



Journal of Veterans Studies

“Thank a Veteran”: The Elevation and Instrumentation of U.S. Military Veterans

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Abstract

Military service members returning home from war have historically faced problems reintegrating to civilian society. Such problems are common among veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. This article uses Buber’s (1958) concepts of experience vs. encounter to demonstrate that I-it communication with and about veterans is fostered by individual-level and relational-level challenges, including veterans’ loss of voice. That loss occurs through veterans’ reluctance to disclose and through societal processes described using muted group theory. Veterans are discursively objectified through the elevation of hero talk and the instrumental use of military rhetoric for commercial and political ends. The article concludes with recommendations for veterans and civilians to re-establish I-thou encounters.

Keywords: Reintegration; Social Support; Identity; Buber; I-it

Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates approximately 40% of combat veterans returning from deployment for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF), “perceived some to extreme overall difficulty in readjusting to civilian life within the past 30 days” (Sayer et al., 2010, p. 593). Reports of challenges with social relations were especially common, including extreme difficulty reported in dealing with strangers (43%) and getting along with a spouse or partner (42%). Reintegration to civilian life is complicated by physical problems (Eisen et al., 2012) and psychological challenges (Zamorski & Britt, 2011).

Veterans unable to successfully transition to a civilian code of communication following deployment will suffer not only interpersonal loss, but also identity loss. Herman & Yarwood (2014) noted that many veterans successfully reintegrate to civilian life, but also that many, “became stuck in a liminal space between civilian and military lives that perpetuated feelings of isolation” (p. 41). This sense of isolation is created and perpetuated by the way people talk to and about veterans. The cultural directive to “thank a veteran” is emblematic of a dominant social discourse, which idealizes veteran identities while marginalizing veterans’ individual voices.

The purpose of this article is to explore why and how veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are objectified through cultural discourses and to offer recommendations for countering the process and restoring their subjectivity. First, the extent of the phenomenon is explored by extending Martin Buber’s (1958) concepts of experience (“I-it”) and encounter (“I-thou”) from interpersonal to collectivistic contexts. Second, to explain why veterans struggle to engage actively in interpersonal expression, the individual and relational barriers to post-deployment reintegration are considered, with muted group theory used to describe how society silences veterans. Next, the process of collective societal objectification of veterans is analyzed with specific attention to processes of elevation and instrumentation. Finally, recommendations are offered for cultivating an I-thou relationship between veterans and civilians.

I-It and I-Thou in a Collective Context

The well-known phrase, “thank a veteran,” is used to illustrate and explain the relevance to veteran objectification of Buber’s (1958) two ways of engaging the world. In the most straightforward denotative understanding, “thank a veteran” is a simple injunction for citizens to verbally express gratitude for service to a specific military veteran they know or meet. Specificity is indicated in that the phrase is rendered in the singular (“thank a veteran”) rather than the plural (“thank veterans”). In short, saying “thank you” to one who has served is the most straightforward understanding of this simple phrase.

This verbal, face-to-face or written expression of gratitude fits Buber’s (1958) concept of engaging the world through encounter, a subjective mode in which two individuals participate in relationship with each other and in which they are both transformed. Buber designates encounters as the “I-thou” mode of engagement. Yet, Buber asserts that this mode is rare in modern society because that society is an “it” world in which others are perceived, not in whole, but as the totality of their qualities. In modern society, I-thou encounters are both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. In contrast, the I-it mode of experience is far more familiar and comfortable to modern individuals. In this mode, another is perceived objectively as something to be known or used. This default mode is so familiar that both those initiating engagements and those who are objectified may prefer an I-it to an I-thou interaction. The uncertainty of initiators is evidenced by the multitude of articles with titles like, “8 ways to express appreciation on veterans day” (Military.com, 2016). In that article, only four of the eight ways entail verbal or nonverbal direct interactions with a veteran. Indicating a shift away from the I-thou mode, other suggested ways to thank a veteran include “show up” to a Veterans Day event, “fly a flag—correctly,” and the more common suggestion in similar lists to “donate” to a veterans group.

