



Three Portrayals of Military Veterans: Implications for their Career Transitions

VOICE

MICHAEL KIRCHNER 

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ABSTRACT

Veterans' studies scholars have examined the military's role in developing service member knowledge and job skills while also considering the many career transition challenges veterans experience. These examinations have contributed toward scholars' and practitioners' understanding of military training and military service; still, media portrayals of veterans' attributes, characteristics, and transition challenges have not been considered through the lens of veteran career transitions. This veteran voice paper reviews how the media portrays veterans through three predominant lenses and subsequently considers how each portrayal may influence their post-military career transitions. Using Media Effects theory, the three outlined portrayals of veterans offer distinct implications for veterans and prospective employers. The intent of this paper is for readers to gain insight into how media portrayals of veterans may necessitate a re-examination of how they are treated and stereotyped in society.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Michael Kirchner

Purdue University Fort Wayne,
United States

kirchnem@pfw.edu

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Service member transitions out of the military are filled with unknowns regarding their future. Veterans have many concerns, including but not limited to securing stable employment, acclimating to non-military work cultures, and the ability to use their knowledge and education when transitioning into the civilian workplace (Maury et al., 2016). These challenges become more complicated to manage when the media and society portray veterans through a selective lens (Garamone, 2019; Parrott et al., 2020). While most civilians view veterans favorably because of their service, those views do not necessarily improve their career transitions (Pew Research Center, 2011). Stereotypes can be the ultimate crux of a veteran's career transition (Almaraz, 2024). Even positive views could hinder a veteran's workforce transition.

As a U.S. Army combat veteran, practitioner with more than 7 years of service overseeing campus veteran resource centers, and a veteran career transition researcher, I have seen how narrow depictions and persistent stigmas of military veterans can be organized. My observations have led to the identification of three primary categories, with each portrayal shaping how employers treat veterans seeking civilian employment and how veterans perceive themselves when preparing for a post-military career. In this voices piece, I present three dominant societal portrayals of veterans and discuss the significance of the portrayals for non-military employers, veterans, and veterans' studies scholars to consider. The purpose is to raise awareness amongst veterans' studies scholars regarding how society has portrayed veterans. Readers will subsequently gain insight into how the behaviors of veterans and employers may need to be modified if we are intent on improving veteran career transitions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The media can significantly shape perceptions and influence stereotypes—otherwise known as Media Effects theory (Borah, 2016). Media effects on societal perceptions range from minimal to significant, but they can nonetheless have a lasting impact (Borah, 2016). Incidentally, early research on media campaigns conducted during World War I fueled concerns regarding the media's impact on societal perceptions of war and military service (Borah, 2016). Importantly, how the media's framing of subpopulations (i.e., military veterans) can impact how past and current service members experience their post-military career transitions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In other words, media portrayals that carry a specific agenda, i.e., the military and veterans are 'good' or 'bad', influence how civilians and employers perceive them.

The media's effect on perceptions of veterans can be tied back to the knowledge gap that exists between veterans and civilians (Pew Research Center, 2011). As civilians lack accessibility to military training and culture, knowledge gaps are created regarding military service (Pew Research Center, 2011). Goffman (1974) noted that individuals struggle to understand, interpret, and make sense of the world around them. Therefore, individuals apply interpretive schemas to address knowledge gaps to create meaning from the available information (Goffman, 1974). These gaps, at times, are likely filled through media portrayals, which can serve as a bridge to provide civilians and non-military employers with clarity regarding veteran experiences.

When I attend training aimed at supporting veterans (i.e., military-friendly employer training, Green Zone Training), discussions inevitably include labeling those who have served. I have also facilitated many of these training sessions for various audiences, and attendees rarely struggle to create robust lists related to veteran stereotypes. These lists consistently include terms such as PTSD, battle-hardened, substance abuse, gun-loving, leaders, and heroes who have sacrificed for my freedom. These labels may apply to some service members; however, they also tend to be excessively assigned. For example, though post-9/11 veterans deployed at higher rates than other recent generations, only a portion of service members ever deploy to a combat zone and have engaged an enemy (Parker et al., 2019). At the same time, those who have served will acknowledge instances of ineffective leaders, which contradicts the aforementioned stereotype (Kirchner, 2018). Additionally, according to Papayanis (2010), most service members would never consider themselves heroes, inviting discussion on what it means to be a 'hero'. Perhaps most importantly, stereotypes describing veterans have persisted within the civilian community, which may influence how employers perceive and treat them as well.

PORTRAYALS

The media and society have shown tendencies toward three distinct portrayals regarding veterans and, correspondingly, how civilian workplaces should respond. Each portrayal can present challenges that non-military employers and military veterans must consider.

