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Diversity and Inclusion Efforts in Federal Agencies: A Context for Exploring Perceptions of Military Veterans

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Abstract

National attention and resources are being brought to the issue of supporting the economic success of America's military veterans. Deemed an essential part of their transition and reintegration, employment remains a major area of focus. As such, various initiatives and hiring preferences in public and private organizations have reduced the obstacles to employment for those transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace. This is particularly the case in U.S. federal agencies, where military veterans comprise an increasingly significant demographic that is adding to the diversity of the workforce. These military veterans bring a unique set of values, life experiences, and perspectives to the civilian workforce that often differ from those of non-military veterans. In 2016, military veterans comprised 31.1% of the federal workforce as compared to 27.6% in 2013. These increases coincide with agency efforts to move from a sole focus on diversity towards a focus on diversity and inclusion—an effort designed to move away from simply ensuring proportional representation from various groups towards integrating the diverse perspectives of various demographic groups into the organization. This article provides a theoretical context for better understanding the perceptions and attitudes of veterans and how perceptions of agency diversity and inclusion efforts may differ between military veterans and non-veterans.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, military veteran, social identity theory, federal agencies

Introduction

According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2017), approximately 3 million of the more than 20 million U.S. military veterans—the demographic of men and women who have previously served in the U. S. Armed Forces and are now civilians—have served post-9/11. Many of these men and women are accustomed to working under pressure, within diverse teams, and making decisions amid uncertainty and possible harm to personnel and property. They possess well-developed technical and non-technical skills acquired in situations and environments that differ from many of their civilian colleagues. Their extensive, formal, hands-on training and experience have been described as a competitive advantage (Hardison et al., 2014) and beneficial for organizations that value diversity, creative problem solving, and productivity (Executive Order 13518, 2009). In fact, hiring and retaining military veterans represents a large component of the overall diversity efforts within many organizations (Choi & Rainey, 2010; Kleykamp, 2009; Ruh, Spicer, & Vaughan, 2009).

In federal agencies, hiring preferences have been established that allow special consideration for military veterans pursuing employment (Lewis, 2013). The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (2016) has stated this demographic currently makes up some 31.1% of the federal workforce—a percentage likely to increase as more than 1 million military service members are expected to leave the military and seek civilian employment over the next several years (Lee, Sanders, & Cox, 2014; Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014). As such, agency leadership is eager to maximize the contribution of this group while ensuring their organizational commitment and retention (Caillier, 2013; Executive Order 13518, 2009). This desire is captured in government-wide efforts to shift from a sole focus on diversity towards a focus on diversity and inclusion (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2011). This shift in focus is an effort designed to move away from simply ensuring proportional representation from various groups, towards integrating the diverse perspectives of various demographic groups into the organization and empowering all individuals (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Research suggests employee perceptions impact both attitudes and behaviors (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2001). Given the large number of military veterans in the federal workforce, understanding the perceptions, attitudes, and workplace behaviors unique to military veterans may prove beneficial for maintaining strong, diverse, and inclusive federal workplaces (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2014). This article discusses social identity theory as a theoretical context for better understanding military veteran perceptions and attitudes in federal agencies, as well as how perceptions of agency diversity and inclusion efforts may differ between military veterans and non-veterans.

From Diversity to Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion continues to receive attention in private and public organizations (Downey, Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015; Tienda, 2013). Early diversity efforts within organizations referred to ensuring representation of individuals with different attributes, such as race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic strata in the workplace (Poster, 2008; Waldrum & Niemira, 1997). More recently, diversity efforts have centered on diversity management (Pitts, 2009). This broadly refers to managing for all differences (race, ethnicity, gender, education, disability, etc.) to ensure every group is treated fairly and has what is needed to function successfully in the workplace (Pitts, 2009; Poster, 2008). Diversity management was a concept first discussed by R. Roosevelt Thomas (1990), who promoted moving beyond seeing diversity as solely recruiting based on race and ethnicity and called upon organizations to view diversity as both a strength and source of competitive advantage.

