



Methodological & Theoretical Innovations for Researching Veterans

ROUNDTABLE

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ABSTRACT

This roundtable explored the significance of methodological and theoretical innovation in advancing veterans studies as an interdisciplinary field. Traditional research on veterans has often relied on narrow, deficit-based models that fail to account for the diversity and complexity of veteran identities and experiences. By integrating critical theoretical frameworks, the participants argue for a more inclusive, reflexive, and ethically grounded approach to veteran research. These innovations challenge dominant narratives and enhance the field's capacity to inform policy, elevate marginalized voices, and engage veterans as co-creators of knowledge instead of research subjects.

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Veterans studies is a rapidly evolving interdisciplinary field dedicated to understanding the complex experiences of military veterans across historical, cultural, social, and political contexts. While early scholarship often relied on clinical, psychological, and policy-driven frameworks to address issues such as trauma, reintegration, and healthcare, these approaches frequently fall short in capturing the full diversity of veteran identities. Veterans are not a monolithic group; they differ widely by race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, service era, and post-service trajectories. Yet, traditional research methods have tended to reinforce dominant narratives centering white, male, combat veterans; thus, marginalizing many voices and experiences.

In recognition of the *Journal of Veterans Studies*' 10th anniversary—a milestone marking a decade of advancing scholarship in the field—this roundtable reflects on where veterans studies has been, where it is now, and where it must go next. For this roundtable, Dr. Khadija Boyd (KB) convened four experts in the field—Dr. Byron L. Gardner (BG), Dr. Abby Kinch (AK), Dr. Steve Wahle (SW), and Mr. Charles O. Warner III (CW)—who argue that advancing veterans studies requires not only new questions, but also new methodological and theoretical approaches. These innovations are essential to making the field more critical, inclusive, and socially responsive to ethically and accurately represent the full spectrum of veteran lives. As the field matures, embracing such innovations is not just beneficial; it is imperative for producing scholarship that truly reflects the richness and diversity of veterans' lived experiences.

MODERATOR AND PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Khadija Boyd, Ph.D., moderator and editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Veterans Studies* (JVS), is a retired U.S. Army combat veteran who earned her doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Northcentral University (NCU). Dr. Boyd's research focuses on race, gender, and the lived experiences of Black women, particularly within military and post-military contexts. Her interdisciplinary scholarship addresses the structural and cultural forces that shape the lives of Black women veterans, emphasizing issues of identity, representation, and equity. She is committed to expanding the field of veterans studies through methodological and theoretical innovations that build upon Critical Race Theory (CRT), Feminist and Queer Theory, decolonial perspectives, and autoethnographic and participatory methodologies to reframe how scholars conceptualize military service, transitioning, and veteran identity. She coined the term *military colorblindness*, which allows racism to thrive in military and veteran spaces where

whiteness is implied and the only acceptable identity in military and veteran culture, expanding upon Colorblind Theory (see [Boyd, 2021](#)).

Bryon L. Garner, Ph.D., work examines the intersections of race, patriotism, and military service by introducing the *Black veteranality* framework. As a U.S. Navy veteran, his academic work synthesizes Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze systemic inequities within military and veteran culture. His scholarship challenges conventional narratives of patriotism in America by centering marginalized veterans' lived experiences, revealing how institutional practices within the armed forces perpetuate racial disparities despite meritocratic ideals. Dr. Garner's research informs policy discussions on veteran healthcare access and advocates for equitable recognition of diverse service members' contributions to national identity. Through innovative blending of personal narrative and structural analysis, Dr. Garner advances understanding of veteranality as a fluid construct shaped by race, gender, and societal perceptions of service. His work continues to reframe academic and public conversations about military service, veteran identity, and racial justice in America. Dr. Garner's recently published book, *Black Veteranality: Military Service and the Illusion of Inclusive Patriotism*, will cover his work extensively.

Steve Wahle, Ph.D., LCSW, works as a vocational counselor for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and teaches for the University of California, Irvine (UCI). Dr. Wahle received his doctorate from the University of South Carolina (USC) and his MSW from Saint Louis University (SLU). In this conversation, Dr. Wahle expands the conversation on *veteranness* and *veterancy*.

Abby Kinch, Ph.D., work examines the intersection of veteran identity, institutional policy, and post-military transition through the lens of Veteran Critical Theory (VCT). As a U.S. Air Force veteran, her research challenges traditional reintegration models by centering belonging, identity coherence, and social wealth as key indicators of long-term success. As vice president of Research at Student Veterans of America, Dr. Kinch leads national studies that inform policy, guide institutional practice, and elevate veterans' lived experiences in higher education and beyond. Her work blends behavioral economics, strategic management, and applied policy analysis to reframe how veteran transition is understood and measured. Dr. Kinch also sits on the University of South Florida (USF) and the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) Amherst faculty. Her forthcoming research includes the development of a *Social Transition Wealth Index* (STWI) to better assess the full spectrum of veterans' post-service outcomes, particularly about experiences of precarity immediately following separation.

