Journal of Veterans Studies

Beyond "Thank You": Recommended Modalities for Meaningful Civilian-Military Discourse

Nicholas J. Mercurio, Major, USAF

Abstract

While numerous studies explore veteran and current military member reintegration challenges from a psychological or sociological perspective, few have examined the impact of discourse on the ability to locate a post-service or post-deployment identity within larger society. To that end, this research investigates veterans' and active duty military members' interpretations of the ritualistic expression of "thank you for your service," and other public acknowledgments and disclosures of their military service. This paper describes two studies, each employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies for data analysis. Verbatim transcriptions are interwoven throughout the corresponding results sections to support the qualitative findings. The multi-methodological application of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth personal interviews, revealed that "thank you for your service" was regarded by study populations as an injunctive norm that frequently elicited feelings of awkwardness, objectification, impostor syndrome, and even resentment. Further, study subjects expressed a general unwillingness to disclose their military service with anyone beyond their self-ascribed ingroup, demonstrating an underlying fear of being labeled as either a hero or victim. To explain their responses and their fears, this paper proposes the hyper-humility model, which describes the confluence of sense of duty, guilt, and/or shame from a perceived comparative lack of hardship or elevation to the standing of those perceived as more deserving, and acute manifestation of impostor syndrome. Lastly, this paper offers a path toward more meaningful civilian-military interaction, by broadening discourse to include more personalized, genuine dialogic exchanges.

Keywords: thank you for your service, veterans, reintegration, muted group theory, military issues, conversation ritual

Introduction

In *Tribe*, Sebastian Junger (2016) explores the mechanisms behind resiliency during and after traumatic experiences and the psychological benefits inherent in a sense of belonging. He notes that with war, greater degrees of public understanding, specifically knowledge of the mission and a basic acknowledgement of the challenges and sacrifices embodied therein, can ease the military member's transition home. The "shared public meaning" generated by this level of understanding, he asserts, provides a context for the losses and sacrifices servicemembers endure (p. 97). That these losses and sacrifices are acknowledged by the greater society, widens the community of shared suffering that serves as an emotional and psychological safety net. For a nation that has been at war for nearly two decades, understanding this shared public meaning as a critical element of successful transitions from military to civilian life is becoming an important reality for the United States' veteran population (Junger, 2016).

However, this public meaning may not be generated by the reflexive and formulaic expressions of gratitude such as "thank you for your service (TYFYS)," that many Americans now

feel obliged to offer military members and veterans. To some, these ritualistic expressions have devolved into cultural performances wherein the sentiment is sabotaged by the saying (see Sherman, 2018; Young, 2017). Additionally, shared public meaning may not be consistently achieved through activities like honoring veterans at sporting events. Junger (2016) explains that these token gestures not only lack obvious benefits, but may also be *harmful*.

In short, they may actually serve to widen the chasm between the less than one percent of the population that serves in the armed forces and the rest of society, casting in sharp relief the uniqueness of military service and the corresponding lack of shared understanding. Empirical research points to this phenomenon, as studies of veterans on college campuses reveal repeated experiences of alienation and frustration caused by a perceived lack of understanding amongst students and professors of veterans' unique experiences (see Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

While it would be easy to attribute this lack of understanding to society's justifiable inability to comprehend combat, the situation is not so clear-cut. It is first necessary to differentiate between returning from a war zone and simply transitioning from military service to civilian life, as each situation conveys its own unique challenges. Second, it is important to understand that not every veteran has actually experienced combat. While this might seem like good news, rates of depression and struggles with reintegration amongst veterans are not confined to those with combat experience—in fact, the number of veterans reporting issues with depression and reintegration is nearly five times the rate of those involved in actual combat (Junger, 2016). Clearly there are mechanisms at work beyond the residual effects of combat or post-traumatic stress.

According to social identity theory (see Reid & Giles, 2008; Tajfel, 1974), veterans may be inadequately prepared to transition from military life—and the social identity elements inherent to that ingroup—to the civilian world that previously was the outgroup. Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that, in this transition from military ingroup to a perceived civilian outgroup, the ritualistic acknowledgements of service may widen the gap between veterans and civilians, thus making reintegration more difficult and leading to feelings of alienation and separation. This leads me to ask the following questions:

RQ1: How do military members and veterans interpret the conversation ritual of "thank you for your service"?
RQ2: How do military members and veterans feel about public acknowledgements of military service?

Investigating these questions will examine why some veterans and military members experience a negative reaction when confronted with the comment TYFYS. The increased knowledge gleaned from exploring these questions could lead to an amelioration of the negative effects of said comments in the future. Specifically, a better understanding of the challenges faced by those military members serving today, and those who have transitioned to civilian life, could help therapists and counselors working with these populations. In a broader sense, the insights gained from attempting to answer these questions will be enlightening to the well-intentioned general public, and in some small way, could serve to cultivate the shared social meaning necessary to close the gap between the military and the society it serves.

Literature Review

A report by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families notes that 41 percent of veterans identified getting socialized to civilian life as a significant challenge, with a similar number reporting they were more confident as servicemembers than as civilians (Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015). Accordingly, there have been numerous studies documenting veterans' struggles with reintegration to society (see Demers, 2011, 2013; Elliott et al., 2011; Feczer & Bjorklund, 2009; Naphan & Elliott,

2015; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011; Sayer et al., 2010; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). These studies have generally been conducted from a psychological point of view, which is not surprising given that about one in five veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a rate nearly three times as high as the rest of the civilian population (RAND Corporation, 2008; US Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). In addition to struggles with medical conditions such as PTSD and clinical depression as a result of traumatic events, some veterans and military members also experience reintegration difficulties—involving identity negotiation at the individual, community, and societal levels—as well as acute alienation from peer groups, and finally, high rates of suicide (see Demers, 2011, 2013; Sayer et al., 2010).

While the preponderance of research regarding veterans' reintegration challenges is concerned with psychological issues such as clinical depression and PTSD, there are studies exploring the impact of more abstract concepts like the importance of community (see Demers, 2011) and role-exit, or the transition from the socially-constructed role of warrior to that of civilian (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Comparatively, there are fewer empirical studies related to the rhetorical challenges endemic to the veteran discursive environment. For the sake of clarity, the veteran discursive environment refers to how veterans communicate with one another, their friends and families, and with larger society, as well as how their friends, and families and social network communicate with, and about, them.

This a problematic omission because communication is constitutive; it is the essential element that transforms, for example, a mere office space and a collection of employees into an organization by allowing roles and processes to be defined (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Similarly, societal roles and interpersonal and intergroup relationships are constituted by communication. Even something as basic as a group label—such as veteran—carries with it significant socially-constructed meaning that is co-created by publics based on their perceived relationship with the group, the entirety of their past experiences, and their thoughts of the future (Botan, 2018). Accordingly, these socially-constructed meanings have pervasive influences on the daily lives of individuals who either identify with a particular group or are ascribed group membership by larger society. With these considerations in mind, it is clear the veteran discursive environment in the United States represents an important veterans' issue worthy of further study.

The combat fetish

Traumatic experiences are not rare. According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, 60 percent of all men and 50 percent of all women, irrespective of military service, will experience trauma in a lifetime (n.d.). Despite this, a common cultural performance is enacted when a civilian encounters a combat veteran: after learning about an aspect of their wartime experience, the civilian confides to the veteran, "I could never imagine what you've been through" (Klay, 2014). This saying, much like TYFYS, is an example of phatic communication—a rote expression that is more functional than meaningful—and that, according to Klay (2014), is indicative of a collective "failure of imagination." The idea that war is something understood only by the initiates of the rite of combat, views espoused by the likes of Sassoon after the Great War, Hemingway following World War II, and O'Brien post-Vietnam, has long been part of our collective consciousness (Klay, 2014). This "fetishizing" of combat trauma as some unknowable mystery, where veterans are the sole keepers of its incommunicable secrets, means that veterans are trapped: unable to feel truly understood by society, or even, by loved ones (Klay, 2014). Klay's (2014) historical and discourse analysis of the "fetishizing" of combat trauma leads me to ask the following additional question:

RQ3: To what extent, if at all, do military members and veterans feel willing and able to share

their military experiences, to include combat if applicable, with loved ones, friends, and/or strangers?
Muted group theory helps explain this discursive separation and isolation by offering a theoretical context that frames the mechanisms present when a minority group, in this case US veterans, is unable to articulate its unique experience to outsiders.

Muted group theory

As a critical feminist theory, muted group theory is founded on the premise that language is a function of culture and thus, in a hetero-normative masculine Western society, is inherently biased toward a male heterosexual experience (Ardener, 2005; Kramarae, 1980, 2005). In explaining the mechanisms at work, Kramarae (1980) describes how accepted language practices have been constructed primarily by heterosexual men to explicate their worldview. As a result, language, the constitutive building blocks of socially-constructed reality, is optimized for the heterosexual male experience. Consequently, there exists a systematic communicative constraining, or muting, of women. For clarity, muted group theory does not contend that women are perceived as perpetually voiceless; it does, however, stipulate that when voicing their own unique experience, women are required to do so with language not optimally-suited to the task. The result is a constraining or silencing effect on the female perspective and female models of reality.

Muted group theory treats gender as a social construct rather than a biological determinant and thus, its precepts are applicable to other groups that are marginalized by, subordinated to, or experience an asymmetrical relationship with larger society due to their socially-constructed identities (Ardener, 2005; Kramarae, 2005). It is this asymmetrical dynamic that opens the possibility of applying muted group theory to groups that experience an elevated social status, such as veterans. The abstraction necessary for this application is done with care, as the historical context of muted group theory—rooted as it is in structural violence and systemic injustice—demands that power and privilege are carefully considered. In order to faithfully apply muted group theory to a socially elevated group such as veterans of our most-recent conflicts, perceived to be afforded high degrees of both power and privilege by society, any subsequent analysis must maintain a nuanced, discursive focus, and take precautions to not conflate the elevated group's experience with those of the historically disadvantaged groups muted group theory was originally intended to liberate. It is also necessary to make a clear distinction between a muting effect, which requires a power imbalance, and communicative constraining, which does not.

In a theoretical examination of this issue, Young (2017) scrutinized the veteran experience through the lens of muted group theory, thereby revealing three assumptions:

1) the different experiences of veterans and civilians yield varying perspectives of reality;
2) the dominance of the civilian experience, which results in veterans struggling to articulate their experience; and 3) the requirement that veterans must translate their experiences into civilian language that is not optimized for articulating their experiences. As a result, veterans, like other traditionally muted groups, are subsequently limited and constrained; that is, they are sometimes unable to voice their collective and individual models of reality due to limitations inherent in the language of the majority—a language that is tailored for the civilian populace often characterized by a collective cone of silence regarding combat. To this point Zoli et al. (2015, p. 4), noted

> many veterans struggle with defining a coherent narrative about their wartime experiences. As student veteran, Sebastian Bae writes in *Foreign Policy*, "despite a decade of war, today's veterans remain faceless, marginalized from society—either heroes or villains—while too often, 'thank you for your service' represents the banality of society's understanding of the nation's wars and the men and women who fought them."