As diversity within organizations continues to rise, leaders are increasingly focused on integrating the diverse perspectives of various demographic groups into the organization and empowering all individuals (April & Blass, 2010; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). In other words, organizations are striving to be inclusive as well as diverse. However, while the concept of workforce diversity and diversity management (Mor Barak, 1999; Mor Barak, 2000) has enjoyed a long history of policy and research, the concept of inclusion in organizations remains a relatively new and under studied topic (Brimhall et al., 2017; Nair & Vohra, 2015). Described as a natural extension of organizational diversity and as the “crux of current diversity efforts” (Sabharwal, 2014, p. 198), organizational inclusion is a relatively new area of study (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2017; Shore et al., 2011). As such, there remains a lack of consensus around the definition, theoretical underpinnings, construct, and ideas of organizational inclusion and how inclusive organizations are built (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Echols, 2009).

Pless and Maak (2004) described an inclusive organization as one that promotes and fosters the integration of its diverse individuals. Roberson (2006) argued that inclusion means eliminating obstacles that prevent employees from fully participating and contributing to the organizations. Inclusion was defined by Pelled, Ledford, & Mohran (1999) as “the degree to which an employee is accepted as an insider by others in a work system” (p. 1014). In 2011, Shore et al., reviewed the existing inclusion literature and developed a new definition for inclusion: “the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (p. 1265). The feelings of belonging, or fitting in, as well as of being valued for their unique characteristics are a departure from earlier definitions.

The available literature has built a consensus that diverse organizations do not automatically equate to inclusive organizations (Chen, Liu, & Portnoy, 2012; Herdman & McMillan-Capehart, 2010; Mor Barak, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2016). Simply ensuring proportional representation of various groups and instituting equitable human resource practices does not equate to an organization actively valuing and engaging its diverse workforce (Herdman & McMillan-Capehart, 2010; Nishii, 2013; Pless & Maak, 2004; Tienda, 2013). The underlying theme in the existing inclusion literature suggests inclusion is a relational concept involving an interaction with the organization (leadership, policies, practices, and resources) and the employee, with the employee feeling they are fully participating members of the organization (Echols, 2009; Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011). In the few empirical studies that have measured inclusion and examined its impact on employee attitudes and behaviors in organizations, researchers found that inclusion can positively influence organizational performance (Sabharwal, 2014) and commitment and is negatively related to turnover intention (Brimhall, Lizano, & Mor Barak, 2014; Hwang & Hopkins, 2012).

Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Government

As the nation's largest employer, the U.S. federal government serves as a model employer in regards to the diversity and inclusion of its workforce. A philosophy of valuing workforce diversity has been adopted by federal agencies and accompanies an active pursuit of policies and initiatives that promote and manage diversity and inclusion within the federal workforce (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2011; Soni, 2000). In fact, existing federal policy requires agencies within the executive branch of government to strive for diversity and inclusion (Choi, 2010). In 2011, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13583, Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce, and thereby established a requirement for agencies within the U.S. federal government to promote and ensure equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion (Executive Order 13583, 2011).

Remaining in effect under President Donald Trump, Executive Order 13583 (2011) directs federal agencies to "develop and implement a more comprehensive, integrated, and strategic focus on diversity and inclusion as a key component of their human resources" (p. 52847). Each agency is required to identify and implement best practices that promote and remove barriers to diversity and equity (Executive Order 13583, 2011). In a sense, the issuance of this Executive Order solidifies the federal government's resolve to make diversity and inclusion within the federal workforce a strategic priority. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management—the agency responsible for administering all policies that support human resource departments throughout the federal government (2011), the Government-Wide Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan (the Plan), developed as part of the President's Executive Order 13583, provides "shared direction, encourages commitment, and creates alignment so agencies can approach their workplace diversity and inclusion efforts in a coordinated, collaborative, and integrated manner" (p. 3). Workplace diversity is addressed in a broad sense and includes individual attributes and characteristics such as "national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structures" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2011, p. 5). Building upon the inclusion literature and the definition offered by Shore et al. (2011), inclusion is defined as "a set of behaviors (culture) that encourages employees to feel valued for their unique qualities and experience a sense of belonging" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016a, p. 6). The 2016 Plan reflects the lessons learned since the original 2011 Plan and provides federal agencies with a framework for continuing to create and foster a diverse and inclusive workplace.

U.S. Military Veterans

The increased focus on inclusion within organizations coincides with national efforts to support the well-being and economic success of America's military veterans (Obama, 2011; Perl, 2015; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Support takes many forms, but increasingly requires an understanding of the role military culture plays in the life and identity of military veterans (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011; Demers, 2011).

