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Special Issue Introduction: Research on the Well-being of Service Members, Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors by Service Members, Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors

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Special Issue Introduction: Research on the Well-being of Service Members, Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors by Service Members, Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

Karl Hamner, Barton Buechner, and Christopher Gill

Introduction

It was a cold day in November of 2007 when the town of Brunswick, Maine, held its annual Veterans Day ceremony in a picturesque park adjacent the parish church. It was my last day in town before moving down south for a new job. As I took stock of the group of people surrounding me, I began to retreat into myself. To my left were mostly civilian onlookers who came to pay their respects. On the stage were several Vietnam veterans talking about things that seemed so foreign to my recent experience. They talked about recovery from the postwar years, repairing relationships with loved ones, and the hope they found in sharing their experiences. In the rest of the crowd, a smattering of World War II veterans leaned on canes or sat in wheelchairs, along with a few Desert Storm veterans with the obligatory black biker vests denoting their service. There were no other War on Terror veterans that I could see. I believed these other veterans had somehow moved on in a way I could not. They seemed to have it together and to have put the war behind them, while I stood there as my life crumbled around me.

A short distance away, the sum of my 30 years of life, in the form of all my belongings, sat in a rusty old pickup. They represented war, a broken marriage, and a diffused sense of self that left me rudderless and adrift after 11 years of service in the Marine Corps. The truck's incessant rattling taunted me with echoes of my failure to find sustainable work, hold my marriage together, and deal with the unrelenting images of war. The next day, the truck would take me from the brutal familiarity of Maine to the vast unknown of south Alabama. For the moment, however, I shivered in a park full of people unaware of the spiral I was in, with no notion of the challenges I would face in the coming months in a new town with no friends, no support. Everything I thought I was had proved transitory. I felt stuck in a liminal space, trying to outrun the haunting specter of "what was," peering over the void of "what is," with no hope of connecting to "what will be." I was attending my first Veterans Day event as a certified veteran. I had no hope or desire of connecting to the civilians in the crowd, but I should have at least been able to feel like a part of this brotherhood around me and proud of my service. Instead, I was alone in a crowd of people.

Fourteen years on, I find myself on a new path as an aspiring researcher in the veteran space. I was given the privilege of joining the scholarly effort to produce this special military and veterans' edition of JCES. Having the opportunity to help provide a place for my fellow veterans to add their voices to the body of research is a vital step toward ensuring that future veterans will be able to navigate transition to civilian life with greater support and connection.

— Christopher M. Gill, veteran, USMC

Background

This special edition of the Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship (JCES) is the result of a 2-year effort to identify, compile, and publish scholarly research *about* military-to-civilian transitions conducted *by* service members, veterans, and their families (SMVF). It gives these SMVF voices center stage by representing a lived experience that speaks a truth to the scientific literature that bears careful and thoughtful consideration. This special edition was inspired by the awareness that many of the programs, policies and processes intended to facilitate social readjustment, transition, and mental health intervention for the SMVF community are largely based upon clinical research. Yet this research has historically limited the participation of individuals with lived experience in SMVF social worlds. As a result, scholarly representations have left out the full nature and diversity of the veteran community and the voices of the oft forgotten military family. As the project continued, we came to understand another compelling reason to publish this work. Scholarship reflecting the experiences of military veterans and their families (as a largely marginalized population) also holds valuable lessons for a society that struggles broadly with issues of identity, values, and belonging, including the balance between unity and diversity.

The genesis of this project was a conversation between two of this issue's editors at an America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) annual symposium about the apparent absence of a forum for publishing work—particularly socially engaged, community-based participatory research—by emerging SMVF scholars. Since this type of research often crosses traditional academic disciplines, it has been challenging to locate and disseminate. Additionally, many veteran-scholars who are coming of age in the era of the Post-9/11 GI Bill are just now reaching the point of creating original research and have not yet become well versed in the ins and outs of academic publishing. Thus, the necessary pathways and processes of mentoring are neither fully established nor well-known to them. We are grateful for the assistance and support of student veteran advocacy organizations, particularly the Student Veterans of America and the National Association of Student Program Administrators, in putting out the call for proposals and helping us to locate a good sampling of these emerging scholars.