Consequently, veterans are denied participation in their own narrative, while those expressing thanks are simultaneously placed in a position of power, able to create their own subjective definition of the veteran, and often casting them in the hero archetype (Young, 2017).

Hero metanarratives

The notion of the hero in American society is problematic in that it alternately represents an unobtainable and transcendent object of desire residing in the realm of the divine, while also prescribing privileged masculine-coded qualities relegating any exemplar to the "masculine other" (Boon, 2005, p. 303). Despite the hero's practical, spiritual, and emotional benefits to a society—for example, the soothing effect of occupational heroes like first responders and the military after the trauma of 9/11—the archetype is harmful at the individual level of identity formation, as the idealized qualities of the hero character are "always and necessarily absent from individual men" (Boon, 2005, p. 305). While research on this subject is typically focused on the hero metanarrative and its impact on masculine identity creation, the injurious consequences of an inaccessible ideal apply to women as well, perhaps even more so, and serve to exacerbate the muting effect.

From Hoffman (2014): "The problem is that 'hero' refers to a character, a protagonist, something in fiction, not to a person, and using this word can hurt the very people it is meant to laud. While meant to create a sense of honor, it can also buy silence, prevent discourse and benefit those in power more than those navigating the new terrain of home after combat" (pg. 3). For example, in Zinger and Cohen's (2010) empirical study about the difficulties of transitioning from combat to the college classroom, a young student veteran stated, "I felt uncomfortable at times when they focused their attention on my military experiences" (p. 43), while several others pointed to not wanting to be, "put on a pedestal" (p. 44).

Instrumentalization

Further complicating the identity-creation process for veterans, is the manner by which veterans are instrumentalized—used as a tool—by larger society in policy debates, such as the partisan dialogue regarding whether funds should be allocated to veteran medical care instead of to receiving Syrian immigrants, or as a means to financial gain, such as how hiring veterans can yield tax breaks for businesses (Young, 2017). Veterans become an impersonal, faceless mascot when co-opted to agendas by sides in political arguments such the debate over Colin Kaepernick and his national anthem-kneeling protests against police brutality.

This commoditization of veterans as instruments for political or financial gain has a dehumanizing discursive effect. Young (2017), referencing Buber's (1958) study of the I-Thou theme, describes this commoditization as an "I-it" relationship that, when combined with the inherent one-way directionality of the communication, has a silencing effect on veterans. I-it as a form of discourse is objectifying; it involves a label, described previously in this paper as an abstract social construct, or an action, usurping the individual as the receiver in an exchange (Young, 2017). More personal, and thus less objectifying, would be an I-Thou modality.

Overall, the issue of instrumentalization, when combined with the previously discussed problems posed by the silencing effects inherent to veterans' and military members' elevated status and values-laden labels like "hero," creates a fundamentally challenging discursive environment. This environment, it would seem, is punctuated by reduction and dehumanization wherein the veteran is turned into a symbol or a signifier for use by others and robbed of his or her individuality. Further, this environment has the potential to negatively impact the men and women who have served, and undermine their reintegration prospects. To date, the empirical research that specifically investigates veteran issues while considering discourse (see Branham, 2016; Grohowski, 2014; McFarlane, 2015)

has touched on the perceptions and implications of TYFYS, but little work outside of Young's (2017) theoretical examination, and Sherman (2015, 2018), has focused directly on veterans' and military members' complicated relationship with the phrase.

TYFYS and gratitude norms

As demonstrated by the array of anecdotal evidence found in commentaries and opinion articles across a variety of publications (see Doubek, 2017; O'Donnell, 2017; Richtel, 2017; Truscott IV, 2017), TYFYS can be especially burdensome for a number of veterans and service members. As previously discussed, for some, the challenge lies in part with the ritualistic nature of the expression. Explaining speech rituals, Lüger (1983) states in the same way communication, specifically the notion of self-articulation, indicates a high degree of individual realization, the converse is also present. This "reduced individualization" (Lüger, 1983, p. 697) is manifested in speech acts that, amongst other characteristics, rely on prescriptive norms of expression or avoid the level of differentiation appropriate to the situation—these speech acts are referred to as rituals. A common example in Western society would be the "How are you? // Good, how are you?" exchange.

Consequently, either due to its pre-determined nature or lack of differentiation, some scholars regard TYFYS as a ritualistic expression and classify it as a "thank you" performance (see Sherman, 2015, 2018; Young, 2017). In fact, Young (2017) characterizes the interaction as reflexive, collective gratitude that results in the objectification of the veteran—the idea that veterans reflexively merit thanks is a monologic, impersonal form of discourse lacking intersubjectivity that ultimately strips veterans of their agency when it comes to expressing their individual narratives. Concurrently, those conveying gratitude are afforded the opportunity—through the resulting power imbalance—to ascribe their own subjective narrative to the veteran (Young, 2017).

Sherman (2018) also notes the "thank you" ritual is particularly fraught, that the inherent lack of emotion in ritualized communication reinforces perceptions of inequality and entitlement, and can ultimately engender distance, misunderstanding, and resentment. Here, she is specifically referencing an "unspoken emotional subterrain [that] underlie[s] a perfunctory 'Thank you,'" wherein both sides feel that a deeper conversation is warranted—"but not here and not now" (p. 36). However, Sherman (2018) contends that when saying TYFYS, civilians, many bearing psychological scarring from the Vietnam era when service members were often vilified, are simultaneously addressing gratitude to the service member while also modeling behavior for a perceived audience. Borrowing from early social referencing literature, Sherman (2018) characterizes TYFYS as both a public enactment and a recommendation of a norm. Further, she expands her defense with the idea that expressed gratitude becomes lived gratitude; "we nurse our hearts from the outside in" (p. 37).

For the purpose of investigating TYFYS, it is important to separate the potentially negative consequences of ritualized gratitude from the positive motivations underlying its use. Accordingly, Lüger (1983) emphasizes that speech rituals are indicative of a communication modality within a specific context and thus cannot simply be explained as "verbal manifestations of deficient action" (p. 708). Where TYFYS is concerned, while it can be characterized as token acceptance of the moral responsibility for war, or abdication to the guilt of not serving, it may also be demonstrative of normative, prosocial behavior (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008; Sherman, 2018). To unpack this notion, it must first be understood that gratitude is a prosocial emotion that, it is theorized, evolved to facilitate reciprocal altruism and, more speculatively, enable upstream reciprocity (McCullough et al., 2008).

Second, Eibach, Wilmot, and Libby (2015) argue for a system-justifying function of gratitude norms. In this instance, the performance of ritualistic gratitude plays a legitimizing function for particular institutions, most especially, the military (Eibach, Wilmot and Libby, 2015). Here, citizens'

internalization of display norms results in the perceived benefits of sociopolitical institutions like the military being greeted with patriotic, system-supporting attitudes, and expressions of gratitude such as TYFYS. In this context, TYFYS has little to do with the individual and instead becomes a political statement of support for, or acknowledgment of the benefits derived from, an institution and its role within the larger system. It would appear, then, that gratitude is inextricably linked with social norms.

Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, and Desteno (2012), espouse a functional approach to gratitude, citing its ability to serve as a "moral barometer" (p. 4) during initial interaction, encouraging the continuance of prosocial behaviors. During interactions between strangers, more salient than reciprocity is the perception of gratitude as demonstrative of commitment (Bartlett et al., 2012). Further, Bartlett et al. (2012), point to accumulating evidence that gratitude is linked to increased relationship satisfaction. If this is the case in a laboratory setting with an initial interaction between two civilians, why does it seemingly not hold true during authentic, gratitude-invoking interactions between civilians and veterans or military members? Offering possible insight into the genesis of this disconnect is Weick's Model of Organizing (WMO).

Weick's Model of Organizing

Coalesced from three underlying theories—systems theory, information theory, and sociocultural evolutionary theory—WMO is often used to inform effective communication practices in complex situations (Kreps, 2014). Particularly germane to this study is the concept of information equivocality and the related principle of requisite variety. Information equivocality refers to the level of uncertainty, complexity, and unpredictability in a situation (Kreps, 2014). The principle of requisite variety stipulates that highly equivocal situations should be met with highly equivocal responses (Kreps, 2014). What Lüger (1983) describes as the appropriate level of differentiation referenced in the preceding is tantamount to the principle of requisite variety. Where TYFYS is concerned, the phrase is being communicated in response to a highly equivocal situation—a veteran or servicemember's military, and potentially combat, service—and thus a conventional, norm-based comment like TYFYS may be insufficient—a violation of requisite variety. Essentially, WMO suggests that TYFYS treats an uncertain situation as if it is completely certain (i.e., the veteran will/should be honored by TYFYS). This, in turn, engenders a mismatch between intentions and outcomes. Ultimately, whether viewing TYFYS through the lens muted group theory or WMO, the empirical research and anecdotal evidence points to the need to move beyond TYFYS. However, it remains unclear what the discursive destination should be. To explore potential discursive destinations, a final research question is investigated:

RQ4: Which civilian comments about military service are most acceptable and least acceptable to military members?

To answer these four research questions, the researcher employed an iterative approach involving two asynchronous multi-methodological studies. The first study explored RQs 1-3, and its preliminary findings were used to refine the research instrument utilized in Study II, to investigate RQ4 and validate initial findings.

Study I

Method

For study I, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held featuring four participants each. One focus group was composed of active duty military members recruited using a convenience sampling frame from the researcher's colleagues and acquaintances who responded to an email solicitation to participate in a FGD. The second focus group was composed of veterans recruited through a volunteer sampling frame from the local university office of military services. The active

duty FGD had four participants: two females and two males, all in their 20s and 30s and all officers. The veteran FGD also had four participants: three male and one female; all the males were in their 20s or 30s and the female was in her 60s. This IRB-approved research required informed consent be obtained from each participant before beginning the FGDs.

Each focus group involved an approximately 45-minute confidential discussion (see Appendix A for interview protocol) moderated by the researcher that was audio recorded via smartphone in order to facilitate transcription. Standard transcripts (i.e., not verbatim, omitting filler words like "um," "uhh," and "like") were produced by TranscriptionPanda, a fee-based audio and video transcription service. The researcher reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to correct any inaccuracies. All participants were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher to preserve confidentiality. The FGD transcripts, totaling 30 pages and slightly more than 14,000 words, were then analyzed using NVivo, a computer-based qualitative analysis tool, through a conventional content analysis where coding references, categories and themes are derived directly from the text data (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

First, analysis consisted of initial, open coding. Re-analysis of transcript data was then accomplished, with initial codes organized into similar groupings of coded categories, and finally, coded thematically to produce qualitative results addressing the above three research questions. This methodology allowed the researcher to arrive at preliminary findings that, while not generalizable to the entire US veteran or active duty military population, offer deep-seated insight into the sample population by providing rich and descriptive data. A subsequent quantitative analysis was performed, which calculated descriptive statistics for the total coded references in Nvivo (N=225), as well as percentages of aggregate coded references (the sum of Nvivo nodes and corresponding child nodes) for each theme identified. Additionally, percentages were calculated for the most prominent individual coded references.