Mr. Charles O. Warner III, U.S. Air Force veteran, is a doctoral candidate with the Department of Social & Cultural Anthropology and Leuven International & European Studies at the University of Leuven in Belgium. His research project, initiated by a four-year Fundamental Research Fellowship with the Research Foundation-Flanders (Grant #1149421N), is titled, *A Soldier's Experience for Society's Peace: Combat Veterans and Post-Conflict Resolution in Southeast Europe*. A core component of this project has been ethnographic fieldwork alongside Albanian, Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian veterans of the Yugoslav Wars (1990s), as well as with American, Dutch, British, and Belgian veterans. He has presented research on veterans studies, memory politics, peacebuilding, security strategies, transitional justice, and veteran (trans)national relations. Charlie earned a M.Sc. in Social Anthropology from the University of Leuven, a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Utah and is a Returned Peace Corps volunteer with service in the Republic of Kosovo.

METHODS

The participants were identified by the former editor-in-chief of the *JVS* as experts in the field of veterans studies and were recruited by email. Once they agreed to participate, they were provided with the discussion questions in advance to streamline the conversation and ensure adherence to the journal's 60-minute time limit. A single Zoom meeting was organized to host the roundtable, enabling all participants to join remotely.

DATA COLLECTION

The roundtable discussion was recorded via Zoom, transcribed by the moderator, and reviewed to ensure accuracy and clarity by all participants before inclusion in the manuscript. Although each participant responded to the same set of questions, the open-ended format encouraged multiple interpretations and the incorporation of methodological and theoretical innovations to the field of veterans studies. This approach underscored the roundtable's aim to reimagine veterans studies through inclusive, ethically grounded methodologies that challenge dominant narratives and center veterans as co-creators of knowledge. To maintain impartiality and foster open dialogue, as editor-in-chief of the *JVS*, I (KB), kept my contributions to a minimum. The discussion was based on the following questions:

1. How can new and existing methodologies and theoretical frameworks advance our understanding of veteran experiences and strengthen the field of veterans studies?

2. What specific gaps in current veterans studies research motivated you to develop new methodological approaches? Or can you walk us through the process of developing your framework for veterans studies? What theoretical foundations, methodologies, or personal experiences influenced its creation?
3. In what ways do your frameworks challenge existing paradigms and offer more nuanced insights into veterans' lived experiences across different social, cultural, and institutional contexts? How do you integrate insights from other disciplines to reinforce existing veterans studies frameworks?
4. How do your frameworks engage with veterans as co-creators of knowledge rather than as subjects of study, and what impact does this have on the research process?
5. In what ways can rethinking traditional research methodologies lead to a more comprehensive understanding of veteran identity beyond service-related trauma and resilience?
6. As we continue to expand the field of veterans studies, what do you see as the most critical next steps in advancing research frameworks that truly capture the complexities of veterans' experiences?

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

KB: This roundtable will examine the evolution of research methodologies and explore the theoretical innovations that have shaped veterans studies as an interdisciplinary field. This roundtable intends to introduce new theoretical frameworks and research methodologies to enhance research and the understanding of veteran experiences and identity formation. First, how can new and existing methodologies and theoretical frameworks advance our understanding of the veteran experience and strengthen the field of veterans studies?

BG: One of the things that I found along my journey is that new frameworks are instrumental in telling the story and providing a counter-narrative. My framework, *Black veteranality*, is an outgrowth of the veteranality framework introduced by Emma Murray in 2016 and expanded upon by my colleague Charles Warner. One of the things that Charles suggested was that veteranality could be expanded, and my contribution does that. *Black veteranality* synthesizes DuBois's double consciousness framework with some elements of the Veteran Critical Theory (VCT), focusing on the fact that, as Black veterans, we occupy an intersectional space. I think that it is integral to introducing a new conversation within veterans studies. This theoretical

foundation helps explain the complex psychological navigation required of Black veterans who simultaneously embody patriotic ideals while confronting systemic racism. Through critical ethnography and narrative interviews, *Black veteranality* documents how Black service members navigate what critical race scholars term the “white gaze.” By combining Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze systemic inequities within military and veteran culture, the framework offers a more nuanced and robust analytic lens to examine structural inequities embedded in military and veteran institutions.