Military Culture

While in the military, service members are part of a system that emphasizes discipline, rigid hierarchy, leadership, honor, and team over individual (Adams, Bruyn, & Chung-Yan, 2004; Dunivin, 1994). It is a system set within a culture characterized by the preparation for and conduct of combat. This culture is influenced by history, tradition, and the missions and specialties performed (Murray, 1999). As such, military veterans represent a unique cultural group with training and experiences distinct from the civilian world (Hall, 2011). Military identity comprising the "values of duty, honor, loyalty, and commitment to comrades, unit, and nation" are developed within the military culture (Demers, 2011, p. 162).

Service members are trained as warfighters who follow strict etiquette often operating within diverse teams in high stress and life-threatening environments that demand teamwork. Duty often requires frequent relocations and separations from family, and effects interaction with peers, subordinates, and superiors due to the requirements associated with a rigid hierarchy (Adams et al., 2004; Hall, 2011; Paparone & Reed, 2011). Previous research has emphasized the need for those working with military veterans to understand the role cultural identity plays in the lives of those who have served (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Hall, 2011; Ross, Ravindranath, Clay, & Lypton, 2015).

Transitioning into Civilian Life

Military culture can leave lasting impressions and often accompanies service members as they transition out of the military and into civilian life (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Teigen, 2006). This military culture is accompanied by diverse experiences that honed an array of technical and non-technical skills. As such, our nation's military veterans bring a unique set of values, life experiences, and perspectives with them to the civilian workforce (Braender & Anderson, 2013; Demers, 2011). Their experience and skills at "leadership, teamwork, team-building, critical thinking, and handling stress" can be a competitive advantage in certain jobs where many of their civilian colleagues of similar age have not received the same extensive and formal hands-on training (Hardison et al., 2014, p.1). Researchers have, however, found the lack of transferability of certain military derived job skills can work as a competitive disadvantage (Atuel, Keeling, Kintzle, Hassan, & Castro, 2016).

Many military veterans face specific challenges as they transition from active duty to civilian life. Healthcare (Meyer, Marion, Coronel, & Jaffee, 2010) for injuries, physical and mental trauma (Kang, Natelson, Mahan, Lee & Murphy, 2003), depression (Byers & Yaffe, 2014; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014), education and transferability of job skills (Atuel et al., 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, sexual assault (Kang, Dalager, Mahan & Ishii, 2005), homelessness, and suicide prevention (Kang & Bullman, 1996) have received major attention and research. These come with perspectives unique to the military experience and make supporting veterans' transition to civilian life both complex and resource intensive. In a study of student veterans on college campuses, Jenner (2017) concluded that research into the "ways in which gender, race/ethnicity, and veteran status intersect to produce unique experiences" could prove beneficial in better understanding this population (p. 9).

Recognizing the resource needs associated with transitioning veterans, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13822 into law on January 9, 2018. Titled Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life, this Executive Order instructs the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop and implement a Joint Action Plan that provides "seamless access to mental health treatment and suicide prevention resources for transitioning uniformed service members in the year following discharge, separation, or retirement" (Executive Order 13822, 2018, p. 1513).

Supporting Military Veterans Through Employment

Community groups, foundations, public agencies and not-for-profit organizations actively honor and offer supportive services to those who have served in America's military. While directly supporting and advocating on behalf of military veterans and their families has been the focus of Congressionally-Chartered Veterans Service Organizations, other organizations have placed a great deal of attention on facilitating the training and hiring of veterans. In fact, the federal government, private industry and not-for-profit organizations are working collaboratively to institute initiatives, human resource policies and practices, and incentives that facilitate the training and hiring of this demographic (Obama, 2011; Hardison, et al., 2014; Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014). Supportive employment programs and incentives now exist in many cities throughout the U.S. that assist veterans with the aforementioned challenges and with attaining meaningful employment (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016; Hall, Harrell, Bicksler, Stewart, & Fisher, 2014).