Results

Veteran Focus Group			
Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Branch of Service**
Michael	Male	34	Marines
Mary	Female	65	Air Force
Ryan	Male	25	Marines
Steven	Male	31	Marines
Active Duty Focus Group			
Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Branch of Service**
David	Male	30	Air Force
Rebecca	Female	35	Air Force
Richard	Male	36	Air Force
Susan	Female	28	Air Force

Descriptive Statistics (Code references)		
N=225	Mean=5	Std Dev=3.35

For clarity, the research questions that pertain to this study are restated below:

RQ1: How do military members and veterans interpret the conversation ritual of "thank you for your service"?

RQ2: How do military members and veterans feel about public acknowledgements of military service?

RQ3: To what extent, if at all, do military members and veterans feel willing and able to share their military experiences, to include combat if applicable, with loved ones, friends, and/or strangers?

The results section is organized thematically with each of the first three themes discussed corresponding in order to the research questions. The first theme, "the thin 'thank you,'" describes how the study population viewed TYFYS as routinized communication more often than not lacking in substance.

Relating to both RQ1 and RQ2, the "lack of shared social meaning" theme, demonstrates how participants regarded ritualized gratitude and public acknowledgments of service as being driven by misguided assumptions on behalf of civilians that often result in feelings of exploitation and instrumentalization. Finally, the "controlled disclosure" theme reveals that the participants generally preferred to control the time, place, and manner in which they divulged details of their service, espousing a preference for interactions with other ingroup members or when the directional orientation of the engagement was in their favor (e.g., they chose to disclose their military affiliation/experiences). The remaining themes, "beyond 'thank you'" and "identity threat," emerged from the data and serve as a recommendation for producing a more effective military-civilian interaction, and describe a consistent concern as a consequence of the prototypical military-civilian interaction, respectively.

The thin "thank you" (37 aggregate coded references—16.4%)

In examining veteran's and military member's interpretations of "thank you for your service," a consistent theme emerges. The name of the theme is taken directly from Sherman (2018). The concept of a thin "thank you" is coalesced from participant perceptions that civilians regard TYFYS as an injunctive norm (12 references/5% of coded references)—e.g., *Susan: One, they feel like it's a social norm to approach or to say something, so they're fulfilling that social norm*). This is seen when both veteran and active duty FGD participants identified TYFYS as an obligation, for example:

Ryan: I just think it is an awkward... Thank you for your service is an obligatory...They have to say that, but I don't...So, I think it definitely plays into just doing this thing that's socially accepted.

...

Susan: It's just the thing to say. It's like a little kid who doesn't know like, 'Oh, I know I'm supposed to say thank you.'

Here we see in praxis what Sherman (2018) contends is the expression of gratitude to the servicemember in parallel with modeling behavior for a perceived audience. The preceding results offer preliminary support to her assertions, although they offer no insight into civilians' motivations.

Continuing with interpretations of TYFYS, participants also noted the typical, ritualistic nature of the phrase. For example, Mary stated, "When you find out somebody's been in the military you say, 'Thank you for your service.'" As Michael put it, "They normally say something along the lines of, 'Thank you for your service. Where did you serve, and how long were you in?'...Pretty typical." One respondent, Ryan, went so far as to suggest TYFYS is the preprogrammed response to a disclosure of military service, indicating it is perhaps perceived as phatic communication, serving a more social than informational role in dyadic communication between a civilian and a current or

former military member (e.g., *Ryan: Yeah, 'Thank you for your service,' is the typical...It's like thank you or you're welcome. It's just easy to...It's the casual thing to say after somebody that you know is, like, 'Oh, yeah, I was in the military'*).

With regard to how they felt about this ritualistic acknowledgement, the two groups were somewhat split. In the veteran group, participants expressed some feelings of resentment:

> *Michael:* I remember getting out in 2006, and I was very angry. And it was just kind of, same thing, 'You are just saying it because it's the popular thing to do. What are you thanking me for?'
>
> ...
>
> *Steven:* You don't know what I did, so what are you thanking me for?

However, interestingly, these expressions of understated resentment only appeared in the veterans' group. Participants in the active duty group were more open to the civilian perspective. When discussing their interpretations of the phrase—after acknowledging its socially prescribed use—their answers revealed a level of sensitivity and empathy regarding difficulties civilians may experience in enacting the cultural performance:

> *David:* I appreciate that the individual took the time, and talked to a stranger, made themselves...possibly, took themselves out of their private space, so I appreciate that. But it's kind of something that you say because you don't really understand what's going on, but you wanna sort of help.
>
> ...
>
> *Susan:* ... it's like they are taking a little bit of extra time to do something that's a little bit uncomfortable for everybody, like we both don't really like it.

Context for the quotes above can again be found in Sherman (2018), and serve to exemplify the previously discussed unspoken emotional subterrain that underscores the need for more substantive engagement.

Lack of shared social meaning (33 aggregate coded references—14.6%)

The second theme revealed by the textual data, which bridges the gap between the first research question exploring interpretation of TYFYS and the second, which delves into feelings related to public acknowledgment of military service, is "lack of shared social meaning." This theme was punctuated by coded references wherein participants describe civilian attitudes informed by assumptions and not actual knowledge or experience (e.g., *Steven: And, I guess, saying, "Thank you for your service," is kind of assuming that I want to be thanked, that I think I did something that was worth being thanked for*). Lack of shared social meaning, which Junger (2016) identified as a significant obstacle in the civilian-military discourse, as discussed in the introduction of this paper, is exemplified by the following quote:

> *Michael:* The only people that are sacrificing, truly, are the military members. And they're the ones that are deployed multiple times. They're the ones being called back to service. They're the ones that are losing folks, especially when you look at...I mean, even if you just go by the numbers, it's a very small percentage of people that are carrying on this agenda. So, you feel extremely alienated, especially when you try to make reason of your service to the cause.

A facet of this theme is manifested in perceptions amongst FGD participants that certain patriotic displays appear "forced" while others viewed it as outright "commercial exploitation." This characterization supports the notion of instrumentalization (see Young, 2017) discussed earlier. It may also derived from coded references such as "shrinking community" and "avoid the uninitiated."

Regarding a shrinking community, participants expressed this idea in a literal sense, noting how a pseudo-warrior caste seems to be evolving as military service becomes a family enterprise (e.g.,

Ryan: It's like a praetorian guard of just the same families just recycling military service). Participants approached the concept more abstractly, relating an acute sense that their pool of candidates for open and honest interaction was limited as a consequence of their military experience.

> *David:* Additionally, you are seeing and experiencing things every day that are disturbing to many people and makes you numb to things that people aren't numb to, and you accept the reality that people aren't willing to accept. And so, you see the world in a very different way than the society around you. And so, generally, you end up just kind of being friends with the people that are like you, and that's the easy way to go.
>
> ...
>
> *Richard:* ... at the end of the day, they're like, 'Oh, yeah telling war stories' like I'll say, 'I couldn't tell you some stuff, and then, even if I did, you wouldn't understand it. You weren't there.' That's even within the group.

The excerpts above also belie an implied or expressed desire to "avoid the uninitiated" (11 references, 5% of coded references), which is supported by multiple instances of participants expressing levels of comfort discussing their service only with another veteran or military member:

> *Ryan:* For sure, I like to talk about my military service with other veterans.
>
> ...
>
> *David:* ... pretty much they have to also be military or somehow earn my trust in a way that I know that they're not gonna be like, "Oh, another baby killer. That's good. Yeah. You did drones. That's good."

Controlled disclosure (10 aggregate coded references — 4%)

As seen in the preceding quote, avoiding uninitiated code is also relevant—in combination with the additional theme of "controlled disclosure"—when addressing the third research question concerning willingness to divulge military affiliations and experiences. Both veterans and active military members expressed preferences for discussing their service with other ingroup members. The idea of controlled disclosure has its genesis in the few instances where participants expressed enjoyment in discussing or revealing their military service to outgroup members. These instances were characterized by their inducement of shock or surprise in the civilian. For example:

> *Rebecca:* Most comfortable, I have the most fun, surprising people. So, it's like going to the place I grew up and my dad is the, or he was the commander of the American Legion post there. And, people just think I'm there because he's my dad and he's the commander, and then my dad points out the picture on the board because he has all of his active duty service members on the board there. And then, he goes, "That's my daughter." And then, they're like, "Oh. Oh, okay." So, that's kind of fun.

The data reveals a juxtaposition of enjoyment derived from countering stereotypes by disclosing military service (e.g., *Susan: It's so fun because they don't expect it especially from a bubbly blonde. They're like, "Come on. You can do pushups?"*), with the need to be guarded, worrying if the civilian is safe and can be trusted with the disclosure (e.g., *Rebecca: Those who are safe to know, yes. It depends on the circumstance*).

Enjoyment through shock or surprise is predicated on a power imbalance; one party has the ability to surprise while the other is relegated to being surprised. It is this power distance that drives the idea of a controlled disclosure as the military member's preferred modality for civilian interaction—the military member is not on the receiving end, being thanked for their service. Instead, they are directing the course of the engagement and choosing to disclose their service. In doing so, they are also mediating whatever role or stereotype the other member(s) of the interaction had ascribed. Ultimately, the orientation of the power in the interaction defines the military member's

narrative. In uncontrolled disclosures, i.e., a military member in uniform is approached by a stranger, that lack of power can lead to the silencing effects:

> *David*: And, usually, there is an awkward pause and then [the civilian says] "Oh, well, you know, thank you for doing what you do," or something. And then, it just awkwardly ends.

Beyond "thank you" (24 aggregate coded references—11%)

Not every aspect of the discussion pertaining to expressions of gratitude and other public acknowledgments of military service was negative, however. Participants from both FGDs identified ideal engagement characteristics that informed an additional theme of "beyond 'thank you,'" exemplified by the following excerpts from the veteran FGD:

> *Steven:* The one time I do appreciate talking about military service is, oddly enough, when somebody asks me questions about it and is genuinely interested and doesn't make assumptions about what I did. I'm definitely much more willing to talk about it.
>
> ...
>
> *Steven:* I think it is because of that because they're not making assumptions and allowing me to define, in a sense, who that is as opposed to whatever is in their minds already.
>
> *Michael:* Yeah, it's like they're actually coming at it with a clean slate saying, 'I actually want to learn or hear your perspective.'

Similarly, in the active duty FGD, Rebecca said: "An ideal exchange would just be curiosity on their behalf...really trying to ask questions about how and why we do what we do." David added: "Well, I think it's being treated as an individual, not a representation."