SW: In thinking about the future of veterans studies, I believe one of the places I see an opportunity is for us to define our constructs, particularly the concept of “veteran” itself. While the definition is already complex within a U.S. context, the challenge becomes even more urgent if we aim to build veterans studies as a truly international and interdisciplinary field. My approach is to conceptualize “veteran” as a symbol, and that means that all individuals treat the symbol based on their own interaction with or their lack of interaction with that symbol. For example, if I say tree, we all can think of a tree and have a conversation about a tree without designating whether we are each thinking of an oak, an apple, or a pine tree. My contention is that a veteran being treated as an object allows us to be very specific about what we mean when scholars are talking about veterans, rather than taking for granted that the audience understands what we mean. One of my ideas is to not only think about the definition of veteran but also come up with some kind of construct, which, for now, I’ll call *veterancy*. *Veterancy* can be assigned by an outside party, whereas being a veteran is constructed in the moment. If we have something to designate when I do a study or I talk about my interaction with veterans, that means I’ve seen your DD 214, or the government has said that you are a veteran, whether you agree with that or not, we have some baseline that we can work off to [more] clearly identify our population and convey what it is that we’re studying and finding.

AK: The field of veterans studies is in the midst of a necessary methodological and epistemological transformation. For too long, it has centered on limited paradigms—primarily trauma and resilience—without accounting for the structural, relational, and institutional forces shaping veterans’ lives. To move forward, we must embrace theoretical frameworks that reposition veterans as dynamic, situated individuals embedded in complex social systems. Veteran Critical Theory (VCT) offers a critical lens to interrogate how power, identity, and institutional discourse interact in the veteran experience. It invites us to challenge reductive categorizations and instead examine the ways veterans navigate, resist, and reshape

systems. Similarly, the concept of social wealth provides a way to rethink transition not as an endpoint marked by employment or education, but as a lifelong process shaped by relationships, community ties, and access to meaningful institutions. These frameworks call for methodologies that can measure connection, trust, and belonging with as much rigor as we measure income or graduation rates. By advancing mixed-method, interdisciplinary approaches that place veterans at the center of inquiry in a co-production model, we strengthen the field’s capacity to produce meaningful, actionable knowledge.

CW: I want to take a step back and approach this question from a fundamental methodological perspective that aligns with Bryon (BG). Back to the fundamentals about populating the space that we’re talking about—the academic space [or] the socio-academic space—and we must first reflect critically on how we are constructing that space, and more importantly, the language, terminology, and frameworks we use to do so. I think the way that we access that, most accurately, is through ethnography and ethnographic field work—with autoethnography being a component of that. The problem that I’m hearing with other veteran discussions here and elsewhere in American academic circles is language. This conversation we’re having right now works because we’re having it in English. The word *veteran* works differently in English than it does in Serbo-Croatian, or many other places that have a different linguistic legacy when it comes to describing former combatants. I can bring this back to the days of Yugoslavia, where, during that time frame, the term “veteran” wasn’t really used, because that was more of a Western construct that was seen as a Western European, North Atlantic kind of usage, and I think ethnography and initial ethnographic field work will help account for how we’re understanding people using their own languages and subjectivities to present themselves in specific socio-academic spaces. Thus, *veteranality* can be used as the analytical and discursive frame that centers veteran subjectivities and allows us to build from that center.

KB: Thank you all for your responses. I would like to say that as the editor in chief of the *Journal of Veterans Studies*, I’m seeing submissions that are not grounded in any theoretical or conceptual framework[s]. I see more of a historical context being provided, which isn’t identifying any gaps in the small field of veterans studies that exists. Moving on, if applicable, what specific gaps in current veterans studies research motivated you to develop new methodological approaches?

SW: With my experience as a social worker with sale practices in the field, what I noticed is there are lots of conversations about veteran identity, and usually we’re going back to the population that has already identified

themselves as the population. So, I'll use an example of when I was a student. We had a student veteran group that convened two blocks from the main VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] Hospital in Saint Louis, Missouri. Half the people in our student veteran group would not sign up for VA healthcare and instead opted to pay \$1,000 a semester for health insurance. This led me down a path of wanting to understand who's a veteran, when they're a veteran, why they're a veteran, and why they're not a veteran. Back to Charles's (CW) point, culturally, we're looking historically at what a veteran is in the United States, and it's easy to know who was in the Korean or Vietnam War at all times of conscription. We are currently at 51 years of an all-volunteer service in the United States, and I think that that changes the way that we think about veterans in this country. We can talk about what propaganda has been produced in order to further support 20 plus years of war with an all-volunteer force, we could talk about the development of benefits and the implications for foreign and domestic policy, but at the end of the day, if we're building all these structures and benefits around the people that we are saying are veterans, but they are not identifying as veterans, then what is the point of it? Only 25% of veterans who are eligible to come to the VA show up. Only half of those who are eligible even express an interest and sign up. So, many of the veteran benefits at the federal level that are being received are from a very small population, and that small population is what we're using to design our programs, and it's this closed loop that doesn't allow us to draw other people into the conversation. Whether that's policy formation or academically, that's what put me on the path of symbolic interactionism, which is a very old sociological framework that I think is a very simple way for us to start this conversation before we jump ahead to more complicated processes and structures.

