is it like to fight in a controversial war?” Ryan, who supported the war, said he was met with “Hatred. Contempt” (p. 37). He was dismayed “about savage, unreasoning, inexplicable attacks on his flag, his President, his country, and – most of all – his buddies” (p. 42). Social and political rules and roles were in

crisis; they were being challenged and tested within the family, the workplace and the school.

### *Redress*

The lack of a public recognition indicative of respect and celebration damaged Vietnam veterans. This recognition could have been a literal or figurative parade. It might have been sponsored by a political organization, by respect and attention in the classroom, or, more intimately, within the family. The return home, the Vietnam veterans were convinced, was different for them. There were no parades and little willingness to engage and listen. Even veterans of other wars were foreign to the Vietnam soldiers. Chambers went to the American Legion Hall where his father found companionship and comfort. There, "I found myself listening to middle-aged men telling me how it was in a 'real war.' They didn't know or care what we went through" (Polner, 1971, p. 9). There was no common experience and no agreement on how to move forward.

### *Reintegration or Schism*

The replacement of the childhood milieu by society and historical time was complicated for Vietnam veterans by their having to incorporate another geography, tradition, and culture. They were often traumatized by their experiences in combat. Their moratorium was more than they had bargained for. Polner (1971) wrote of Durant,

In his thoughts he keeps returning again and again to Vietnam, the laughing and stunning children, the blazing sunrises, to the green and beautiful hills, crawling with disease and death under their lush foliage, to the insufferable heat, the bombs, the shrieks. (p. 62)

The trauma, ambiguity and, for many, ambivalences made the reintegration and schism not as absolute as in Turner's conceptualization. When they returned, the veterans were conflicted about their roles in society. The rules of the society they reentered were being challenged and were changing rapidly. Reentry was not simple for any. Whether they ultimately supported, opposed or were haunted by the war, for all there was significant schism and there was difficulty reintegrating. I will discuss this further in the following section.

### The Intersection of Turner and Erikson

Ideology is the pivot between Turner and Erikson, between the social and the intrapsychic. From one side, it reflects cultural rules; from the other side, it reflects individual identity. Turner states that the question he would ask of any social drama focuses on the redressive phase: Is the redressive machinery adequate to handle the crisis threatening social rules and their meaning? Erikson would ask whether the ideological structure were adequate to the stage of identity conflict. Joining them together, one asks whether the processes delineated by the social rules could channel the ideological ferment.

Vietnam veterans were flown home individually and discharged. The transition was often a shock. Chambers said, "I was just stunned; for quite a while I wasn't sure what I had seen or what I had gone through" (Polner, 1971, p. 5). Durant came home, walked amongst the wealth and stillness of the suburbs – and vomited.

The quality of the homecoming has been an overt part of the debate over Vietnam veteran therapeutic and policy needs. It has been a part of the debate over the legitimacy of the war and, more deeply, over the changing structure of society. Applying Erikson's



theory to this data, one notes the absence of an adequate ideological safety net to catch the veteran on his return. Applying Turner's theory, one notes the failure of rituals of school, job, and family to comprehend and address the rupture of purpose of a major institution, the army, available to the patriotic working class male. Society was forming new rules of patriotic action, of racial and cultural pluralism, and of mental health diagnoses adequate to the different veterans of a different war.

Polner's veterans provided the following evidence which we can interpret using the question raised by the combined theories. In early 1966, when antiwar protest was still new, Pearson was a guest on a radio talk show debating his antiwar views. He was evicted that day by his father, who had happened to listen to the show. The institution of the media allowed ideological ferment in Pearson's role as a talk show guest; the rules of his family did not. The Democratic Party in 1968 held its nominating convention for president in Chicago. Antiwar protestors and police clashed in the streets. The rules for selecting a Democratic nominee were inadequate to channeling protest against the Vietnam war. Durant, along with a few other veterans, attended the convention in an attempt to sway a few delegates to support Eugene McCarthy's antiwar candidacy. Durant was scheduled to attend the Maine caucus, but drew away to wander, observing the street protests. "He remembers holding back his tears. Nothing could keep the cops off their backs; nobody could change anyone's mind peacefully" (46). In a political science class, Chambers, a hawk, challenged a student member of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom who wanted the United States to be much more aggressive in Vietnam. The university provided a structure for ideological debate, but

Chambers demanded a community of those bonded by their experience of having served in Vietnam.

Chambers followed his father's demand: He is most proud that he never turned his back on his fellow Marines. He said, though, that he had changed: He did not want to turn out like the working class members at the American Legion Hall who glorified war, forgot their fear, and had parochial, bombastic, insignificant lives. He concluded,

My pride in the Marines is as strong as ever and I go to small, informal reunions. But I'm out of it. Out of it so long as I have a good job and a good future. If that ends, who knows? I might go back to my buddies and ask them to find the guys responsible for our trouble. Or I might one day decide it was all for nothing. Who knows? (p. 15)

Chambers revealed the tension between his identity as a Marine and his unease about the ability of society's structures to frame and contain his needs and aspirations. Harper's choices revealed similar concerns. He said, "we were soldiers, doin' our job, doin' what we were told to do" (28). But, Polner reported, he has "increasingly retreated from earthly concerns, insisting that his life belongs exclusively for Christ" (30).