The sentiment behind these passages is that the FGD participants do not necessarily subscribe to the prevailing cultural notion described by Klay (2014), that military experience is unknowable only to those who have it. If there is a sense that the engagement has the potential to extend beyond ritualized gratitude expression to genuine, interpersonal interaction, then participants would be willing to share their experiences. Furthermore, the respondents across both FGDs expressed a desire to have deeper, more meaningful conversations with civilians.

Identity threat (121 aggregate coded references—53.7%)

Finally, analysis of the data revealed "identity threat" as a dense and overarching theme. Evidence of this theme is located in coded references to stereotyping (e.g., *Michael: And so, it's one of those things where I'd rather not be looked at...I'd rather be looked at as a person first and not just a blank stereotype of a military member*); depersonalization (e.g., *David: Well, I think it's being treated as an individual, not a representation*); and the perceived ramifications of the hero archetype:

> *Susan:* It is so destructive and we do it because the men and sometimes women who are in Congress who send us to war, they don't have to pay the cost, and I saw the cost and it is terrible, and those are the people who are heroes. And, so I, when I hear that, I've met them. I wrote about them. I lived with them. They are broken because of what this country demands from them and we put them on this pedestal, and it makes them all the more lonely [sic] because they don't have anyone to connect with because now they're this hero and they can't be broken.
>
> *David:* They have to be the avatar of themselves.

These codes can also be categorized as narrative usurpation (28 aggregate references—12%) owing to the fact that the FGD participants are describing scenarios in which they are precluded from conveying their own unique model of reality to a civilian because that civilian has already come to a socially concocted or heuristically derived conclusion.

The reporting of this phenomenon in the textual data serves as additional supporting evidence for applicability of muted group theory in this context (see Young, 2017). The concept of narrative usurpation is most clearly underscored in the following quote from *David:* "I don't think they [civilians] think about you as an individual...you're just...you are what the military is to them."

A key component of the identity threat theme revealed in the FGDs was the pervasive demonstration of, or direct and indirect reference to "impostor syndrome" (20 references—9%), as seen in the following excerpts:

David: It's that it's uncomfortable to have somebody tell you, "Thank you for your service," when I'm just doing an office-style job here and there are people who are doing an actual job that maybe I just happened to be a representative of them and I'm not them, therefore, it's uncomfortable.

...

Susan: But there is an aspect where you feel uncomfortable because it's just you don't feel, or actually I don't feel worthy of their adoration in some ways.

...

Susan: Yeah. Now, it's truly impostor syndrome.

Rebecca: I feel like I'm wearing a Halloween costume sometimes.

...

Mary: I usually get, "Oh, really?" And then they say, "Thank you for your service." I get somewhat embarrassed because I feel like I was an older veteran. I did not serve in any combat capacity, so I'm just not sure how to respond.

Two additional, significant categories that emerged in data analysis: One, "hyper-humility," (51 aggregate references—23%), is a significant finding that perhaps can be seen as a mediator of participants' reported responses when encountering the identity threat theme. The other is "label avoidance" (27 references—12%). The label avoidance concept and hyper-humility, explicated through a proposed model, are discussed below.

Discussion

Theoretical examination of the discursive environment veterans and military members encounter, both during their military careers and after separating or retiring, reveals a multitude of challenges. First, and seemingly paradoxically, veterans and military members can be harmed by their elevated status. The seemingly benign calls to "support the troops," and reflexive gratitude in conversation rituals like "thank you for your service" that, as previously mentioned, serve to widen the gap between the military and the rest of society, are a form of unintentional symbolic violence.

According to muted group theory, this symbolic violence results primarily from veterans' asymmetrical relationship to the larger society and the limitations inherent in how the majority talks about military service. Specifically, this relationship, when combined with monologic, or one-way, discourse in the language of the majority—language that is not optimized to communicate the unique veteran experience—results in a communicative constraining effect wherein some veterans are excluded from participating in the creation of their own narratives. Instead, a pre-packaged narrative is forced upon them.

It is important to note here, however, that there is not a muting effect as it is traditionally understood within the context of muted group theory. The power and privilege bestowed on current and former military members (with the exception of the Vietnam-era, which is an outlier in terms of societal-veteran relations) by the majority of society, precludes them from experiencing muting in the same fashion as marginalized or subordinate groups. Instead, veterans and military members such as the FGD participants, experience a self-imposed muting effect when they retreat inward to insular,

homogenous communities of shared experience and suffering that creates a symbolic "bunker," wherein initiates of the rite of combat are safe to share their stories.

As noted above, participants in both groups reported instances when they felt they were regarded by civilians not as unique individuals, but as abstract constructions or representations of a military archetype informed more by portrayals in the media than interpersonal interaction. Participants in both groups communicated that not everyone feels the same way about their service and often the power and privilege conferred upon them by a (mostly) benignly supportive society can result in discomfort and awkwardness. A by-product of this elevated status is this ostensible and constantly looming pedestal for veterans and military members that can constrain the expression of their experiences, restrict their agency, and erode their individuality.

Additional stressors are manifested by the hero metanarrative, which places veterans and military members under the yoke of the inherently unobtainable and hyper-masculine qualities of the hero archetype. Participants in both FGDs expressed concern regarding the implications of the hero metanarrative, both in terms of their ability to express their individual narratives when directly confronted by the hero archetype in a discreet communication engagement and also the long-term consequences of being adjacent to what some perceived as the dilution of its significance through overuse and trivializing. From David:

> I think that the word hero should be reserved for very particular acts and it means something, at least to me and to most people in the military, it means a very specific thing that I don't feel like it means, others are like, "Oh, Oprah is my hero." No, that's a very particular thing to me.

Lastly, civilian-military discourse is typified by pervasive objectification and instrumentalization; veterans and military members are regularly co-opted into policy debates and commoditized for financial gain (Young, 2017). The result, is a discursive environment where some veterans and military members routinely feel unable to participate, or are both actively and passively prevented from participating, in their own narrative. This lack of participation can lead to cascading negative effects (given communication's constitutive properties) in identity creation and/or maintenance. To buttress against those potential negative effects, FGD participants reported feelings, perceptions, and behaviors which, through subsequent analysis, produced two potentially new concepts related to communications research of veterans and military members. These concepts, the aforementioned hyper-humility and label avoidance, are explicated in the following section.

Victim/hero trope avoidance concept

When the veterans and military members who participated in these FGDs described being recognized for their service—either formally with awards, or informally with normative expressions of gratitude—they were sensitive to the implied connotations of that recognition and engaged in outward behaviors or cognitive rationalizations to avoid being labeled a "victim" or "hero." To avoid the victim label, they emphasized their volunteer status (e.g., *Michael: Plus, I volunteered, it's not like I was drafted or anything*), and willing performance of a duty, for which they received financial compensation and often enjoyed (e.g., *Richard: I don't deserve to be kind of thanked...because actually I enjoy my job. I like what I do. It's a good living so I don't think I need to be thanked for any of this*). According to participants, one cannot be a victim if they signed up for, benefit from, and enjoy whatever role or experience civilians perceive as victimizing or pity-inducing.

To avoid the hero label, the FGD participants outwardly and inwardly attempted to diminish their contributions in uniform, while simultaneously engaging in a subtle level of self-derogation evoking impostor syndrome, all the while emphasizing the fact that they were just doing their duty. The intersection of this sense of duty, impostor syndrome, and the implicit guilt/shame that accompanies being elevated and compared to those who are perceived as more

deserving produces the hyper-humility effect shown in Fig. 1 (below). The hyper-humility model provides a possible explanation for the anecdotal evidence that usually appears during the lead-up to Veterans Day in the editorial sections of newspapers with commentaries penned by combat veterans who ask not to be thanked for their service.
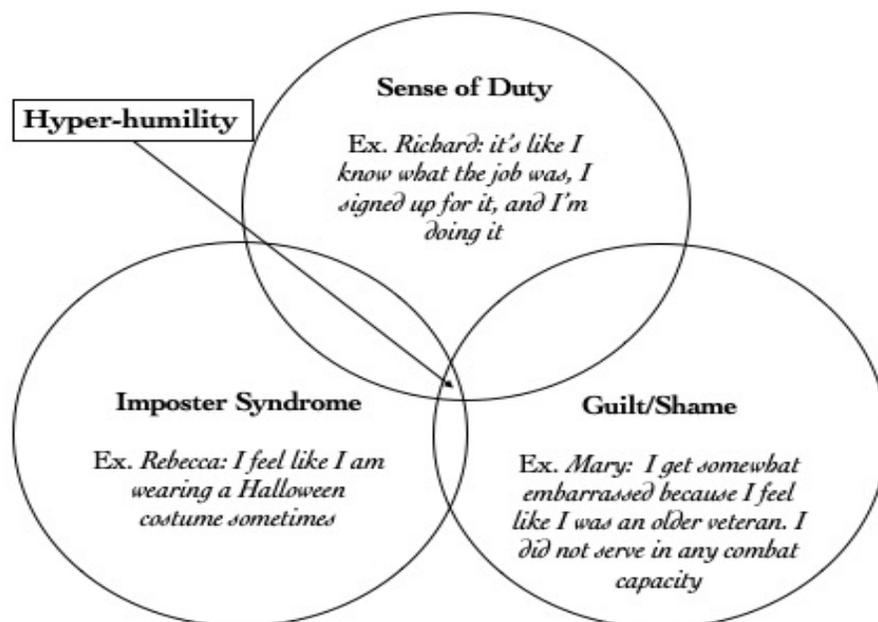

Fig. 1. Hyper Humility Model

Invariably, there will be a passage wherein the veteran refers to some "other" who is more deserving, despite the fact that their own record of performance may be extraordinary. Institutional values of service and sacrifice, organizational traditions and mythology, and individual struggles with self-actualizing the military experience, make negotiating gratitude and hero-labeling particularly problematic. Even for those who served a single enlistment and performed their assigned duties, there is a cognitive dissonance that results from the experience of taking an oath to support and defend the U.S. Constitution and the cultural baggage that accompanies it—veterans can negotiate the weight of that baggage through expressions of hyper-humility. The unfortunate consequence of the hyper-humility effect is that it often leads to silencing and a lack of participation in one's own narrative construction.

Circling back to the research questions, the results imply that for the study population, TYFYS and other ritualized acknowledgments of military service are generally not perceived in the same manner as they were intended. Even when not greeted with resentment, rote expressions such as TYFYS are met with similarly programmed responses such as "Thank you for your support"—a clear indication of a communicative constraining effect. The reason for this constraint may lie in the fact that such routinized exchanges lack the appropriate level of equivocality a discussion of military service would seem to require. In addition to the subtext of concerns related to the requisite variety in the civilian interactions they experienced—as evidenced by the identity threat theme—the participants espoused a nearly universal discomfort with candor when describing their military experiences to outgroup members. This discomfort was ultimately connected to whether or not the participant believed they could express their personal narrative in a genuine, dialogic exchange, unencumbered by stereotypes and pop-culture-based assumptions.

