

# Introduction: Scholarship



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This current generation of veterans needs, perhaps more than ever, reliable and accurate information regarding what it means to serve in the military. In the United States, only 7% of the population either is currently serving or has served in the U.S. Armed Forces. This means that an overwhelming majority of Americans has little to no knowledge of what it means to serve in the military. Yet, since the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, close to 3 million Americans have been deployed to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. With those two wars drawing to a close and almost 2 million of those service members returning home, the boundary that exists between veterans and civilians must be bridged.

The military world and civilian world are in many ways culturally opposed. Based on my own experiences, I know that it is a difficult transition from military to civilian life. It took me several months and some friends, who were also veterans, to help walk me through the process. And in many ways my transition experiences were ideal. I had never served in combat and had three relatively uneventful tours of duty. If you add the stresses of multiple combat deployments to the cultural shocks veterans face, the transition becomes exponentially more challenging. These significant challenges, combined with the

naivety of the civilian population regarding military experience, pose serious problems for society.

It is not the case that civilians are not interested in helping veterans make the transition. I believe there is much evidence to the contrary. However, the current discourse surrounding veterans is uninformed and consists of two dominant narratives. In one narrative, veterans are seen as heroes and paraded around at football games and applauded in airports. While this is a nice gesture, some veterans do not want to be portrayed in this way, as it may seem disingenuous or even harmful depending upon that particular veteran's experiences. The other dominant narrative, and the one that arguably receives more attention, is that of the veteran as damaged goods or ticking time bombs. We have all heard countless stories on various media outlets about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). I am in no way saying that these conditions do not exist and are not serious, because they do constitute important aspects of many veterans' experiences. However, I do want to say that these two tropes do not capture the totality, or even the majority, of veterans' experiences. Both of these narratives can potentially be dangerous and harmful for veterans. Obviously, a narrative that views veterans as ticking time bombs can incite unjustified fear in a civilian population with a limited frame of reference about military culture. Perhaps less obviously, the frame of veterans as heroes can also be detrimental as it creates unrealistic expectations for veterans and can ostracize veterans from their new peers.

The current lack of knowledge of military culture among the civilian population, combined with the largely uninformed stereotypes

of veterans as damaged or heroic, can only be overcome through a greater understanding of the military experience. One way to bridge the gap between military and civilian cultures is through scholarship that attempts to provide a more accurate portrayal of the military experience. Veteran-focused scholarship will bring rigorous research methods to the difficult questions faced by this current generation of veterans and by the society attempting to welcome these warriors home. Veterans' research can be done in many different disciplines within the humanities and social sciences and allows for interdisciplinary possibilities. Indeed, many of these projects should be interdisciplinary to provide a more holistic picture of the research questions. Perhaps most importantly, veteran-related research will allow the individual veterans to speak for themselves rather than simply being portrayed as caricatures or stereotypes by the media.

There is a growing population of academics, some who are veterans, dedicating large portions of their research agenda to addressing the difficulties faced by this generation of veterans. In Spring 2013, Virginia Tech hosted the first national research conference dedicated solely to veteran-related research. The title of the conference was "Veterans in Society: Shifting the Discourse," and we welcomed proposals from many different disciplines and scholars. The conference was well attended and many great discussions took place surrounding issues related to veterans' transition to society. Virginia Tech intends to make the conference an annual event, and it is an excellent opportunity to showcase scholarly research. Travis Martin, formerly of Eastern Kentucky University, started the first Veterans' Studies curriculum which offers a unique, multi-disciplinary

program that provides veterans and non-veteran students with a foundation of understanding regarding military structure, culture, combat, and the psychological and physiological changes resulting from military service. D. Alexis Hart, Associate Professor of English at Allegheny College, and Roger Thompson, Associate Professor of English at Stony Brook University and a senior research fellow at the Syracuse Institute for Veterans and Military Families, recently published a report on some of the challenges and implications of first-year writing courses for veterans. Hart and Thompson observe that in higher education, a majority of training offered to faculty tends to focus on veteran deficits: TBI, PTSD, transition issues, adjustment issues, and absenteeism. Rather than continuing the deficit model, Hart and Thompson argue for training that involves roundtable discussions that allow veterans, faculty, and students to more fully engage with the complexities of military service.

If you are a scholar or an aspiring scholar, I highly encourage you to explore veteran-related research opportunities. If you believe, as I do, that higher education and scholarship can serve the public good, there are few better opportunities to put that belief into practice. This current generation of veterans faces tremendous difficulties, as does society, in attempting to reconcile military experience with civilian life and welcoming these public servants home. A frequently raised concern is that scholarship often stays in the Ivory Tower and does not inform the public discourse. Publishing an article in this all-volunteer, non-profit journal is an excellent way to ensure that your scholarship can reach a broader public audience.