Ryan, the third pro-war veteran, found definition in an uncomplicated view of himself as a citizen; he argued for the need to support the president. But he also believed the country is coming apart. He evaluates his service by "what your [soldier] friends think" (39).

Durant, who ended opposing the war, resigned from West Point, no longer able to believe in the Army. He found the rules of political change momentarily adequate to his needs: He worked for McCarthy's anti-war candidacy for president in February 1968.

And he joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. But he still cannot transcend the “nightmare” (62). He had married, but otherwise had drifted, taking an occasional college course.

Of O’Connor, who had a promising corporate career, Polner wrote, Now that he understands clearly the necessity of purpose and organization, the need for detail and leadership, he and other veterans who agree with him want to create a national veterans organization, a counterforce to the American Legion and the VFW aimed not only against the Vietnam war but toward the development of a broad movement, complete with life insurance benefits, ladies’ auxiliaries, and youth affiliates. (79)

His career was teaching him about the rules, roles, and institutions of society so that he could channel the powerful ideological ferment of his identity.

Pearson said he is a “murderer” (81). He said, “I will never again serve any cause that is contrary to my beliefs” (85). He plunged into the world of activism and anti-war demonstrations. But he was a volcano, feared by even his fellow activists that he might turn a demonstration into chaos – violating and upending the rules of redressive engagement. He has also become a shop steward for his union, and sees himself as a “missionary” to the working class (92). Here he finds a way to structure his intrapsychic, ideological upheaval.

Schoenwald, on the other hand, has “blotted everything out” (99). He finds no redressive structures. He tore up an invitation to join the VFW. And he broke off a friendship with a fellow veteran who took his silence for opposition to the war. His parents emigrated from Germany after World War II. His father said, “Don’t trouble

trouble”; and his mother said they survived because they did not fuss, they obeyed orders. Schoenwald said, “So my ‘war hero’ days are gone forever....I just want to be left alone” (106).

### Implications for Social Work

The integration of Erikson’s psychosocial theory and Turner’s theory out of social anthropology is productive for the field of social work. The policy field benefits as legislation and bureaucracies can better respond to the identity and ideological ferment of veterans returning from combat. Tension was experienced by these former soldiers as they demanded new structures of outreach to Vietnam veterans. This was noticed by Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The *Legacies* (1981) study and the 1981 survey by Louis Harris and Associates were prodded into being by the poor fit between intrapsychic processes and social rules. Legislation setting up Vet Centers for mental health care in the community was passed. The American Psychiatric Association included a new category of posttraumatic stress disorder in its 1980 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III*. This helped normalize a particular wartime experience which had ripple effects in other societal applications of the diagnosis of trauma and instigated further research into techniques for treatment. The pressure for change, for a better fit, resulted in dramatically different delegate selection rules in the Democratic Party in the 1972 race for president. But they were rules that empowered, that year, women, youth, and minorities to the exclusion, initially, of the working class white segment of the old Democratic coalition. The political bifurcation continues to this day, though now with adequate delegate representation for all groups so the battle is fought over votes not structure. The foreign policy choices of the United States

government continued to be supported and challenged over similar issues of anticommunism in Central and South America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But the ideological base of protest had expanded, offering more adequate opportunities for expression.

The interplay of Erikson and Turner also informs social work clinical practice. Therapists treating Vietnam veterans from the white working class today can better help their clients when they understand that most of these veterans are ambivalent about their service. Further, they have had difficulty integrating their psychological identities since the social structures with which they engaged and defined themselves, within which they had grown up, were being bent, broken, and resynthesized so rapidly. The social schisms were profound. The intrapsychic structures were themselves being bent and opportunities for sublimation defined by a society in flux and conflict. A veteran who has difficulty with a father imago reentered a society in which all authority – military, political, familial, racial, and gender – was being challenged. Even though that sociological moment has past, the veteran's conflicts and resolutions remain imprinted with the struggles of that time.

### Conclusion

There is a suggestive parallel between the theories of Erikson and Turner. They both deal with moments of crisis. For the Vietnam veterans, a psychological and a social crisis occurred at the point of return to the United States after combat duty. Erikson's identity confusion made Turner's schism more likely; and schism made it more difficult for veterans to find a means to express altered identities. Where there was relatively more identity consolidation, the veterans were better able to find means for redressive action

leading to reintegration. However, the inadequacy of redressive structures inhibited public action on the historical stage for the Vietnam combat veteran age cohort. The integration of identity with history, to create for individuals and for groups new ideological syntheses, was ambivalent and problematic.

The clinical social work field benefits from the integration of Erikson and Turner. The theoretical basis of clinical work over the past forty years has increasingly included relational and social elements. The stresses and redressive mechanisms of Turner's social drama have implications for unconscious processes and opportunities for ego development, organization, expression and health.

Much theoretical work and work with applied theory has yet to be done to integrate the theories of intrapsychic and social realities. Doing it will help policymakers and clinicians alike provide for the well being of citizens in their individual lives and social processes. Integrating Turner and Erikson, I suggest, is a step along that road.

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