Limitations

Limitations of study I are primarily focused on the methodology, as FGD are often limited by groupthink, dominant members intimidating more passive members and colonizing the conversation, and dependence on small sample sizes. While FGD limitations are universal, other sampling limitations are unique to this study. Specifically, the sampling frames employed did not afford the opportunity to recruit a large and varied population of military members and veterans. Consequently, there are problems with the sample related to both its small size and relatively homogenous composition (in terms of rank consistency for each FGD, with the veteran group composed solely of enlisted members and the active duty group featuring only officers). Additionally, there were instances of dominant members in each FGD—Michael in the veteran group and Susan in the active duty group—who occasionally monopolized the conversation. Conversely, each group also had passive members (Steven in the veteran group and Richard in the active duty group), whose participation occasionally had to be coaxed while their resulting responses were often terse. Lastly, the findings are not generalizable to the larger veteran and active duty military populations. They are, however, a valid measure for describing the unique experiences of the subjects who were studied and for generating insights that could potentially be of value to other researchers studying the discursive environment experienced by military members and veterans.

Implications

Additional research into the implications of the discourse between military service and society is warranted. As demonstrated by study I, providing a way forward is complicated by the highly equivocal nature of the problem. On the one hand, the veteran and active duty participants alike professed a desire for deeper conversations focused on cultivating understanding. Seemingly paradoxically, however, their perceptions of the uniqueness of military service compelled participants to routinely avoid the uninitiated and seek out increasingly smaller communities of shared suffering and the corresponding comfort of ingroup homogeneity. According to the participants, in instances when a civilian shows genuine interest and is nuanced enough to avoid the thin "thank you" and impertinent questions, they engender trust and establish a more personal connection with the veteran or service member—as an individual, not as a stereotype, representative, or symbol.

Based on these preliminary results, the engagement characteristics presented during the discussion of "Beyond 'Thank You'" should act as a guide for veterans, military members and civilians alike. These characteristics are punctuated by genuine curiosity on behalf of civilians which leads to the possibility of a dialogic exchange. According to the FGD participants, the best indicator of genuine curiosity is conveyed by asking questions inquiring after the military member's own unique experiences. In this way the civilian is demonstrating interest in the individual, not what they represent. Simultaneously, they are signaling their intention to engage in an interpersonal interaction as opposed to modeling a social norm (by merely saying TYFYS). Potentially by modeling these engagement characteristics, those who have served will be presented with an opportunity to educate their civilian counterparts and correspondingly close the military-civilian divide. Concurrently, civilians will be afforded the opportunity for genuine feelings of gratitude to penetrate the challenges posed by the discursive environment—the end result could be an engagement where the sentiment will not be sabotaged by the saying. Therefore, additional research that investigates alternative modalities of engagement between civilians and the members of the military in search of best practices should be pursued. Future research should employ a multimethodological approach in order to mitigate the limitations identified above. Specifically, in addition to the in-depth interview form of qualitative investigation utilized in Study II (below), which addresses the limitations imposed by FGDs, future research should include a quantitative study of a representative veteran and active

military sample that investigates attitudes toward reflexive gratitude statements and perceived self-efficacy in personal narrative explication. Such a study would not be subject to the same limitations regarding external validity inherent in the research conducted, as well as the additional research proposed above.

Study II

Method

Utilizing the study I as a springboard, this participative evaluative research study attempted to validate the initial findings of Study I, while also investigating civilian-military interaction modalities from a military and veteran perspective in response to RQ4. As mentioned above, Study I findings were used to refine in-depth interview research instrument for Study II, and were also used to produce a code book (see Appendix B) for text data analysis. For this study, in-depth personal interviews were used to gather data about veterans' and service members' experiences with, and preferences concerning TYFYS, and other civilian comments regarding military service. By employing an in-depth personal interview strategy that utilized a semi-standardized protocol (see Appendix C), the researcher was able to probe for deeper answers and acquire rich, descriptive and relevant data that may not otherwise be gleaned through focus group discussions, content analysis, or questionnaires.

To structure these interviews, the researcher employed a critical incident technique (CIT) (see Kreps, 2017) to ascertain participants' most positive and negative experiences with a member (or members) of the public commenting on, or acknowledging, their military service. CIT is an evidence-based evaluative technique that can be valuable in accessing most and least preferred messages from the public, as well as suggestions for preferred ways to communicate with service members—both of which are particularly germane to this study. CIT is designed to assess strengths and weaknesses using a participant approach; the data are authentic examples from the population being studied. Therefore, CIT is appropriate for studying TYFYS as public comments on military service—especially the ritualized expressions of gratitude—have been highlighted empirically and anecdotally as fraught for some veterans and service members.

The subjects of the in-depth, confidential, one-on-one interviews, were a varied population of US active-duty military members and veterans recruited through purposive snowball sampling. This sampling method afforded the opportunity to recruit a variety of subjects across the following demographic categories: male/female; combat experience/no combat experience; officer/enlisted; active duty/veteran, and multiple service branches. Recruitment was conducted on a rolling basis and in parallel with subject interviews. The only recruitment criterion was that the participant must have served during the current conflicts (within the previous 17 years). This stipulation is to ensure the data are focused on service member attitudes and perspectives regarding TYFYS within the context of present-day society. Incorporating veterans from the Vietnam era when, as discussed earlier, civilian reactions toward military service were decidedly less positive on average, would have inhibited the likelihood that using CIT would point to a better modality for military and civilian interaction.

This IRB-approved research obtaining required informed consent from each participant before beginning interviews. As noted above, the one-on-one confidential interviews were conducted on a rolling basis and employed a semi-standardized interview protocol designed to probe for rich, descriptive data regarding subjects' attitudes toward and experiences with civilian comments on their military service. Interviews were conducted until data saturation (see Fusch & Ness, 2015) was achieved at 11 total participants. The interviews were audio recorded via cell phone to facilitate transcription, after which the recordings were deleted to preserve confidentiality. Standard transcripts (i.e. not verbatim, omitting filler words like "um," "uhh," and "like") were again produced

by TranscriptionPanda, with a subsequent researcher review while listening to the audio recordings to correct any inaccuracies. All participants were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher to preserve confidentiality. The interview transcripts, totaling 44 pages and more than 20,000 words, were also analyzed using NVivo through a conventional content analysis.

For this study, qualitative analysis was performed in two stages, beginning with initial coding guided by the code book generated from the previous study, but with allowances for latent analysis through open coding to generate new codes that emerge from the data. Iterative re-analysis of transcript data was performed with initial codes refined and categorized into similar groupings, and then coded thematically to produce qualitative results addressing the research question. Additionally, quantitative analysis of the coded references was performed to provide descriptive statistics and percentages of interview coverage and aggregate coded references for prominent codes/categories and key themes. Quantitative data allowed the researcher to demonstrate the relative strength of discursive patterns amongst interview subjects. This quantitative data also provided empirical evidence for a preferred modality of military-civilian interaction within the population studied.

Results

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Status	Rank	Branch	Combat (Y/N)
Aaron	Male	32	Active Duty	Officer	Air Force	N
Asa	Male	33	Active Duty	Enlisted	Air Force	N
Christine	Female	31	Active Duty	Officer	Air Force	N
Dante	Male	34	Active Duty	Officer	Army	Y
Mark	Male	39	Veteran	Officer	Army	Y
Rick	Male	25	Active Duty	Enlisted	Air Force	N
Roger	Male	28	Veteran	Officer	Army	Y
Sam	Male	44	Veteran	Enlisted	Army	Y
Skyler	Female	29	Active Duty	Officer	Air Force	Y
Tammy	Female	38	Active Duty	Enlisted	Air Force	Y
Todd	Male	39	Active Duty	Officer	Air Force	Y

Descriptive Statistics (Code references)		
N=304	Mean=7.41	Std Dev=6.28

In presenting the results the researcher begins with findings of Study II in relation to Study I, in order to relate which themes, and/or their constitutive elements, were consistent across both studies. Following, the researcher focuses on how the findings of Study II relate specifically to RQ4: Which civilian comments about military service are most acceptable and least acceptable to military members?

Active and passive barriers (88 aggregate coded references—28.9%)

As this in-depth interview research was primarily focused on current and former U.S. military members' perspectives of interactions with civilians, a consistent theme of active and passive barriers emerged from the data. Participants described a myriad of cultural and communicative barriers that often prevented a more effective military-civilian interaction from taking place. What was thematically coded in the first study as lack of shared social meaning was broken down into several coded references in this study, the most prominent being "knowledge gap" (91% interview coverage; 21 references—7%) (e.g., *Dante: The community usually doesn't know what veterans went through, there is a knowledge gap*).

To explain, participants described civilians as generally unfamiliar with overall military culture and current overseas operations. They were also acutely focused on the communicative constraints imposed by the unique, acronym-laden military vernacular, and direct approach service members employ with one another that does not translate well to larger society (e.g., *Christine: I think the biggest barrier is language. A lot of military members say words that civilians don't understand and vice versa...we use a lot of terminology they don't understand*).

With regard to the military-military interaction modalities, Mark and Tammy were specifically concerned, that the way military members communicate with one another can be perceived as off-putting or even aggressive by civilians, creating what was coded as "norm tensions" between the military and civilians:

> *Mark:* I found through my service that we communicate in a very direct manner. It is easy to ascertain what you are being told to do in the service. This makes the communication with the general public challenging based on a few factors: a common ground and understanding of what each other do... My direct approach to communicate with my employees, is sometimes taken as aggressive or over the top. An accepted communication culture in the military is also the free use of vulgarity. It is frowned on when communicating with the general public. While there is significant training on sensitivity in the service, it still does not stop our direct approach with communication with one another. If I spoke in the civilian sector as I did in the service I think I would be unemployed quickly.
>
> ...
>
> *Tammy:* I definitely think there are some barriers in communication. In the military, we tend to be much more direct and to the point. And I think that is very unsettling to the average person that has never served in the military. They think we're overly aggressive or overly pushy when it's just our culture in which we work every day to be direct, and short, and to the point. And they're just not used to that.

Here, both Mark and Tammy are describing communicative constraining due to the language and communication norms of larger society not being optimized to accommodate their unique expressions of military-informed models of reality, making a clear case for the applicability of muted group theory in this context.

There was also strong support within the Study II population, for a barrier brought forward from Study I: "avoid the uninitiated" (82% coverage; 18 references—6%). For example:

> *Aaron:* I just don't want to talk about military service to civilians. It's just tedious, and I just want to get on with my day.
>
> ...
>
> *Roger:* It is easier to talk to civilians who are retired or grew up around the service because they truly understand what you are referring to when you talk about certain experiences like deployment, moving around, education, sacrifices.

In searching for an explanation for this tendency to avoid the uninitiated, the researcher found that when discussing comfort talking about military experiences with different groups of people (i.e., family, friends, strangers, etc.), Mark described the phenomenon of retreating to the "bunker" with his closest military companions that was discussed in Study I:

> I always seem to go back to the hard times with them and find comfort with them. While there is never verbal acknowledgment you can always count on the "head nod," or high five and the comfort that it was their fierce companionship and loyalty to me that keep each of us alive in the fiercest of combat.