VETERAN AS AN ASSET

The media and society's first portrayal of veterans is that they are assets to civilian employers because of their military training. Although technical and tactical skills are

needed, most jobs within the armed forces are outside the scope of combat roles, including but not limited to nursing, information technology, maintenance, and human resources, which highlight soft skills. As Kirchner and Akdere (2019) identified, veterans bring many soft skills outside of their combat training to the workplace that were developed through their military service. These soft skills include leadership, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; McCausland et al., 2017). Concurrently, service members complete extensive training during their time in the armed forces, which corresponds with developing unique technical skills. These skills are learned through training and the actual performance of one's job specialty. Technical skills acquired are leveraged by non-military employers who understand how to evaluate military job specialties in contrast with civilian roles. Soft skills, while valued, are less easily assessed or translated (Harrell & Berglass, 2012).

At the same time, the media and society promote the unique attributes veterans demonstrate after serving in the military. For example, attention to detail, dependability, stress management, discipline, self-motivation, and persistence are often attributed to and considered desirable by employers (Hardison et al., 2015; Krueger et al., 2017). Veterans are recognized for their training experiences, which have helped develop these attributes, such as participating in dangerous, demanding exercises, task mastery requiring extensive practice, and collaborating with others to accomplish tasks (Hardison et al., 2015). These attributes and experiences complement the knowledge and skills—both soft and technical—veterans have developed through service. As such, veterans are often portrayed as a value-add to civilian employers because of their military background and training.

VETERAN AS A LIABILITY

Conversely, the media also widely shares an opposing portrayal permeating through society. In this case, veterans are portrayed as 'broken' or 'impaired' in at least one area (Jowers, 2024). Civilian employers report concerns for hiring veterans because they can be too rigid, too authoritative, excessively hypervigilant, or have difficulty adjusting to new coworkers (McCormick et al., 2019; Rausch, 2014; Stone et al., 2018). These character traits are likely attributed to veterans' exposure to the armed forces' military culture, which prioritizes collectivism, intense training, and preparation for combat (McCaslin et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2017). Importantly, these characteristics are prescribed with little regard for the job specialty, service branch, rank/responsibilities, years of service, or combat/deployment history.

Media portrayals of veterans being 'broken' are elevated via commercials, ads, and images of disabled veterans. Veterans are concerned about perceptions of their physical or mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress, because of the potentially negative impact on their employment outcomes (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). Other media depictions have stereotyped veterans as having excessive difficulty acclimating to a life post-military service, which only exacerbates their ability to transition into the civilian workspace successfully. Veterans are concerned about the stigma and being recognized as 'ticking timebombs' who can be 'set off' for no apparent reason (Shankle et al., 2023). Others express concern regarding alcohol and substance abuse issues, which veterans have been portrayed as struggling to manage. Aspects related to homelessness and instability permeate through society as awareness campaigns regularly promote the need to support veterans' personal struggles. While these concerns have not clearly been correlated with veterans' ability to perform a job and are sometimes overreaching, nonetheless, they are persistently tied to veterans' career transition challenges (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Shankle et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2018).

VETERAN AS A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A third portrayal largely ignores the veteran for their character traits or personal and professional challenges and instead centers on what they have done through their service. The messaging appears to be most often used in capital campaigns by organizations seeking to raise funds to continue or expand their support of veterans. Importantly, veterans are not highlighted for their training and military experience or viewed solely through the lens of being 'broken'. Instead, the messaging encourages civilians to recognize and acknowledge the obstacles veterans faced during their service and since transitioning out of the military.

Through this portrayal, media and society promote the need to care for veterans because of the sacrifices they made during their time in the armed forces. Non-profit organizations include marketing efforts that use language such as "we can never do enough" and "never leave a soldier behind" (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2011; Wounded Warrior Project, 2012). These efforts may include messages about the challenges veterans face but predominantly focus on helping veterans in all aspects of their transition out of the military. Military-friendly employers are also evaluated and recognized for what they offer to the veteran community, including but not limited to designated jobs for veterans, specialized training or mentorship programs, inclusive cultures, or support and retention initiatives (Militaryfriendly.org, n.d.).

DISCUSSION

Stereotyping is a normal human behavior and, through consensually shared understandings, establishes social representations of unique groups, which are shared through media depictions and other forms of mass communication sharing (Schaller, 1996). Each of the three described veteran perspectives contributes in their own way toward veteran career transition challenges, which have been widely researched over the last 20 years.