AK: My methodological and theoretical work emerged in direct response to two pressing gaps in veterans studies. First, how the prevailing metrics used to assess veteran outcomes (e.g., employment status, income, educational attainment) fail to capture what veterans consistently report as their greatest needs (e.g., meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, the ability to navigate institutions without shame or alienation). Second, research designs too often frame veterans as passive recipients of care or subjects of study, rather than as experts in their own transitions. These gaps demanded new tools. Drawing from relational sociology, public policy, Indigenous epistemologies, and critical theories, including those developed in disability studies and labor studies, I began to develop the *Social Transition Wealth Index* (STWI). This mixed-method tool measures dimensions of veteran transition that are often overlooked (e.g., community trust, institutional access,

social capital, identity formation). Methodologically, STWI includes validated psychometric scales, social network analysis, and open-ended narrative prompts, all designed in collaboration with veterans themselves. The process was iterative and deeply participatory, guided by the conviction that veterans are not only the best narrators of their own experience but are also capable of helping shape the tools used to measure it. My work has been shaped equally by theoretical inquiry and by more than a decade of direct engagement with student veterans and military-connected learners, many of whom have articulated needs, critiques, and insights that formal research frameworks have yet to fully recognize.

BG: The development of *Black veteranality* addresses several critical gaps in veterans' studies research—limited analysis of race in veteranality. While Emma Murray introduced the concept of veteranality in 2016 and Charles Warner expanded it in 2022, both primarily focused on criminality, violence, and returning combat veterans. However, they fall short of analyzing the unique experiences of Black veterans and the relationship between racial trauma from moral injury and veteran identity. *Black veteranality* fills this theoretical void by building upon DuBois' concept of *double consciousness* and applying it specifically to military service contexts. This theoretical foundation helps explain the complex psychological navigation required of Black veterans who simultaneously embody patriotic ideals while confronting systemic racism. Through critical ethnography and narrative interviews, Black veteranality will document how Black service members navigate what critical race scholars term the "white gaze". Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), synthesized with Veteran Critical Theory (VCT), to analyze systemic inequities within military and veteran culture creates a more robust analytical tool than either theory alone could provide.

KB: The gap that I have identified is the lack of focus in the literature on anyone who is not a combat veteran with PTSD, completely immobilized from society, or a student-veteran.

BG: Thank you for bringing that up. One of the things in my research has been on patriotism, its conceptualization, and how it's been studied in a way that I think has been problematic. Fundamentally, what we're talking about is our relationship to our government and the nation-state, and in that, we're talking about how closely or loosely we identify with American identity. Then there's a subset of people who identify with this other category of being a veteran. Now, in my research about patriotism, specifically patriotism in America, there has been this interwoven story also about race. Race has been something that has been a part of this conceptualization since the beginning and that's why I chose to start at that point, because I was trying to

resolve my own feelings about my service and trying to figure out where do I fit in these larger conceptualizations of patriotism and American identity based on how I grew up and when, what I experienced in the military, and then what I have experienced since. To the point, yes, the gap is very large because there was no scholarship that really focused on that. Now, there are psychological studies that offer thoughts and feelings about patriotism, which did conclude these large gaps. So, that was one of my motivations for a journal (*JVS*) special edition on patriotism, which I participated in a few years ago. I wanted to start the conversation about all these different perspectives on patriotism. For example, when I interviewed a patriot and when I interviewed other Black veterans for my book, most of them sat back in their chairs and were astounded that I asked them, “What is patriotism?” and what was astounding to me about that is that this is something that’s just so fundamental. It was astounding that people just had not been asked, had not had any deep thoughts about it, and when finding out if there are incredible nuances, allowed the conversation to continue.

CW: Two things that I would focus on for this talking point, one being comparative methodology, and the other being an overemphasis on the term or the trope “identity” within the comparative method. It is to call out the “navel gazing” that we kind of engage in when we’re looking at predominantly American or English language veterans. Thinking that we’re thinking outside the box and moving outside and expanding these comparative frames, when perhaps we’re not actually pushing it out far enough. By not expanding or pushing the boundaries of these comparative frames what are we missing out on? What are the contexts? What are the different gaps? What are the unknown gaps? Now we might be able to identify certain gaps in our methodologies and theoretical approaches, but what are we missing by not actually moving outside of ourselves? An example would be in Croatia and Kosovo, where the veterans there have problems with so-called “fake veterans”. This phenomenon of fake veterans, where veterans, as individuals, post conflict or post-war, are presenting themselves to the state by trying to say, ‘Yes, I am a veteran to receive benefits,’ but they never served in the military or militia, and sometimes there’s bribery, corruption, and nepotism involved. So, it’s kind of an inverse of what Steve (SW) was talking about, where you have veterans in the United States, or former service members who are refusing to acknowledge or accept that documentality against the state. So, when we start our comparative conversations, what can we find in that? A new dimension of the veteran experience that does not exist in the U.S., thus is not currently “seen” as a part of North Atlantic comparative frames. Next, identity and the reliance