Given the tendency of clinical, academic, and other institutional researchers to focus on prevalent veteran stereotypes, scholars have paid insufficient attention to family and community social dynamics, alternative forms of mental health support, and the salutary benefits of community-based integration programming for veterans. Most importantly, the authentic voices of veterans and family members have not had a large role in the research literature. Accordingly, we sought to bring to the fore a multitude of SMVF perspectives through a wide range of scholarship. These voices speak with clarity about the context of the transition experience, their vision for social change, evidence-based models for engagement, and cultural competency for researchers as applied to SMVF issues.

This special edition reflects a range of topics and contexts, with scholarship drawn from both seasoned individuals and teams and those newer to the field. The research approaches that appear in this edition are diverse—from qualitative and reflective analyses by individual scholars based on methods of autoethnography and phenomenology to participative empirical quantitative studies conducted by teams composed of SMVF scholars and experienced researchers. Each of the 13 studies included here is unique in its approach and design. However, for purposes of organization, we have found that the studies fit into several broad categories, which we have defined as follows: (1) models for engagement of SMVF scholars in participatory research, (2) contextualizing of veterans' lived experience, (3) systems - focused research for driving social change, and (4) projects emphasizing cultural competency and moral injury.

Article Summaries

Section 1: Models for Engagement of SMVF Scholars in Participatory Research

These articles exemplify research practices that integrate SMVF perspectives in diverse and often multidisciplinary teams. The studies in this section are focused on evaluation of community programs intended to serve the social and mental health needs of veterans.

In the jointly authored piece "I Remember the Skills We Learned and Put Them Into Practice: An Evaluation of a Peer Support Training Program for Veterans," coauthors Karen Besterman-Dahan, Jacqueline Sivén, Kiersten Downs, and Tatiana Orozco describe an experimental and participatory

research design that provides a multiperspective evaluation of a skills training intervention. While the purpose of the training was to enhance peer advisement skills, the evaluation comments also revealed transformed perspectives among the participants, who were a mix of veterans and nonveterans. This piece offers a good example of the use of an ethnographic research method to capture the lived experiences of veterans, and it also models community-based engagement through a public-private partnership approach. In reflexive terms, this study makes significant observations about the importance of self-awareness, mindfulness, and communication skills to the transition process, noting that these skills are not only critical in peer advisement but also transferable to family, work, and social situations. In this sense, it provides an excellent counterpoint to other pieces in this edition that deal with military and veterans' cultural competence.

The next study in this section, with the intriguing title "If You Don't Name the Dragon, You Can't Begin to Slay It," represents the efforts of Gala True, Sarah Ono, Ray Facundo, Carlos Urbina, Sawyer Sheldon, and J. Duncan Southall. Their adaptation of participatory action research, grounded theory, and the photovoice technique offers a novel approach for building knowledge of veterans' lived experiences of traumatic brain injury (TBI) among the veteran and caregiver community. Their collaborative effort resulted in "community-informed solutions" for reintegration of veterans into the community and models the practice of "partnered dissemination" of study results.

"Motivations of Older Veterans and Dependents in a Physical Activity Program" reports on community-based mixed methods research conducted by Candace Brown, Ismail Mustafa Aijazuddin, and Miriam Morey. The participatory framing of this study, which details the structure and evaluation of community engagement among veterans in an exercise program, results in a culturally sensitive assessment of an important medical/mental health issue. The study foregrounds the issue of motivation and long-term participation, and it also documents a novel partnership between a private health club and a veteran-serving nonprofit organization, Team Red, White, and Blue. The evidence provided here may be useful to support more public-private initiatives (or hybridized programs) following this model.

The last study in this category, "Creating Community for Women Veterans Through Social Networking Organizations," was authored by a team led by Kate Hendricks Thomas, Caroline Angel, and Nicholas Armstrong, with Michael Erwin, Louis Nemec, Brandon Young, John Pinter, Blayne Smith, and Justin McDaniel. The study includes both comparative and aggregate findings about the improvements in mental state experienced by men and women veterans who voluntarily participate in community-based social/recreational activities. This research recognizes further potential for gender-specific services while acknowledging the role and value of single-sex programming and outreach in such recreational programs.