ASSETS

When viewed predominately as assets, non-military employers appropriately acknowledge the value of hiring someone who has already completed a career. Throughout a veteran's time in the military, they have developed soft and technical skills, which correlate with employee performance. At the same time, they are credited for the character attributes that are often developed through their service (Kirchner & Akdere, 2019). The training provided within the armed forces plays a significant role in shaping veterans' attributes and competencies (Krueger et al., 2017). The predominately favorable lens through which veterans are portrayed potentially inflates existing issues for both veterans and non-military employers.

In this sense, veterans may develop an inflated sense of competence, unrealistic job and wage expectations, and inflated self-confidence in their ability to secure desirable employment. Unsurprisingly, many veterans experience culture shock when they learn that the jobs they would like may be unattainable due to education or experience requirements (Maury et al., 2016). At this point, veterans are challenged to adjust expectations, invest greater time and resources into their education and career planning, or reconsider their career pathways. For non-military employers, viewing veterans solely as assets may shield hiring managers from setting reasonable expectations regarding veterans' leadership skills, job-relevant training, and ability to acclimate to a non-military workplace culture. In this sense, employers must be intentional about evaluating veteran job applicant attributes and be realistic in their expectations for new employees who have left the military. At the same time, non-military employers need to consider the distinctions between military and non-military work cultures.

LIABILITIES

As liabilities, non-military employers and society emphasize the potential burden veterans play because of their military service. Persistent stereotypes regarding veterans managing post-traumatic stress, being substance abusers,

or experiencing physical or other mental health issues are most often unwarranted and inappropriate (McFarling et al., 2011; Stone & Stone, 2015). These stigmas add a layer of depth to the career transitions that veterans already experience. In this sense, veterans need to acknowledge the existence of stigmas about them and be ready to handle criticisms or concerns that civilians may have. Media depictions and social stigmas regarding veterans' inability to acclimate into non-military organizations, their mental or physical health challenges, or veterans' knowledge and skills gaps present both positive and negative implications for veteran career transitions.

Acknowledging that veterans may have a range of struggles and issues they navigate upon leaving the military is important because it offers non-military employers an opportunity to consider strategies they can implement to help offset these challenges. Already, many organizations offer veteran employee resource groups to veteran employees or partner veterans who are new employees with more seasoned mentors. These initiatives can have a meaningful impact on veterans' career transitions (Hunter-Johnson, 2021). Additionally, non-military organizations may offer military cultural competence training to employees as an effort to bridge the knowledge gap between civilians and those who have served (Pew Research Center, 2011). The opportunities help address these issues but can also become problematic if employees maintain concerns about working or engaging with veterans due to the emphasis on veteran issues. At the same time, too much focus on supporting veterans and oversight of the positives they do bring to the workforce may be detrimental to their career transitions.

Consider local career fairs offered to veterans. Of the many I have attended, often the jobs being promoted are for sales positions (i.e., insurance industry), public safety, manufacturing, or trucking. Despite a willingness to hire veterans, these jobs are generally entry-level, include demanding hours/work schedules, and may be commission-based. While these roles can offer stable and excellent careers for some, they generally overlook the training and professional experience veterans have already acquired. Instead, they seem to be low-risk roles for the employer. Also, media portrayals that associate veterans with having extensive baggage add to the transition challenges that veterans already experience.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

As a social responsibility, veterans are almost always portrayed with a sense of both pity and glory. Veterans Day programs, maintenance of employment benefits while a service member is deployed, welcome home parties, and

military-friendly designations are all strategies reflective of the social responsibility mindset. Non-military employers communicate their support for veterans via these strategies and demonstrate a level of care for their service. Conversely, it is incumbent on non-military employers to understand what it means to be friendly to their military-affiliated employees. These designations and other demonstrations of support are limited in their value offered if veteran employees do not feel that the demonstrations are authentic. Employers are therefore encouraged to scrutinize and define their intent for offering veteran or military-affiliated programming. By defining the intent, employers may better understand how their resource investments into veteran-specific programming impact their workplace, veteran employees, and the greater military community. For veterans, there is an opportunity to more deeply understand how the treatment as social responsibilities can best be leveraged and supported for the greater good.

CONCLUSION

The career transition challenges veterans experience are well documented, though the impact of media and societal portrayals on their transitions into the non-military workplace have largely been overlooked. Programs aimed at recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans are admirable as are initiatives that highlight the training and experience veterans bring to the workplace. However, these initiatives may never reach their potential if the impact of existing stereotypes are not more deeply understood. We are challenged to further explore how portrayals and stereotypes of military veterans may have influenced their career transitions. Veterans studies scholars have a unique role in influencing and shaping the narrative regarding the impact of military service. By more critically examining how portrayals of veterans influence career transitions, we can work to improve our ability to support their transition into the non-military workplace.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Michael Kirchner  orcid.org/0000-0001-5681-188X
Purdue University Fort Wayne, United States

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