on identity, or I would potentially, maybe controversially argue, an over-reliance on the idea of identity, especially when we’re using it in a singular use. When we’re talking about veterans, I have a love/hate relationship with it. I tend to lean more towards, and this is the anthropologist in me, to speak about veteran subjectivities, or perhaps in the singular veteran subjectivity. This allows for multiplicities of the person of their identities, because a veteran identity is not a singular thing. There’s multiple components that are coming into this and informing whatever we might want to call “veteran identity.” I think that we can take some pages from anthropology as a discipline and maybe realign, include, or think through this idea of subjectivity versus identity, and see what happens when we approach them, and try to develop and insert veteran subjectivities into our research narratives, rather than speaking about, perhaps almost inaccurately, a veteran identity.

KB: Very interesting. Thank you all for your feedback. Next question: In what ways do your frameworks challenge existing paradigms and offer more nuanced insights?

SW: I did my research, and one thing that I kept coming up against was this idea that a veteran is static or that any identity is static. So, there is an intersection between these experiences that people have that makes them a composite, and I think that’s important to consider. However, going a step further and accounting for interactions, which we are gathering data or we are exchanging information, for Bryon’s (BG) work, for him to go out and do an ethnography with veterans in the United States versus me going out and doing an ethnography with veterans in the United States, because we have two different experiences, those participants will interact with us differently. When it comes to having these conversations and trying to understand what it is and what’s occurring when we’re out there doing our research, where we’re interacting in the world, we must understand that the interaction and what we are gathering from that interaction is only applicable then and in that time. I asked participants about being veterans in other places. Every single participant said they had stories of being in a public place, being asked to identify as a veteran, and resisting the urge to identify as a veteran, but then being prompted by the people around them who knew that they had been in the military to identify as a veteran. Whereas, in other places, people would happily do it, and they didn’t need to be prompted. I will also say that this depends on the context changes and the way that they form and then present that identity. I also think that this is something that we have overlooked in social science. One example of that and why it’s folly to approach veteran research in social science in this way is veteran suicide. We continuously publish about veteran suicide assuming that the people that are included in those studies somehow made their

decision based on another decision to join the military at some time and we absolutely don't know because we are not asking people how do thoughts of suicide or self-harm or harm to others relate back to your time in the military or the way that you view yourself as a veteran. There is a huge gap that I think we're missing out on.

KB: I'm going to add to that by circling back to Bryon's (BG) work on patriotism, and how my own work challenges existing paradigms. I will say that I am not a patriot. I think the assumption is always made that people who serve their country are patriots. Going to Afghanistan and then understanding in some capacity that the U.S. operates as an empire changed my outlook on military service, and it changed my outlook on being a veteran and how I moved through society as a veteran. People who know me know that I am a veteran, and I don't deny that, but I don't broadcast it if I don't have to. So, my work exists to challenge the paradigms that everybody who serves is a patriot, because that is not always the case.

AK: The frameworks I use and develop (e.g., VCT, social wealth) challenge dominant paradigms by rejecting linear or binary models of transition. Traditional approaches often characterize veterans as either broken or healed, either dependent or self-sufficient, but these frames obscure the fluid and context-dependent nature of identity and reintegration. My work insists on understanding veteran transition as a relational and institutional process that veterans do not simply "move on" from the military, but must negotiate their place in shifting social networks, community roles, and systems that are often ill-equipped to receive them. To reinforce this reframing, I draw on a wide array of disciplines. From Critical Race Theory (CRT), I borrow the imperative to analyze how veterans' experiences are shaped by race, racism, and structural exclusion—particularly for BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, & People of Color] and immigrant veterans whose stories are often erased from dominant narratives. From disability studies, I embrace the social model, which shifts the focus from individual impairments to the societal barriers that disable and marginalize. From labor studies, I analyze military service as a form of labor governed by hierarchy, precarity, and surveillance, and I extend that lens to examine how veterans are reintegrated into civilian labor markets under inequitable conditions. These perspectives do not just enrich veterans studies; they transform it by exposing the need for more contextually aware, systemically informed, and justice-oriented scholarship.

CW: Two thoughts, there's a huge difference that sometimes goes unnoticed or unaddressed between nationalism and patriotism, and looking at how those two things interconnect, intersect, or clash collide, is something that still needs to be more heavily addressed

from a veteran perspective and veteran positionality. The other thing is to try being an American service member or American veteran overseas right now. In some places, it was never particularly easy, and it's taking on different ramifications now, where even research projects are being seen differently as the optics shift and things shift in the United States. So, it's interesting to see where and how your own subjectivities and your own connectivity to the veteran experience can shift.