It was also interesting to note that Asa, who had not experienced direct combat, alluded to the collective failure of imagination Klay (2014) identified in Western society, saying: "I learned through ancestors that war is impossible to comprehend." For the study population, whether it was the psychological safety of what Junger (2016) described as the community of shared suffering, a socially-constructed silencing effect, or the perception of dubious prospects for being understood, significant barriers to effective military-civilian communication exist.

Identity threat (99 aggregate coded references—32.5%)

The most significant theme from Study I, identity threat, emerged again in Study II as the most prominent. There was significant continued support for concerns related to stereotyping (91% interview coverage; 17 references—6%) (e.g., *Todd: I don't think the average person who's never served, has not been in the military, knows the distinctions. So, there's a lot of generalizations to them. Everyone is either a soldier, a marine, or a pilot. So, I have a hard time telling them really what I do, because they can't relate to it*).

Key concepts such as narrative usurpation (73% interview coverage; 41 aggregate coded references—13%), and hyper-humility (73% coverage; 28 aggregate coded references—9%) from Study I, were also validated within the Study II population. Narrative usurpation is exemplified by Sam: "I don't like it when someone I interact with seems like they have their mind made up already about me."

Regarding hyper-humility specifically, there was evidence for continued use of the hyper-humility model proposed in Study I as its components (impostor syndrome, sense of duty, and guilt/shame) were coded across a number of interviews. Excerpts from the interviews related to hyper-humility:

> *Todd:* I also think they think we suffer more than we actually do. Because I've seen them talk about a lot of the struggles and the hardships that we put up with. For the most part, it's only a small percentage of people that I've worked with that experience a lot of those hardships and trials. Most of us aren't deploying every 90 days or 120 days, and we're not on constant rotations at…And even our deployments in the air force aren't like army deployments that are usually one year to 18 months. We're six months in, and then we're back out.
> …
> *Rick:* I felt similar about the phrase "Thank you for your service" … that I really haven't done much to deserve those thanks.
> …
> *Skyler:* But for me in the Air Force, there's a lot of embarrassment that I'd ever want to talk about the stress that I have or some of the more…I don't want to call them traumatic but more kind of grotesque details that I've ever seen in my life. I feel kind of worried about that. Because I don't feel like I've earned any kind of designation for being more stressed, I suppose.

> *Tammy:* For me, it's I've chosen to do this, so I don't need to be thanked for it. This is a choice that I made. I wasn't forced. I wasn't coerced. So, for me, it's not necessary.

There were also coded references to label avoidance in the Study II population, although the internal validity is not as strongly supported as the other elements of identity threat carried forward from Study I—while references were coded in six of 11 interviews, there were only six total references. One of the coded references reads:

> *Rick:* The only time when acknowledging my military service becomes uncomfortable is when military members are glorified and held on this podium of all military services members are called "heroes." Yes, there are military members that have stood out and stepped up and are heroes, but the majority of us are just normal people, doing normal people things.

Preferred communication modalities

The remaining themes that emerged from Study II are related specifically to RQ4 and the CIT strategy—positive and negative encounters—and are discussed below.

Negative encounter (50 aggregate coded references—16.4%)

For the study population, there was a high degree of agreement regarding the typical characteristics of a negative encounter. For some, the main driver of a negative encounter was TYFYS as an "injunctive norm" (72% coverage; 15 references—5%), a finding that connects closely to the concept of the "thin 'thank you'" discussed in Study I. For example:

> *Christine:* Yeah, I think that I'm more thankful or more appreciate or accepting of when somebody does that when it's not just in passing. Sometimes when people say, "Thank you for your service," and it's at the grocery store. And they don't even bother to look up at you. It's like, "Are you thankful for my service?" Probably not.
> ...
> *Dante:* Some people feel "thank you for your service" is simply the right thing to say…The least acceptable [comments from civilians] are any comments that feel like the person is saying them only out of politeness.

Similarly, Aaron describes the awkwardness that arises when civilians are unsure of which behaviors to model and are actively searching for that injunctive norm: "Although I have noticed a fair number of people who don't know what to say or do. As if I'm some type of 'other,' and now you can't talk to me like you would any other person. Some people start tip-toeing and the conversation then focuses on the military." For other participants, the negative encounter was founded in ignorance, either willful or unintentional, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

> *Mark:* I found it almost challenging to discuss what I did with prospective employers. One specific employer found out I was prior military and stopped the interview. He said most soldiers are damaged goods and add no value to the work place because of their instability. Needless to say, I questioned this. His specific comment to me was "you really seem smart enough, why did you join in the first place, could you not hack it in college?" By no means do I ever look for a handout, but you are taught as you leave the service to leverage your time with employers, and in this situation, it did not work, as he was not appreciative of any service.
> ...
> *Tammy:* I think one of the most negative encounters has been with extended family. They didn't really understand what I do and why I do it. And their perception was from the, "How

do you leave your immediate family to go off all the time and do things when they need more?" So, that was the negative experience is just not understanding the calling behind it.
...
Skyler: I was talking to someone the other day about Afghanistan, and they made some comments about war mongering or something about us starting the war in the first place. And I kind of want...realizing that it's been 18 years since 9/11 happened...those are the ones I still kind of find difficult to talk to. Because now we're at a point where people don't remember or don't even think about the fact that we're still in Afghanistan because of 9/11, because 3,000 people died on a single *day.* And that's when it kind of gets disheartening, that people don't even think that there's a reason for us being overseas anymore, because they don't remember, don't feel that heartache that a lot of people felt 18 years ago.

As discussed in the preceding section, participants expressed concerns regarding narrative usurpation and identity threat in a similar fashion to the Study I population. However, while Study I participants focused on narrative usurpation executed through ascribed stereotypes and the resulting monologic discourse, some participants in Study II describe negative encounters centered around a distinct form of dialogic narrative usurpation—a form that can be termed as Coerced Representative (55% coverage; 6 references—2%).

In these instances, the military member or veteran is forced to serve as spokesperson for the entire military institution, fielding confrontational questions beyond the scope of their individual service or experiences. The following excerpt describes such an encounter:

Rick: One of the absolute worst *[sic]* encounters I've had with someone when they learned I was in the military was when I was visiting a friend at "The" Ohio State University. She was having a small party of only about 12 to 15 people. They were all college friends and I was the new face so of course everyone is asking who I am, who I know at the party and what school I go to. Of course, I don't go to a traditional school because I'm active duty military. As soon as I said that I was military the entire vibe of the room changed...like if you had just walked in, you would've thought that someone had just got news that an immediate family member passed away. After about ten very awkward seconds of silence, two people left the room to escape the tension and then finally a very small college student with either purple or pink hair started to talk. She started off by saying "Oh, you're Military! So….", and I could already tell where she was going with whatever she was about so say. She started saying and asking things like "How does it feel knowing your comrades are killing innocent people," and "there's no need for American military to be anywhere else besides America." I answered her questions and explained to her that the American military isn't just over there shooting everyone, but she was more determined to believe what she hears on the news. That was probably one of the most negative experiences I've had after being learned I was in the military.

Positive encounter (67 aggregate coded references—22%)

Similar to negative encounters or comments from civilians, the study population displayed high levels of agreement on the characteristics of positive encounters or comments. Participants shared a desire to be treated like a "normal" person, experience routine conversational modalities, and not be ascribed an elevated status—instances were coded as a desire to "normalize" interaction (normalize = 73% coverage; 11 references—4%). For example:

Aaron: …just a regular conversation as I get to know someone. You can do the same with someone in the military. "Oh, you're in the Air Force?" "So, is this home, or just here for a

short while?" "How do you like the area?" "Hey, I have kids too and we really like going to this place." Just be normal.

Todd: I would prefer that they just treat me the same way they would treat anyone if they found out that they were a teacher, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a garbage man. To me, this is just an occupation. I don't define myself by being in the military, so I don't want… I don't need any personal or extra recognition because I wear a uniform.

…

Rick: To make a conversation less awkward, just talk to service members the way you would talk to anyone else.

…

Skyler: So, I think what I want them to see is that we're just normal people, that we love serving, that we love our countries.

…

Asa: Simply put, I don't want to be put on a pedestal.

The second defining engagement characteristic participants relayed was one of genuine, two-way information exchange, limiting reliance on ritualized gratitude expressions. These instances were coded as "genuine dialogic exchange" (73% coverage; 19 references—6%), and shared similar characteristics to the beyond "thank you" theme of Study I. Instances of genuine dialogic exchange include:

Aaron: Met a guy the other day who does consulting work. The conversation consisted of me asking questions like "What type of consulting?" "Do you travel a lot?" "Where are you from?" "Oh, well your, you know, pick a sport, team sucks" ... This is a minute difference, but saying "Thank you for your service" at the end of the conversation, comes across much better than saying it right off the bat. At the end of the conversation, you know me a little bit, I know you a little bit and "Thank you for your service" isn't a token phrase anymore.

…

Christine: I think when people maybe seem more genuine when they say it, they provide a bit more context for their thanks…Like they maybe say, "Oh, my grandparent was in the military. Or my parent was in the military. I'm really thankful for your service." So, typically the most positive experiences that I have with that phrase are when there's more than just that phrase. Like they follow it up with something, or they start with something else to kind of…It kind of demonstrates to me that they're legitimately thankful for my service instead of just throwing words at me because they don't know what else to say.

…

Rick: Some of the most positive conversations and encounters I have had with someone when they first learned I was in the military is with people that know nothing about the military, the Air Force, or my job. They don't come into the conversation with any preconceived notions or ideas of the military, either positive of negative. What they leave the conversation knowing about anything like that is what I've told them. Often times their reaction is very positive and excited. They say things like "Wow, that sounds really cool" or "You're so lucky." When they say things like that, it's easy to just kind of laugh it off and roll your eyes because of course you don't tell them the negative aspects but nevertheless, it really does remind me how enjoyable and beneficial it is to be in the military.