Finding meaningful employment (Leddy, Stefanovics, & Rosenheck, 2014; Stone & Stone, 2015), has been described as one way to renew the sense of purpose and meaning military veterans may have lost and find difficult to obtain in their transition to civilian life (Castro and Kintzle, 2014). Research surrounding the employment of America's military veterans has focused primarily on job readiness, transfer of skills, and education programs (Kleykamp, 2009; Mangum & Ball, 1989; Richard & Wilhite, 1990; Ruh, Spicer, & Vaughan, 2009). How perceptions of military veterans employed in organizations may contribute to positive organizational outcomes remains absent from the available literature.

Military Veterans in Federal Agencies

In the federal government, initiatives have long existed to employ veterans within federal agencies after separating from the military. Disabled military veterans have received preference in hiring since the Civil War (Collins et al., 2014). This preference was expanded to non-disabled veterans by Congress following World War I. Considered a means of honoring veterans for their service and sacrifices, veterans' preference as we know it today comes from the Veterans' Preference Act of 1944, as amended, and codified in Title 5 of the U.S. Code. By law, various categories of military veterans pursuing federal employment are to receive preference in hiring and retention from among other eligible non-veteran candidates (Lewis, 2013).

With an estimated 10.4% of post-9/11 veterans experiencing unemployment (Heaton & Krull, 2012) and about half of post-9/11 veterans transitioning to civilian life in recent years having experienced some period of unemployment within 15 months of separation (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015), meaningful employment while managing challenges unique to the military experience, are an essential part of the transition and reintegration of military veterans (Elbogen, Johnson, Wagner, Newton, & Beckham, 2012). The Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2014), asserts that the successful reintegration of the nation's military veterans into the civilian workforce contributes to sustaining the country's long tradition of an all-volunteer military and that the public needs to know that America values military veterans as a civil asset to ensure future generations remain willing to volunteer for service.

In November 2009, Executive Order 13518: Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government, mandated the creation of a Council on Veterans Employment and a Veterans Employment Initiative. The Council on Veterans Employment was tasked with developing a government-wide effort to increase the number of veterans employed within the federal workforce (Executive Order 13518, 2009). The Council focused its efforts on the recruitment and training of military veterans. The agencies represented on the Council were required to develop a government-wide Veterans Recruitment and Employment Strategic Plan as well as agency-specific operational plans that serve to promote employment opportunities for veterans (Executive Order 13518, 2009). It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that these Executive Orders are part of a continuous improvement effort by the federal government to fully realize the goal of utilizing the talents of all segments of society through the recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention of a more diverse federal workforce.

In 2016, the executive branch of government hired the highest number of military veterans in more than 20 years. As specified by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (2016), in the 2016 Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch Report, military veterans constitute 31% of the federal workforce and comprised 31.1% (71,304) of the 229,034 new employees hired in 2016, with the majority (86%) receiving veterans' preference. This is an increase from 2013, when military veterans constituted 27.6% of the federal workforce and comprised 31% (50,502) of the 162,839 new employees hired in 2013. In the same year, most veterans were between 40 and 60 years of age, male and non-supervisors. Spread across the more than 80 executive agencies, 81% of the military veteran population were male and 19% were female. As specified in table 1 (below), military veterans now comprise more than 30% of the workforce in some federal agencies (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2013; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2016).

Table 1

Ten Federal Agencies With Most Military Veterans (Executive Branch Full-Time Permanent Employees)

Agency	Employees	Veterans	Percentage (%)
Defense	687,435	326,529	47.5
Veterans Affairs	373,149	122,305	32.8
Homeland Security	191,644	53,126	27.7

Agency	Employees	Veterans	Percentage (%)
Justice	117,121	29,246	25.0
Treasury	92,109	10,203	11.1
Health and Human Services	86,552	6,476	7.5
Interior	71,057	12,127	17.1
Social Security Administration	64,394	10,478	16.3
Transportation	55,172	20,249	36.7
Commerce	46,046	5,636	12.2

Adapted from Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch Fiscal Year 2016, p. 6.

With more than 200,000 military service members expected to transition out of the military and into the civilian workforce each year over the five-year period of 2014 to 2019 (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), the number of military veterans entering the federal workforce is expected to increase. As such, agency leadership is eager to maximize the contribution from this group while ensuring their recruitment, well-being, commitment to, and retention within their agencies (Obama, 2011; EO 13518, 2009). Given that employee commitment can impact productivity and turnover (Gould-Williams, 2004; Pitts, Marvel, & Fernandez, 2011), it is important to understand how organizational factors may impact the commitment of military veterans to their agencies.