KB: I think the access to the information, the access to social media, allows people to see that being a veteran doesn't necessarily guarantee you hero or patriotic status, and it doesn't guarantee you these things that we see in the movies. What I think opens the gap is the false realities that people have of what they believe a veteran is. I think that because we have more access to information, challenging what people believe to be true within veterans' lived experiences and veterans studies is completely different from the stories or movies that are being perceived as a static or universal veteran experience. Next question: How do your frameworks engage with veterans as co-creators of knowledge rather than as subjects of study, and what impact does this have on the research process?

CW: I follow Anna Tsing, Tim Ingold, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Donna Haraway, and Arjun Appadurai—just to name a few—whose anthropological research and critical interrogations of social scientific praxes have led to new ways of conceptualizing research and research reciprocators. From developing postcolonial narratives and methods to reimagining and researching the multi-dimensional/multi-species nature of social relations, their work has forced a recognition of the hegemonies at play today. In so doing, there have emerged writing strategies and research methodologies that have identified and challenged the myths of so-called "objectivity," forced reflections upon past/inherited research engagements and ethics, and restructured the researcher/reciprocator relationship so that the nature of "academic authority" is reflexively and rigorously co-dependent. For example, writing strategies are now at-play that (pro)actively account for (1) the researcher's positionality, (2) the relationship between researcher and research reciprocator, and (3) research designs that explicitly place researcher(s)/reciprocator(s) in a continuum of co-creation rather than a unilateral process of knowledge extraction that is common today outside of social anthropology. If these dynamics are not rendered clearly and explicitly, we should ask who is being silenced in the research and why ethical protocols and researcher reflexivity were engaged from the research design phase through to writing/publication strategies. By extension, these approaches emphasize the processes, performances, and networks of veteran relations rather than efforts to

capture or categorize a fixed veteran identity. This takes on increasing relevance as researchers realize the deepening interplays between veterans and, for example, companion animals, biotechnological integration, dismantling ableist frames of access and ability, class (versus culture) post-service positionality, alternative/natural therapies, and civic engagement understood in terms of social capital.

BG: The *Black veteranality* framework engages veterans as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere subjects through several key approaches. Privileging Veteran Narratives centers Black veterans' lived experiences and perspectives. The framework treats veterans as experts on their own experiences rather than objects of study. This approach also addresses power imbalances in traditional research paradigms through Trust Building, which engages veterans throughout the research process to build trust by aligning the research with participants' own experiences as veterans. This collaborative approach helps overcome veterans' documented lack of trust in research and healthcare systems. Moreover, Enhanced Data Quality allows veterans to contribute to the study design, feasibility, and data collection. They improve research instruments, interview guides, and recruitment methods, resulting in more authentic and nuanced findings. Their insider knowledge can identify flawed assumptions that academic researchers might miss. Finally, Community Accountability ensures that research benefits extend to the communities being studied by involving veterans in disseminating and translating research findings. This approach creates a more ethical research process that addresses community needs.

SW: Rather than assign veteran status to former military members, I ask them to define veteran for me in the context of our interaction. I treat "veteran" as a construct created by social interaction and argue it should be treated this way by researchers as well.

AK: Veterans are not just participants in my research. From the earliest stages of conceptual design through to data analysis and dissemination, I treat veterans as co-creators of knowledge. This commitment is ethical and epistemological. Veterans bring situated expertise, institutional memory, and a lived understanding of transition that cannot be accessed through traditional top-down research. In practice, this means veterans are involved in designing survey instruments, shaping focus group protocols, co-facilitating discussions, and interpreting findings. We conduct community validation workshops, ensuring that the language, constructs, and conclusions resonate with the populations we intend to serve. The impact of this co-production is profound. It yields richer, more grounded data, surfaces unexpected lines of inquiry, and builds trust with communities that

have historically been skeptical of institutional research. It also shifts the balance of power in research away from academic authority and toward shared meaning-making. Co-production doesn't just change the process; it changes the product, yielding frameworks and findings that are more accurate, more nuanced, and more useful for policy, practice, and everyday life.

KB: In what ways can rethinking traditional research methodologies lead to a more comprehensive understanding of veteran identity beyond service-related trauma and resilience?

BG: *Black veteranality* enables a more comprehensive understanding of veteran identity beyond service-related trauma. By Life-Course Perspective: the framework examines the entirety of the Black servicemember/veteran experience rather than focusing solely on the homecoming experience, recognizing that in-service experiences naturally influence how Black veterans navigate their return to civilian life. Narrative Coherence: Findings suggest a necessity for coherence in Black Post-9/11 veterans' life narratives—integrating servicemember and veteran experiences into a singular, rather than disconnected, narrative—to more holistically understand their experience. Social Construction Analysis: *Black veteranality* analyzes veteranality as a dynamic social construction that can be examined through a critical lens, moving beyond essentialist understandings of veteran identity to examine how such identities are produced and maintained. Psychological Complexity: By documenting the psychological duality Black Americans experience when negotiating racialized identity formations in military contexts, the framework provides a more nuanced understanding of the intrapsychic processes involved in veteran identity formation.