Discussion

A discussion of Study II findings must occur within the overall context of both studies, as Study II both reconsiders and builds upon the findings of Study I. To offer a measure of this

supporting context, Figure 2 (below) provides a visualization of the thematic patterns and relationships across the two studies, with themes appearing only in Study I depicted in the left third, themes specific to Study II in the right third, and themes (or their constitutive elements) common to both studies, depicted in the middle third. The size of each circle represents an approximation of the corresponding relative strength of the discursive patterns of each theme and the bi-directional arrows indicate a relationship between the constitutive elements of the themes.
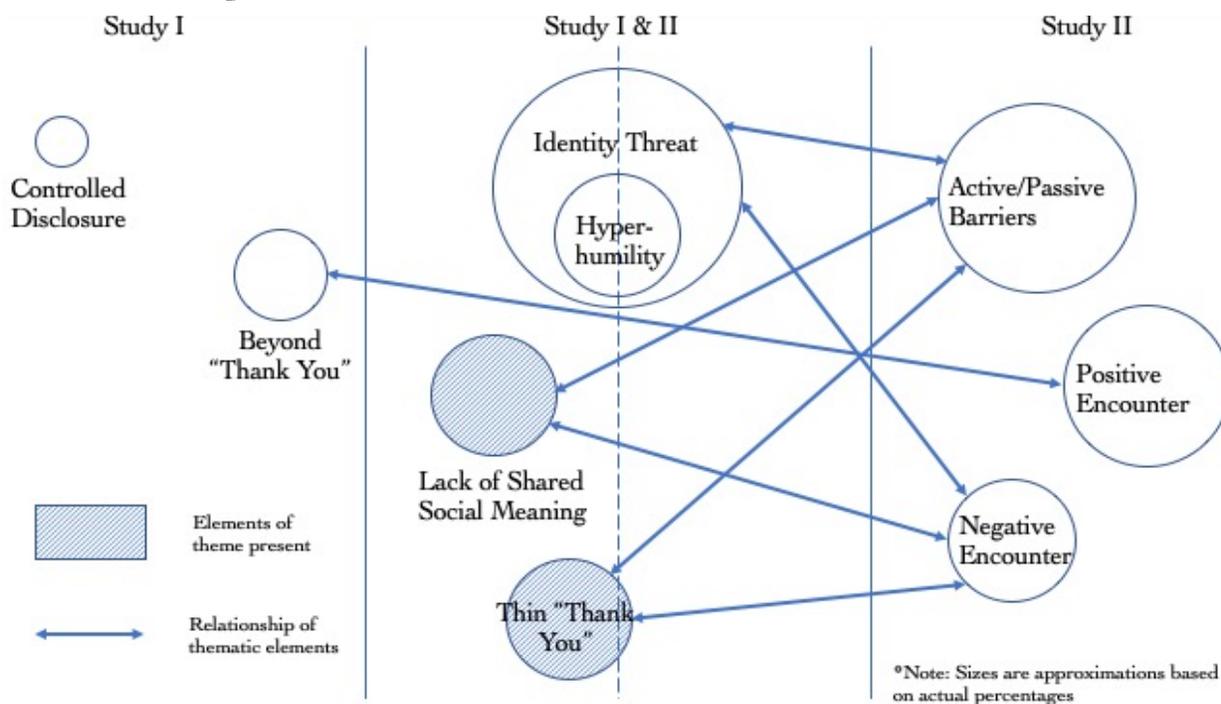

Fig. 2. Theme Comparison

As depicted in Figure 2 (above), there was an overall level of agreement among the themes reported in each study, a fact that positively reflects on the efficacy of the research instruments used in combination to answer the four research questions proposed at the beginning of this paper. Regarding RQ1, participants across both studies found TYFYS to generally indicate the fulfillment of a social norm as opposed to a genuine attempt to convey gratitude to the *participants themselves*. This lack of interpersonal interaction left little room for personal narrative explication.

Similarly, when considering RQ2, both study populations displayed comparable levels of concern regarding the implicit identity threat (and related demonstrations of hyper-humility) and the lack of shared social understanding that undercut typical public acknowledgments of their military service. In response to these factors, participants in both studies describe retreating inward to homogenous ingroups and, in response to RQ3, report levels of discomfort when discussing their military service that increase at a rate inversely proportional to the commonalities they share with the recipient (i.e., most comfortable with military members who have had similar experiences; least comfortable with complete strangers). The common thread that extends across all of the findings from RQs 1-3 is conversation depth. It figures prominently in the findings for RQ4—shallow conversations (i.e. consisting of only ritualized gratitude expressions) are the least preferred amongst participants from both studies, and deeper conversations involving genuine interest and personal information exchange are most preferred.

In terms of theoretical implications, these findings support the notion that the current discursive state of play between larger U.S. society and current and former members of the military is fundamentally challenging. Divergence in normative communication modalities and language ill-suited for expressing unique military models of reality was reported as communicatively constraining for this population, offering additional evidence supporting the continued application of muted group theory in this context. However, just as with Study I, there were not muting effects as traditionally understood within the context of muted group theory; veterans and military member interviewees were not prevented from communicating by larger society—merely, the process was made more difficult as a result of language deficiencies, lack of knowledge/understanding, and the socially-constructed burden of their ascribed elevated status.

The ramifications of these discursive and cultural forces were sometimes manifested in difficulties locating an individual identity within larger society. This was reported above when Aaron specifically referred to "othering." And additional instance is presented below, wherein Todd expresses concern regarding the conflation of his military service with a socially ascribed identity due to the military's perceived elevated status:

> I would prefer that they just treat me the same way they would treat anyone if they found out that they were a teacher, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a garbage man. To me, this is just an occupation. I don't define myself by being in the military, so I don't want…I don't need any personal or extra recognition because I wear a uniform. Now, what I do is different, obviously. And the commitments are a lot higher on our end for being in the military. But at the end of the day, it's just an occupation. It's just a career. I could easily transition tomorrow into being a student, or being a professor, or being a stay at home dad. And it would define me the same amount as being in the military does. I'm still me.

Regarding muting effects specifically, it is noteworthy that while there were no instances of external muting, given the power and privilege dynamics inherent in the elevated position of the military, there were internal muting effects reported as a result the perceived constraints due to the limitations imposed by "operational security" (e.g., *Skyler: As an organization, as the military as a whole, we're very understandably worried about operational security. Thus, some military members may air on the side of, "Oh, I'm not allowed to talk about anything that I've done over there, where I was or what we did."*). Ultimately, this internal muting effect is the inherent consequence of the bureaucratic organization, where typically the services' public affairs professionals are charged with external communication, and the hierarchical rank structure, within which orders are issued and followed, of the military institution.

Continuing the discussion of the suitability of existing communications theory in studying military-civilian discourse, Study II offered strong support for the applicability of WMO. As reported above, the study population described the most negative encounters as those lacking sufficient equivocality and requisite variety while the most positive encounters were typified by the genuine dialogic exchange that produces an interaction affording the appropriate level of complexity for dealing with a topic as substantial as military service. It would appear, then, that the issue is not with TYFYS per se, it is that the engagement begins and ends with ritualized gratitude and does not extend the appropriate level equivocality. This idea was expressed by Aaron above and it bears repeating again here:

> This is a minute difference, but saying, 'Thank you for your service' at the end of the conversation, comes across much better than saying it right off the bat. At the end of the conversation, you know me a little bit, I know you a little bit, and 'Thank you for your service,' isn't a token phrase anymore.

Limitations

For Study II, limitations primarily centered around the sampling frame as a nationally-representative sample was not recruited. As a result, participants tended to be older than the average age of military members and also represented only two of the four military branches; both of these limitations were a direct consequence of the purposive snowball sampling method employed. Additionally, the interpretation of the results, and the candor of the subjects, are both concerns as a result of researcher and subject biases across the sample.

The researcher is an active duty military officer and has experienced a complicated relationship with TYFYS and military-civilian discourse modalities as a result of his own combat experiences. While the researcher has read extensively about, and continuously engages in efforts to process and contextualize his experiences within the framework of larger society—and was also keenly aware of possible bias while conducting this analysis—there is a possibility the results were slightly skewed. Regarding subject bias, given that the subjects knew the researcher personally, there may have been a lack of candor, as the subjects sought to avoid seeming ungrateful or hostile and thus withheld information. Subject bias is one possible explanation for the larger number of positive encounters over negative encounters. Lastly, the nature of this in-depth interview research precludes generalizing results to the military and veteran population writ large.

Implications

Within the context of academia, the most significant findings of this study are those in support of the continued application of muted group theory, WMO, and the researcher's proposed hyper-humility model in military-civilian communications research. Future research should seek to develop a quantitative instrument based on these qualitative results to measure preferred communication modalities across a nationally-representative sample. An experimental research design might be effective in this context, and offer empirical evidence in support of the preferred military-civilian engagement.

The practical findings of Study I in terms of preferred military-civilian engagement characteristics were supported and expanded through the application of CIT in Study II. Both military members and civilians alike should seek to normalize their interactions and pursue a genuine dialogic exchange, within which greater understanding amongst the parties may be cultivated and heartfelt gratitude may be more successfully conveyed. This effort does not necessarily require civilians to delve into the traumatic details of the loss and carnage of combat service or the more mundane but more frequent separations from family and friends—in fact, some of the participants viewed intentionally shielding civilians from those realities as a stipulation of their voluntary service. It does, however, require a slightly deeper commitment to the second-personal nature of the TYFYS exchange with the intentional seeking of personal information. Based on these findings, the following recommendations for improving military-civilian discourse include:

- Civilians should consider extending their interactions with a veteran or military member to a brief exchange, in which they ask questions about the individual's branch of service, career field, and hometown, for example.
- If civilians feel compelled to thank the member or veteran for their service, TYFYS should not constitute the entirety of the conversation, and they should move TYFYS to the back-end of the conversation as opposed to opening the encounter with it.
- Military members and veterans should consider reducing the constraining effects of ritualized gratitude expressions by responding with appreciation for the acknowledgment and an offering to briefly explain what they do, or have done, in service to the U.S.

- Military services' public affairs personnel should consider expanding the mandatory media training service members receive to include a module focused on crafting simple, personalized, and meaningful responses about their jobs that are within the limits of operational security and can be used when interacting with members of the community.

Conclusion

As the United States' longest period of armed conflict continues, it becomes increasingly vital that we learn as a society how to effectively communicate with those few who bear the largest physical, psychological, emotional, and moral burdens of war. Both studies show that it is not necessarily what is said by a civilian that can be communicatively constraining and present an identity threat to the service member, it is the overall discursive context within which it is said. Whether it is TYFYS or some other form of ritualized or routinized conversation, when confronted with phatic communication, study participants were generally left feeling awkward, stereotyped, constrained, precluded from participating in their own narrative, or coerced into speaking on behalf of the entire military institution to the detriment of expressing their individual model of reality. While it cannot be concluded from this paper alone, there is increasing indication that the majority of military members, past and present, have similar experiences. Therefore, as Sherman (2015) contends, there is a responsibility borne by society in effectively welcoming its warriors home to assess its level of moral responsibility for the current wars and, as this paper suggests, also examine the implications of how it speaks to, and about, them for the prospect of successful reintegration.

References

Ardener, S. (2005). Ardener's "muted groups": The genesis of an idea and its praxis. *Women & Language*, *28*(2), 50–54.

Bartlett, M. Y., Condon, P., Cruz, J., Baumann, J., & Desteno, D. (2012). Gratitude: Prompting behaviours that build relationships. *Cognition and Emotion*, *26*(1), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.561297

Boon, K. A. (2005). Heroes, metanarratives, and the paradox of masculinity in contemporary Western culture. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *13*(3), 301–312. https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1303.301

Botan, C. H. (2018). *Strategic communication theory and practice: The cocreational model*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.