Section 2: Contextualizing of Veterans' Lived Experience

This section contains articles that contribute to an understanding of military culture through the authentic voice and lived experience of veterans and the analysis of contextual symbology and sensitivities that shape the SMVF experience from formation, to operational realities, through periods of transition.

The Australian research team of Jonathan Lane, Miranda Van Hooff, Ellie Lawrence-Wood, and Alexander McFarlane provides the lead article for this section, titled "Culturally Informed Interventions for Military, Veteran, and Emergency Service Personnel: The Importance of Group Structure, Lived Experience Facilitators, and Recovery-Oriented Content." The study takes a mixed-methods approach to examining the effectiveness of culturally informed group therapy for military and first responders. It frames the distinction between clinical and community (recovery-oriented) approaches to mental health and helps to answer the question of why active-duty service members and veterans tend not to complete many evidence-based therapies despite their documented efficacy. This insightful work argues for the dual need to (1) develop military cultural competence among mental health and social service providers and (2) undertake psychoeducation of military clients to help make them more equal partners in their therapeutic interactions.

Shawn Dunlap's thoughtful, reflective piece, "Put Yourself in My Combat Boots: Autoethnographic Reflections on Soldiers and

Veterans as a Form of Life,” reveals the potential of an individual veteran-scholar using the reflective discipline of autoethnographic research. Dunlap combines an analysis of his own lived experience with other academic studies in history and the social sciences to provide an intriguing firsthand account of how his lived experience is situated within a broader political-military context. Dunlap introduces the conceptual model of “community ethnography” as a means of unlocking the underlying meanings and symbologies within the military and veteran community. He positions this model as a way of interpreting these meanings and symbologies for others outside of the veteran experience. Dunlap’s work also touches on the therapeutic nature of this type of self-reflective writing from a mental health perspective.

Kelly Wadsworth’s study, “Profoundly Changed: The Homecoming of Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan,” offers substantive insights into the essential structure underlying the lived experiences of transitioning veterans, analyzed through the lens of both essential and lifeworld versions of phenomenology. Her article provides a rigorous, accessible view of phenomenological methods, and it reveals some of the subtle yet profound changes in consciousness and perception that take place for returning veterans. Wadsworth considers the “expanded self” of a postservice veteran that includes both challenges to identity and enhanced awareness. She also explores the reflexive nature of this shift in identity and perception in community settings. Wadsworth’s work challenges the commonly held notion that veterans reintegrate into a “static society” without the society itself being changed or impacted by their return.

The final article in this category, Derek Abbey’s “How Veterans Make Meaning of the College Choice Process in the Post-9/11 Era,” similarly contributes to a deeper understanding of the student veteran experience by using qualitative interview data to critique an established theory of college selection (Gallagher’s college choice theory). It also gives voice to the lived experiences of student veterans in a meaningful way, illustrating how qualitative research can be effectively conducted using automated tools that may make research projects of this type more accessible to beginning veteran-scholars. His paper outlines a replicable

method that could be used at other college campuses to help create a shared understanding of the college selection and motivation process for student veterans.

Section 3: Systems - Focused Research for Driving Social Change

Articles in this section consider the bridging of values and social dynamics between service culture and the community setting via a systems perspective. Such a broadened view of the complexity of military-civilian relationships encompasses the international scope of research into the contemporary experience of veterans, as well as offering profound implications for local community settings. Among these are ideas for increasing cultural competency in interaction with veterans, and “normalizing” mental health care by identifying and providing forms of self-care that are consistent with military values and culture. These are types of approaches that may lead to a decrease in social isolation and marginalization of returning veterans, and work to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help.

The study “Military Culture and Its Impact on Mental Health and Stigma,” by Alexis Ganz, Chikako Yamaguchi, Bina Parekh, Gilly Koritzky, and Stephen Berger, makes a strong contribution to our understanding of both military culture’s impact on help-seeking and cultural and intercultural aspects of service as they relate to transition and postservice community reintegration. The introduction and testing of a scale that measures both in-service and postservice identification with military cultural values stands as an important addition to the military psychology literature, but the bridging of these concepts to a nonmilitary context is our focus here. Ganz and team’s research suggests that there is less of a difference than is generally believed between active-duty service members/veterans and those who have not served with regard to attitudes about mental health. The study also suggests that a strong response to values (either acceptance or rejection) appears to provide something of a protective factor, particularly with respect to suicide risk. These findings have strong implications for reimagining ways to help separating veterans, especially those who may have struggled to fit in with military culture, “find their tribe” in the community after service.