AK: Rethinking methodology means questioning our assumptions about what counts as evidence, who produces knowledge, and which stories are worth telling. Traditional methodologies in veterans studies have tended to rely heavily on surveys, clinical assessments, and institutional data, tools that are often reductive and unable to capture the complexity of veteran identity. When we broaden our methodological imagination, we begin to see veterans not as data points but as narrators, meaning-makers, and institutional navigators. For example, longitudinal ethnography can trace how a veteran's sense of self shifts across institutional encounters, from the Department of Veterans Affairs to local community colleges to nonprofit networks. Participatory action research allows veterans to set the research agenda and prioritize issues that matter to them, such as caregiving, spiritual reintegration, or intergenerational trauma. Narrative methods and life history interviews foreground the temporal and emotional

textures of transition in a way that quantitative tools cannot. That said, quantitative methodologies still have a role to play, especially when they are embedded within mixed method designs that allow for both scale and depth. By using relational network mapping, we can quantify the density and diversity of veterans' support systems. By developing new indices like STWI, we can measure social trust, institutional confidence, and relational capital. These innovations allow us to move beyond trauma checklists and resilience scores and toward a fuller, more human understanding of what it means to build a life after military service.

SW: Engaging in research that is framed by a deficit is limiting. I assume there is no experience unique to former military members. Traumatic brain injury, sexual assault, and life transitions are experienced by people who do not join the military. All the deficits investigated within the military/veteran population are human problems. What is unique about the U.S. culture for veterans is the resources available to former military members. Reframing veteran-related research to investigate the advantages this population has would be informative for policy and practice decision-making.

CW: I would briefly answer this question by suggesting that the term "veteran identity" is problematic in a manner that resists comprehensive social scientific engagement with veterans. Critically, then, should our primary optics of veterans in society be solely predicated upon or privileged "identity"? What of veteran subjectivities or veteran solidarities? If we encounter and position veterans by tracing lines of social, economic, and political solidarity or solicit and experience veteran subjectivities, we will not only move beyond the limiting tropes of trauma and resilience, but we will also holistically perceive the interlocking dimensions of veteran life-worlds. This is not to suggest a dismissal of identity *vis-à-vis* veteran-oriented research, but instead of privileging "identity," we examine the veteran relations and power dynamics that connect and shape veterans. Veteran subjectivity and solidarity are embodied and self-generated, thus allowing veterans themselves to be the genesis and guardians of knowledge production rather than passive, homogenized objects fitted into preformed social scientific analyses or reinforce research prejudices—from methodological nationalism to the myths of objectivity. An alternate answer to this question is to frame and conduct veteran-oriented research in a manner that either examines past veteran actions and engagements in societies or conceives of the potentialities of veteran contributions to other fields of study. For my research, this means looking to veterans as memory activists or collaborators in

countering extremism or potential contributors to strategic peacebuilding; not to mention how veterans potentially problematize peacebuilding or facilitate extremism. While this methodology of researching veterans via their actions instead of their identity, [it] goes hand-in-hand with fundamental understandings of veteran subjectivities and precarities, and it reworks how we consider both collaborative knowledge creation between veterans and other elements of society as well as how our collective futures are constructed and contested. In other words, veterans are not essentialized nor found in artificially constructed voids or vacuums.

KB: As we continue to expand the field of veterans studies, what do you see as the most critical next steps in advancing research frameworks that truly capture the complexities of veterans' experiences?

SW: Creating parameters for "veteran" and veterans studies is crucial in the development of the field because what differentiates veterans studies from literature, history, sociology, national security, etc.? This is especially important as we are interdisciplinary. It should be noted here that the definitions of these terms will not be static and will require constant consideration.

AK: The most critical next step for veterans studies is to institutionalize complexity. This means resisting one-size-fits-all frameworks and investing instead in pluralistic, flexible models that can adapt to the diverse realities of veterans' lives. It means developing interdisciplinary infrastructures that bring together policy scholars, ethnographers, mental health professionals, educators, and veterans themselves to co-create research agendas. We need new metrics that account for belonging, trust, and purpose, not just job placement and benefit utilization. We need longitudinal studies that follow veterans across time and space, capturing how identity is reconstituted in relation to shifting roles, responsibilities, and relationships. We need targeted frameworks for populations long ignored or underserved: women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans, veterans of color, survivors of military sexual trauma, caregivers, and those discharged under stigmatizing conditions. We also need to invest in training the next generation of veteran scholars, many of whom are veterans themselves, and ensure they are supported, published, and heard. Finally, we must rethink our dissemination practices. Research should return to the communities that made it possible, translated into policy recommendations, institutional practices, and accessible language. If we can build a field that is rigorous, inclusive, and accountable, we will not only advance veterans studies but we will also reimagine what transition, identity, and community can mean in a post-service world.

