



Conversations in Veterans' Studies: "Veteran" as a Post-Labor Category

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ABSTRACT

The emerging field of veterans' studies is promising due to its interdisciplinarity. Yet lenses of war, injury, and policy dominate how veterans and their experiences are examined. While these elements of inquiry do tremendous work in expanding our understanding of some veterans' experiences, these angles can inadvertently reinforce tropic narratives and/or be limiting, regarding the complexity by which we can conceive of veterans as social beings, epistemic agents, and professionals. Thus, I argue that an in-depth consideration of military service as a labor form is fundamental to the conversations of veterans' social identity. Focusing on military service qua labor encapsulates critical factors of being, doing, knowing, and relating, which can act as theoretical connective tissue for the various disciplinary perspectives in veterans studies allowing for a more dynamic picture to unfold.

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Research on servicemembers and veterans tends to center on war and medicalization. While war certainly positions servicemembers in a politically relational way and medical research pinpoints physiological and psychological idiosyncrasies of the military subject, they are limited in how they connect the multifaceted, experiential factors of servicemembers' identities, which later inflects that of the veteran. Scholars have offered poignant considerations of veterans, especially as it pertains to their reintegration into society, yet still focus on war, physical or mental injury (Van Ells, 2001; Waller, 1944), policy, and education (DiRamio, 2017; Moore, 2017; Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Despite the spurious disciplining of the emerging field of veterans studies so far (Craig, 2015), it is nevertheless beneficial to examine veteran subjectivity through interdisciplinary perspectives.

For example, Phillips & Lincoln (2017) proposed a critical studies approach to add to the mix. By considering veterans through a critical theory lens, the social status of veterans and their relationality to social institutions becomes more complex, while simultaneously moving away from problematizing veterans themselves (Waller, 1944) and towards thinking more structurally and institutionally. Indeed, ample historical evidence indicates dynamics that may justify a reading of veteran subjectivity as one of marginality or (dis)advantage with respect to their civilian counterparts (see for example Butler, 1935; DiAngelis, 2019; Waters, 1933). This theoretical standpoint is promising as a potential lurking variable that may not always be readily observed or articulated by veterans themselves or by their civilian interlocutors. However, critical theory without cautious implementation runs the risk of intensifying elements of perceived marginality as an essential experiential commonality rather than demystifying the roots of social misunderstandings or interactional strains.

It is crucial to establish a frame or reference point by which to contextualize servicemembers and veterans, such that research serving these persons does not fail to account for the complexity of their experience nor simply describe them. One way to approach these complexities is to establish a standpoint that might render veterans' military service readable and valuable—especially as it relates to the fraught realm of employment or education—in order to mitigate stigmatization or the perpetuation of dramatized tropes. Thus, a deeper examination of military labor would arguably be generative in forming some connective bonds across many of the disciplinary lines listed so far and could begin to bridge the gap of veteran/civilian interactions in multiple arenas.

An understanding of military labor necessarily foregrounds an understanding of veterans. On a broader

scale, Anteby et al. (2016) theorize the occupational subject along the lines of “becoming, doing, and relating” (p. 184). This orientation is especially productive if applied to veterans. After all, the status of “veteran” is incumbent upon entering and transitioning through the labor practice of military service, which is underscored by a distinct form of military socialization and practice that thereby molds them. Such a perspective theoretically scaffolds scholarly findings that argue that veterans' increased risk for health conditions like PTS or substance abuse can be attributed to the nature of their military work (Ray & Heaslip, 2011). On a more existential level, as a Marxist perspective might suggest, labor is fundamental to the human condition. Therefore, it is perceivable that by understanding the terms and conditions of one's labor practice, another may come to understand the laborer as a result.

Since WWII, the proportion of US citizens with direct military experience has declined. This is especially palpable in institutions such as universities (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Stern, 2017), but the side effects of this decline are not limited to this space. Such an experiential gap in part manifests as an illegibility of veterans' value or needs. Largely, this is for lack of understanding the conditions that shaped them. This may also be exacerbated by the ever-changing landscape of military work (Bailey, 2013; Latiff, 2017) and public perception not keeping pace.

By focusing on labor, the dynamics of history, war, and the body are not only connected and encapsulated, but an analysis of military labor has the potential to hold the psychosocial, relational, political, and physical in tensegrity. Certainly, there have been scholastic investigations into the labor aspect of military activity, but these also tend to take on a largely historical role (Mansfield, 2016; Zürcher, 2013). It is of little service to debate whether military activity constitutes work—Zürcher et al. (2013) have well established that case. Rather, there is a need to expand and clarify the nature of military labor, particularly how it contributes to the self-craft—that is, the processes and experiences by which one constructs and comes to understand themselves socially and reflexively (Mbembe, 2019; Vora, 2015)—of those doing said labor, as well as how an understanding and unpacking of the interconnectedness of military work and sociopolitical systems can render servicemembers' experiences more legible from both etic and emic positions.

A framework of “veteran” as a post-labor category contextualizes military service—despite its now slightly incongruous nomenclature—as an occupation organized by compensatory labor exchange that has undoubtedly evolved from its historical location as a national or social obligation (Wright, 2012; Zürcher, 2013). Veteran as a post-labor category, departs from a policy perspective of

wholesale assessment of benefits or political entanglements (i.e., relating), as well as the important narrative aspect of entering the military (i.e., becoming), and instead targets the specifics of what veterans have done (i.e., doing) to achieve the status. Such an examination stands to clarify functional catalysts of veterans' physical, epistemic, and even emotional qualifications, skills, or idiosyncrasies. Further, understanding the associated tasks of military service qua compensatory labor places these activities in a value-scheme.

Practically, framing veteran as a post-labor category has implications for veterans' service providers, employers, or even veterans themselves, to articulate their military service as transferable, more readily in the civilian sector. Additionally, isolating the mental, physical, and emotional tasks pursuant to this labor-form creates space to process the medical or social peculiarities that veterans may exhibit in a less stigmatized or fetishized manner. From a theoretical lens, investigation of military service as labor establishes a new, comparative site to consider dynamics of labor division or gendered/invisible work that is still ripe for resolution even in the civilian sphere.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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