An important organizational factor to consider in relation to military veterans and the federal workforce is the area of downsizing—intentional reductions in the number of employees. An oft recurring theme in discussions of inefficiencies and mismanagement with government agencies, downsizing has been suggested as a means of improving performance by limiting human resources to key government services (Edwards, 2005; Jones, 2016). In fact, shortly after taking office in January 2017, President Donald Trump took steps to downsize the federal workforce through attrition by issuing a Presidential Memorandum, imposing a hiring freeze on all federal employees except military, public safety, and public health positions. According to the Office of Management and Budget (2018), this Presidential Memorandum put a pause on the hiring of federal civilian employees while requiring their office to develop recommendations for a Government-wide long-term workforce reduction plan through attrition. While the hiring freeze ended on April 12, 2017, the requirement for a long-term plan to reduce the size of the federal civilian workforce remains (Greszler, 2017). The results of this plan are expected to inform the Government-wide Reform Plan to be published as part of the President's 2019 Budget (Office of Management and Budget, 2018). It remains unclear how current efforts to restructure the federal government will impact military veteran employment or the perceptions and behaviors of military veterans working within federal agencies.

Social Identity Theory

As more military veterans add to the diversity of federal agencies and agencies strive to maximize their contribution, it is imperative to explore the unique characteristics and perceptions of military veterans as they relate to the evolution of diversity and inclusion in organizations and how these may differ from non-veterans. Social identity theory provides the basis for investigating how perceptions of organizational inclusion may differ based on group affiliation in general, and specifically, between military veterans and non-veterans. Developed in the early 1970's by social psychologist Henri Tajfel, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals define their self-concept not just by perceptions of their singular personal selves, but rather by their multiple selves or "social identities" that exist due to their wider group memberships (Lam

et al., 2010). The theory posits that the group an individual identifies with provides a source of self-esteem and fitting-in (Sabharwal, 2014). In other words, group membership is essential to the development of an individual's self-concept (Hennessy & West, 1999). Individuals derive an important definition of self through belonging to, and membership in, groups (Mor Barak et al., 2016). This is consistent with the explanation of Demers (2011) that "identity is socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed" within social or civic spaces (p. 163). Tajfel defined social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Hogg, 2006, p. 123). A group exists when three or more individuals think of and assess themselves as having shared attributes that distinguish them (as a group) from other groups (Hogg, 2006).

Military veterans are a group that is often seen and holds themselves in high regard. National efforts to honor and support the well-being of veterans and their families is well known (Elbogen et al., 2012; Obama, 2011; Rossiter, Dumas, Wilmoth, & Patrician, 2016). In addition to being honored and supported by the community, prior military experience and military culture may become the basis for veterans defining who they are in relation to their colleagues. Furthermore, being made fully aware of the hiring and promotion preferences afforded due to their military service, may promote a sense of being part of a distinct group within the civilian workplace.

Social identity theory suggests that employees' perceptions of organizational actions and policies are influenced by their sense of belonging to specific identity groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Hall (2011) explained, the military represents a unique cultural group distinct from the civilian world. Military culture is ingrained, leaving lasting impressions that can impact the experiences of service members throughout their lives (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011; Meyer, Writer, & Brim, 2016). Social identity theory provides a basis for investigating how perceptions of organizational diversity and inclusion efforts may differ between military veterans and non-veterans.

According to social identity theory, an individual's attachment to members of their own group serves to validate their own social identity and helps determine the ways in which they will interact with and interpret the action of others. This suggests that employee perceptions of the actions and policies of their organization will be influenced by their membership in and sense of belonging to specific identity groups. Therefore, social identity theory connects diversity characteristics and perceptions of diversity and inclusion within organizations because it indicates an individual's "perceptions of organizational actions and policies are influenced by their belonging to specific identity groups" (Cho and Barak, 2008, pg. 106). Gade and Wilkens (2013) found that military veteran clients of a vocational rehabilitation system in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, reported significantly higher levels of program satisfaction and "perceived considerable differences in the behaviors of their counselor" when they believed their counselor was also a veteran (p. 267). Research into student veterans found that they frequently seek out other student veterans to "validate their experiences and aid in successfully making the transition to college" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 30).