“The Benefits of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu in Managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” by

Kelly Weinberger and Tracey Burraston, presents empirical evidence from a longitudinal assessment of how Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) affects the management of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms over time. It also considers how veterans experience the practice of BJJ in community settings. BJJ is described as a somatically based practice that can serve in conjunction with supervised mental health support or as a freestanding wellness activity for those not inclined to seek formal help. This framing situates BJJ (and other martial arts) as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) approaches for helping veterans manage their PTSD symptoms. The article also discusses cultural adaptations of practice facilities to create more “veteran-friendly” environments.

Section 4: Projects Emphasizing Cultural Competency and Moral Injury

There is a growing awareness in the social sciences of moral injury as a complex construct that includes elements of identity, culture, and values as factors contributing to well-being—which can be damaged by events that challenge deeply held concepts of self and worldview. Many of the articles elsewhere in this special edition touch on how cultural factors can contribute to moral injury among veterans, but those in this section are particularly focused on making these connections. Additionally, these articles invite readers to consider how factors underlying moral injury among veterans in community settings can be reciprocally addressed in ways that are potentially transformative for the community as well as helpful to veterans.

“Teaching Military Cultural Competency to Clinicians and Clinical Students: Assessing Impact and Effectiveness,” by Nancy Isserman and James Martin, documents and evaluates a community-based collaboration between mental health practitioners, academia, and nonprofit organizations for developing military cultural competence. This study accounts for the complexity of the military and veteran experience, including the impact on families and the barriers to communication created by misconceptions and stereotypes. Particularly promising is Isserman and Martin’s concept of “reciprocal cultural competency,” which addresses the mutually strengthening effect of giving veterans tools to translate their military

experience while expanding the community’s capability to engage people from diverse or nonmainstream backgrounds.

The contribution by Daniel Perez, Paul Larson and John Bair, “U.S. Veterans Experience Moral Injury Differently Based on Moral Foundation Preferences,” seeks to advance understanding of moral injury. This study takes a novel approach by applying moral foundations theory to the psychological consequences of difficult and challenging experiences. This study adds a great deal to our understanding of the “moral” aspect of moral injury, which has been less explored (at least in the United States) than the “injury” aspect. The authors’ attention to “what is injured in moral injury” may help veterans assess for themselves the underlying nature of troubling experiences beyond the symptoms they are experiencing, which may in turn guide them in subsequent meaning making around these events.

The innovative study “Structural Examination of Moral Injury and PTSD and Their Associations With Suicidal Behavior Among Combat Veterans,” by Jeremy Jinkerson, Allison Battles, Michelle Kelley, and Richard Mason, examines possible connections between symptoms associated with moral injury and suicide risk. Their research offers evidence that symptoms associated with both PTSD and moral injury can be indicators of suicide risk, and it suggests ways that military and unit culture may affect the lenses through which individual service members interpret potentially morally injurious events. This contribution is significant in the sense that actions, perceptions, and intentions may become misaligned across cultural differences, either during service or in transition.

Conclusion

As the introduction to this special edition suggests, there is a sense of urgency to better understand the lived experiences of military members, veterans, and families in order to improve their well-being. There is an irony to the alienation often felt by those who have served their country, distancing them in many ways from other citizens despite their communities’ best intentions to welcome them home. It is our hope that this collection of research articles by, about, and for members of the SMVF community will inspire further exploration in these and other areas. While the articles represented here only begin to capture the diversity of the SMVF experience, they do capture the passion and

innovation of researchers from a wide range of disciplinary areas who have an interest in the well-being of those who have served and those close to them. Maybe just as importantly, many of these studies also reveal some of the potential reciprocal value to society (at both the system and the community level) of understanding the nature of the SMVF experience.

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