BG: To continue expanding the field of veterans studies and capture the complexities of veterans' experiences, several critical next steps are essential. First, expanded data collection; for example, partnerships between the Black Veterans Project and Yale Law School's Veterans Legal Services Clinic have compelled the Department of Veterans Affairs to release data revealing systemic disparities in disability benefits allocation. Similar data-driven approaches are needed across multiple domains. Second, Reparative Justice frameworks and collaboration with reparations research consortiums; for example, the African American Redress Network, which aims to bolster frameworks for advancing reparations for Black veterans. This work connects historical injustices to contemporary inequities. Third, Educational Integration and the development of Veterans Studies Certificate Programs; for example, UCI's School of Social Sciences can help analyze the diversity and complexity of veterans' experiences, past and present. Such programs should incorporate *Black veteranality* perspectives. Fourth, policy reform. *Black veteranality* research has informed federal policies, such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) study on veterans' benefits allocation and can continue to drive policy reforms addressing systemic inequities. Lastly, interdisciplinary collaboration allows future research to foster collaboration between veterans studies scholars and those in related fields such as disability studies, labor studies, and public health to create a more comprehensive understanding of veteran experiences. The *Black veteranality* framework represents a significant advancement in veterans studies, offering a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the complex intersections of race, military service, and American identity. Centering marginalized veterans' lived experiences and examining structural inequities creates space for more nuanced, comprehensive approaches to veteran research and policy.

CW: Recognition of the "American experience" and North Atlantic-focused narratives currently dominating the very foundations of "veterans studies" in the United States. Veteran-oriented research that only includes citizens of the United States is not a baseline for an entire field of study, nor should the American veteran experience be a go-to, sole, or primary component of comparative research. The lagging recognition of, and reflexivity with, this issue is deeply concerning, for it demonstrates a lack of awareness regarding how we speak of and with veterans in research. This becomes even more problematic as we bring [in]to veterans studies decolonial, postcolonial, feminist, and posthuman frames of engagement. Speaking of dominant narratives, we need to also critically consider how we see and speak of the concepts "transition" and

"reintegration." Aside from placing the emphasis of success or accomplishment—whatever that might mean—on the veteran, the concepts lend a false sense that there is a final state or a fixed conclusion that is identical for, and achievable by, each veteran in different societies or socio-economic classes. As with identity, this is not to suggest we dismiss the concepts, but we should call for more refined, rigorous usage so that we render quite clearly what is being meant, or hidden, when we say veteran transition and/or reintegration. Also, I would suggest a coordinated effort by the VSA [Veterans Studies Association] to reach out to and include veteran-oriented researchers from the Global South in virtual workshops, roundtables, and special journal editions. Finally, critical engagement by peers and peer reviewers with the phenomenon of "I am a veteran researching veterans; thus, my 'research' has an innate authority and/or authenticity." Being a veteran does not automatically equate to being a trained, ethical, rigorous researcher with [in] veterans studies, nor does veteran status replace research experience, ethics training, or coherent research strategies. This critique extends to what can be generously referred to as veteran "autoethnography" that grounds certain research seen in veterans studies today but is frequently lacking in theoretical/methodological considerations.

REFLECTION

Veterans studies is undergoing a profound methodological and theoretical transformation, moving beyond traditional clinical and policy-driven frameworks. This roundtable critically interrogated prevailing assumptions while introducing new conceptual and methodological tools to better capture the complexity of veterans' lived experiences. Key themes emerged across discussions: (a) the limitations of identity-based frameworks, (b) the necessity for epistemological and methodological innovation, (c) the value of co-production, with veterans positioned as co-creators of knowledge with epistemic authority rather than passive subjects, and (d) the imperative to decenter U.S.-centric narratives by decolonizing and globalizing veterans studies to embrace inclusive, transnational perspectives that reflect the diverse realities of veterans worldwide. The panelist emphasized the intersectional and dynamic nature of veteran identities, shaped by race, gender, class, sexuality, service era, and post-service trajectories. Moreover, advancing the field requires pluralistic approaches that incorporate mixed methods, critical ethnography, narrative inquiry, and relational frameworks. The conversation also

challenged assumptions about patriotism and transition, urging a critical reexamination of normative ideals and linear reintegration models.

CONCLUSION

As the field continues to grow, its future depends on inclusivity, nuance, and critical reflection—building a discourse that truly reflects the varied experiences of those who have served.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

No ethical approval was needed. The answers of the participants were lightly edited and, in some cases shortened, to avoid redundancy and maintain a semblance of symmetry and to cover a wide range of issues. This roundtable discussion took place via Zoom® on April 16, 2025.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

As the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Veterans Studies* and the moderator to this roundtable, I, (KB), disclose my dual role in the creation and publication of this work. This contribution did not undergo external peer review, consistent with the journal's editorial policy for roundtable discussions. I affirm that the editorial process for this submission adhered to the journal's standards for transparency and integrity, and no conflicts of interest influenced its publication.

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