Depending on the social context, an individual may be compelled to think, feel, behave or even interpret situations based on group affiliation (Cho & Mor Barak, 2008). Therefore, applying social identity theory, it should be expected that veterans' perceptions will be influenced by their military affiliation, or specific identity group, and potentially differ from the perceptions of other groups, which should be explored in future studies. Understanding the perceptions and attitudes unique to this diverse group can be beneficial for maintaining strong, inclusive workplaces. However, few studies have investigated the unique perspectives of military veterans in the civilian workplace, how they may differ from non-veterans, and how those perspectives impact important organizational outcomes.

Early studies using social identity theory centered on the role that self-concept plays in group membership as well as relationships between groups (Cho & Mor Barak, 2008). However, social identity theory has also been used to study attitudes and behavior, influence and group cohesion, as well as decision making, bias, and leadership (Brown, 2000). More recent studies have explored social identity theory in an organizational context (Ellemers, Haslam, van Knippenberg, & Platow, 2003; Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). The theory has been used to explore motivation, commitment, turnover, group cohesion, decision-making, and job satisfaction within organizations.

Demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and specific group affiliations are ways in which social identity theory asserts individuals will tend to self-categorize themselves into groups. Thus, it is through a lens of social identity theory that military veteran status and perceived organizational inclusion can be explored (Cho and Barak, 2008).

Conclusions

The U.S. federal government is the nation's largest employer and is at the forefront of workplace diversity and inclusion. Specific emphasis is being placed on the recruitment and retention of military veterans. Federal agencies have instituted policies that focus on diversity and inclusion of all employees, while at the same time enacting special hiring and retention initiatives designed to recruit and retain military veterans. This has led to the military veteran demographic currently comprising some 31% of the civilian federal workforce. This figure is only expected to grow as more individuals transition out of the US military (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014).

As more military veterans fill the ranks and add to the diversity of the civilian federal workforce, it becomes important for agencies to retain and maximize the benefit from such a diverse group. Maximizing the benefit of diverse groups is at the core of current efforts to progress from a focus on diversity and diversity management towards a focus on inclusion (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2017). Inclusion is a nascent concept in the organizational literature and remains understudied in public organizations. Furthermore, military veterans have been largely overlooked as a demographic in the organizational literature.

Social identity theory suggests employee perceptions of organizational actions and policies are influenced by their sense of belonging to specific identity groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, social identity theory provides a basis for investigating how perceptions of diversity and inclusion may differ between military veterans and non-veterans. The unique characteristics and experiences of military veterans are factors that may lead to differences in perceptions and attitudes between military veterans and non-veterans. Understanding how the unique characteristics and perceptions of this demographic may impact factors such as trust, commitment, retention, and productivity, should be an important consideration for all federal agencies. As mentioned by MacLean and Elder (2007), more research is needed that investigates potential differences in veteran and non-veteran populations and makes use of existing theories to understand the extent to which differences in perception may exist. To this end, our article provides support for investigating military veterans as a specific demographic in organizational studies and a theoretical basis for understanding how military veteran employees' perceptions of agency inclusion efforts may differ from non-veterans. Such information may prove important to sustaining a diverse workforce that is representative of this growing population of employees.

Leaders within federal agencies must learn and implement appropriate strategies for instituting policies and practices that account for the varied perspectives of diverse groups as well as individuals. Agencies who fail in balancing self-interest with existing perspectives and concerns of military veteran employees, might find themselves unable to maximize the contribution and commitment of this significant demographic. Future organizational research should examine the role of military veteran status as it relates to relationships between employee perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes. Special attention should be paid to the growing number of female military veterans and potential perceptual difference from male veterans. Future research should also investigate whether military veteran employees' perceptions of social identity, commitment, and diversity and inclusion efforts differ based on the agency in which they work and whether military veterans predominantly pursue employment within specific agencies.

Theoretical and practical next steps include using the context from this article to:

- 1) empirically examine the perceptions of inclusion among military veterans and non-veterans within federal agencies and determine if more targeted policies and programs that support and promote organizational inclusion are warranted,
- 2) and empirically examine the impact of military veteran employees' perceptions of inclusion on important outcomes of organizational commitment and engagement.

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