Branham, C. (2016). Wounded warrior or war hero? Or maybe, neither?: Resisting common tropes of the veteran and developing digital literacy practices via narrative building and identity presentation in social networking spaces. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Retrieved from http://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/5109

Buber, M. (1958). The I-thou theme, contemporary psychotherapy, and psychodrama. *Pastoral Psychology*, *9*(5), 57–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01758631

Demers, A. L. (2011). When veterans return: The role of community in reintegration. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *16*(2), 160–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2010.519281

---. (2013). From death to life: Female veterans, identity negotiation, and reintegration into society. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *53*(4), 489–515. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167812472395

Doubek, J. (2017, May 28). Don't say "thank you for your service" this Monday. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2017/05/28/530504781/words-youll-hear-memorial-day-dos-and-donts

Eibach, R. P., Wilmot, M. O., & Libby, L. K. (2015). The system-justifying function of gratitude norms. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *9*(7), 348–358. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12184

Elliott, M., Gonzalez, C., & Larsen, B. (2011). U.S. military veterans transition to college: Combat, PTSD, and alienation on campus. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *48*(3), 279–296. https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.6293

Feczer, D., & Bjorklund, P. (2009). Forever changed: Posttraumatic stress disorder in female military veterans, a case report. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, *45*(4), 278–291. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6163.2009.00230.x

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The qualitative report, 20*(9), 1408-1416.

Grohowski, M. (2014). Moving words/words that move: Language practices plaguing US servicewomen. *Women & Language*, *37*(1), 121–130.

Hoffman, C. (2014, July 20). Stop calling soldiers "heroes": It stops us from seeing them as human—and dismisses their experience. *Salon*. Retrieved from https://www.salon.com/2014/07/20/stop_calling_soldiers_heroes_it_stops_us_from_seeing_them_as_human_and_dismisses_their_experience

Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, *15*(9), 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Junger, S. (2016). *Tribe*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

Klay, P. (2014, February 8). After war, a failure of the imagination. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html

Kramarae, C. (1980). Speaking of women and men. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, *3*(2), v. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-0685(80)92050-3

---. (2005). Muted group theory and communication: Asking dangerous questions. *Women & Language*, *28*(2), 55–61.

Kreps, G. L. (2014). Weick's model of organizing. In T. L. Thompson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of health communication* (Vol. III, pp. 1468–1470). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Kreps, G. L. (2017). The critical incident technique. In J. P. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of communication research methods*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.

Lüger, H.-H. (1983). Some aspects of ritual communication. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *7*(6), 695–711. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(83)90091-7

McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *17*(4), 281–285. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00590.x

McFarlane, M. D. (2015). U.S. military policy and the discursive construction of servicewomen's bodies, (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Communication, University of Utah) 265.

Naphan, D. E., & Elliott, M. (2015). Role exit from the military: Student veterans' perceptions of transitioning from the U.S. military to higher education. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(2), 36–48.

O'Donnell, W. (2017, February 9). Why saying "thank you for your service" offends some veterans. Retrieved from https://inmilitary.com/why-saying-thank-you-for-your-service-offends-some-veterans

Putnam, L. L., & Nicotera, A. M. (2009). *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication*. Routledge.

RAND Corporation. (2008, April 17). One in five Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from PTSD or major depression. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/news/press/2008/04/17.html

Reid, S. A., & Giles, H. (2008). Social identity theory. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication*. Blackwell Reference Online: Blackwell Publishing. Retrieved from www.communicationencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405131995_yr2015_chunk_g978140513199524_ss62-1

Richtel, M. (2017, December 21). Please don't thank me for my service. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/sunday-review/please-dont-thank-me-for-my-service.html

Rumann, C., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2011*(155), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.457

Sayer, N. A., Noorbaloochi, S., Frazier, P., Carlson, K., Gravely, A., & Murdoch, M. (2010). Reintegration problems and treatment interests among Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans receiving VA medical care. *Psychiatric Services*, *61*(6), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2010.61.6.589

Sherman, N. (2015). *Afterwar: Healing the moral wounds of our soldiers* (1st ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

---. (2018). Thin "thank you's." In D. Carr (Ed.), *Cultivating moral character and virtue in professional practice* (pp. 29–40). New York: Routledge.

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Information (International Social Science Council)*, *13*(2), 65–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204

Truscott IV, L. K. (2017, July 12). Please stop thanking me for my service. *Salon*. Retrieved from https://www.salon.com/2017/07/12/please-stop-thanking-me-for-my-service/

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (n.d.). How common is PTSD? - PTSD: National Center for PTSD [General Information]. Retrieved from www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp

Young, L. B. (2017). "Thank a veteran": The elevation and instrumentation of U.S. military veterans. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *2*(2), 58–75.

Zinger, L., & Cohen, A. (2010). Veterans returning from war into the classroom: How can colleges be better prepared to meet their needs. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 3*(1), 39–51.

Zoli, C., Maury, R., & Fay, D. (2015). Missing perspectives: Servicemembers' transition from service to civilian life. *Institute for Veterans and Military Families*. Retrieved from surface.syr.edu/ivmf/7

Nicholas J. Mercurio
George Mason University
nmercuri@masonlive.gmu.edu

Appendix A: Study I Interview Protocol

1. Describe the last encounter you can remember when someone first learns about your military service. What did they do? What did they say? Was this encounter typical or different from the others you can remember? How did you feel about this encounter?
2. Have you ever been told "thank you for your service"? If so, how do feel about this expression?
3. How does it make you feel when your military service is acknowledged in a formal setting? What about an informal setting? Are there times where you feel more or less comfortable with it? What makes it more or less comfortable for you?
4. What are your thoughts on things like military discounts, preferred boarding of airplanes, and "salutes to service" at sporting events? (Follow up: Would you prefer to skip one or all of these? Why? Why not?)
5. What do you think people who have not served think about when meeting a veteran or military member?
6. Describe your ideal exchange with someone first learning about your military service. What, if anything, do you think prevents this ideal exchange? What needs to change to make it happen more often?
7. Have you ever felt alienated from the public since joining the military? If so, describe the context.
8. Describe the context in which you have encountered the label, "hero," either applied to yourself or other veterans or military members. How did you feel about it?
9. Do you ever talk about your military service with others? Why or why not? Who do you feel most comfortable talking to about your service? Least comfortable?
10. How important is your history of military service to your identity, or your sense of yourself? Do you want others to know you've served?

Appendix B: Study II Code Book

Code	Example
Positive encounter with civilian	N/A: Is the speaker describing a positive encounter?
Negative encounter with civilian	N/A: Is the speaker describing a negative encounter?
Stereotyping (ascribed some or all characteristics of stereotype; conferred qualities based on assumptions; oversimplified)	I'd rather be looked at as a person first and not just a blank stereotype of a military member;
Guilt (feeling guilty when perceived as being better/braver than they perceive themselves)	I don't really like it because I just don't feel like I had felt as fulfilled in what I did in my military career than, maybe, older generations or other generations may have or haven't done. So, I just felt like I did my time, but it's not like I did something that was so great compared to what others before me had done
Shame (feeling less-than for not doing more/ having it as bad; also, being compared to those perceived as more deserving)	And then they say, "Thank you for your service." I get somewhat embarrassed because I feel like I was an older veteran. I did not serve in any combat capacity, so I'm just not sure how to respond // It feels like we are tricking them
Sense of duty (stoic; diminishing service/ accomplishments; "just" duty; emphasizing volunteer status)	Plus, I volunteered, so it's not like I was drafted or anything like that. So, I don't feel like they even owe me a "thank you" for my service // So, it's awkward when you're doing something and you feel is your duty to be elevated for it because you are just accomplishing your duty, to me. So, to me, I shouldn't be elevated merely for doing my duty
Uncomfortable with recognition	But there is an aspect where you feel uncomfortable because it's just you don't feel, or actually I don't feel worthy of their adoration in some ways.
Impostor Syndrome (feeling like a fraud, unworthy of praise/ success)	It's that it's uncomfortable to have somebody tell you, "Thank you for your service," when I'm just doing an office-style job here and there are people who are doing an actual job that maybe I just happened to be a representative of them and I'm not them, therefore, it's uncomfortable
Resentment	You don't know what I did, so what are you thanking me for
Injunctive Norm (behaving in manner consistent with societal expectations)	Yeah, "Thank you for your service," is the typical... It's like thank you or you're welcome // It' like a child, "oh this is what I am supposed to say"
Label avoidance (specifically avoiding perception as hero or victim)	Honestly, I think that there are definitely some Heroes among them, but not everyone, in my opinion, qualifies, definitely not myself.

Avoid uninitiated (avoiding interaction with civilians and/or military without same experiences)	I am most uncomfortable probably talking about military service in what I do when I travel because I'm unsure of who I'm speaking with and how they feel about us; Like with civilians I will try to avoid it as much as possible
Self-conscious (feeling awkward; less-than; not worthy; undeserving)	Like because there's the duality of they see me and I definitely am not in a combat role or just I perceive and I could be, but I… so, there's that where I'm like, "You know what, I missed a lot of holidays, too." But then there's the other times where I'm like, "I think you think I do more than I do," // But there is an aspect where you feel uncomfortable because it's just you don't feel, or actually I don't feel worthy of their adoration in some ways.
Identity Threat (concern regarding depersonalization at the hands of another; individual identity being subsumed by group, socially-constructed identity)	Well, I think it's being treated as an individual, not a representation; They have to be the avatar of themselves // Well I think that they think exactly what they think about the military. I don't think they think about you as an individual...you're just, you are what the military is to them
Narrative Usurpation (describing scenarios in which they are precluded from conveying unique model of reality to civilian because civilian already has a socially concocted/heuristically derived conclusion)	I don't think they [civilians] think about you as an individual...you're just...you are what the military is to them // And, I guess, saying, "Thank you for your service," is kind of assuming that I want to be thanked, that I think I did something that was worth being thanked for//Allowing me to define, in a sense, who that is

Appendix C: Study II Interview Protocol

1. Have you ever been told "thank you for your service"? If so, how did you feel about the expression? Have there been times when you felt differently about it? Tell me about those situations and what made them different.
2. What's been the most positive encounter or conversation you've had when someone first learned about your military service? Tell me the story. What about your most negative encounter? What was it about those experiences that made them so positive/negative?
3. How does it make you feel when your military service is acknowledged? Are there times where you feel more or less comfortable with this acknowledgement and why?
4. What comments by civilians regarding military service are the most acceptable to you? The least acceptable? Why?
5. What do you think the average American thinks about when meeting a veteran or military member? Would you want them to think something different? If so, why?
6. Do you think that there are any barriers in communication between veterans and military members and the general public? If so, what are they? (Follow-up if they are confused by "communication barriers"): In other words, what makes it difficult, if anything, for civilians and military members to talk to one another?
7. Have you ever felt alienated or isolated from the public since joining the military? Can you think of an example of a time you felt this way?
8. How comfortable do you feel discussing details of your service with family? Friends? Strangers? How about other service members?
9. How would you like civilians to act or what would you like them to say once they've first learned about your military service? What would make the conversation less draining or awkward?