These additional suggestions demonstrate that Buber’s ideas are transferrable from dyadic encounters to collectivistic encounters. The fact that advice is offered via mass media and online channels indicates a collective mass audience seeking guidance on cultural norms for the expression of gratitude. And because the advice is not tailored to individual initiators or receivers of verbal or nonverbal expressions of thanks, the individual “veteran” becomes a placeholder for all veterans. Therefore, this shift from an individual, spontaneous gesture to a cultural injunction to “Thank a veteran” necessarily becomes a non-spontaneous cultural performance in which “a veteran” becomes any veteran who can serve as a receptacle of gratitude. Thus collectivized, veterans simultaneously are objectified.

As noted, those who are objectified may prefer an I-it to an I-thou interaction. Evidence suggests that veterans are often ambivalent about expressions of gratitude for service. In a blog entry titled “How to thank a veteran 101,” the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (2016) cautions in the third sentence, “Even though we all know that saying thank you is meant to make one another feel good, it isn’t always that way with Veterans” (para. 2). The article includes first-person accounts of ambivalence from OEF/OIF veterans. Marine Corps veteran Carlos Loera expresses ambivalence in saying, “At first, it was hard for me to accept the fact that random strangers wanted to thank me” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016, para. 10). His use of “random strangers” suggests those expressing gratitude are also depersonalized, and perhaps objectified, by the veteran recipients. Veterans perceive those saying “thank you” in more personal (I-thou) terms when their thanks are motivated by greater understanding of who the veteran is and/or what the veteran has done. Navy veteran Daniel Perritt states, “A veteran thanking another veteran is different than civilians for me because it really is an automatic reaction these days—people feel obligated to thank us for stuff they have no clue about because it’s socially accepted” (2016, para. 13). In short, these

veterans are ambivalent because they cannot be sure whether gratitude is motivated by sincere understanding and appreciation of the sacrifices deployment entails, or by a self-serving desire to be perceived—by society or by one’s self—as a grateful person.

Instead of ambivalence, other veterans are hostile to the cultural practice. A *New York Times* article explored the phenomenon, noting that for some veterans, “the thanks comes across as shallow, disconnected, a reflexive offering from people who, while meaning well, have no clue what soldiers did over there or what motivated them to go, and who would never have gone themselves nor sent their own sons and daughters” (Richtel, 2015, para. 7). The article noted that some veterans mockingly respond to the phenomenon by tearfully thanking each other for their service. Veteran Rich Halverson confirms this mocking response, and adds others which are more confrontational:

One guy always says “Thank you for being an American,” while another says “Thank you for paying for my eye-surgery.” One makes light of it and says “You’re welcome, democracy’s on me today.” Another guy usually waits for the person to move along and mumbles to his friends: “f*** you too” (Halverson, 2016, para. 5).

This repeated cultural performance of gratitude expression is broadly perceived by veterans, whose responses of acceptance, ambivalence, or hostility reinforce that they are individuals who should be engaged with personalized conversation rather than generic phrases. When such phrases are used, veterans must decide (a) what the speaker’s motives are, and (b) how to respond in a way that preserves their own integrity and individuality. Navy veteran Krista Wright Elliot questions, “When someone says thank you for your service are they saying it because they think it’s the right thing to do or is it heartfelt?” (Kelly, 2017, para. 7). This question directly contrasts the I-it mode of treating another as a purpose (“because they think it’s the right thing to do”) with the I-thou mode of treating another as a co-participant in a transformational relationship (“is it heartfelt?”). In short, veterans, as individuals, vary in the way they interpret the thank-a-veteran performance, and those interpretations doubtless relate, in part, to the way it is performed (“the right thing to do” vs. “heartfelt”) and by whom it is performed (“a random stranger” vs. someone who has a relationship with the veteran, even if that relationship is through co-identification with the military). When rendered as cultural norm, however, the collectivistic nature of the injunction—civilians should thank veterans—reduces it to the I-it mode and thereby objectifies the veteran, who in some cases may reflexively objectify the one expressing gratitude.

Why Veterans Struggle with Voice

The foregoing arguments in no way diminish the collective debts of gratitude and ongoing support owed to military veterans. On the contrary, the argument here is that reflexive, collective gratitude is problematic because it objectifies veterans and denies them participation in their own ongoing identity formation while simultaneously placing those expressing thanks in the position of defining who veterans are. In another article eliciting veteran perspectives on this cultural performance, Marine Corps veteran Lydia Davey recognizes, “Getting prescriptive about how people should thank me is stifling and unhelpful” (*Task & Purpose*, 2015, para. 9). It is stifling precisely because it limits both civilians and veterans in their range of identity expression.

The creativity implicit in the intersubjective I-thou mode is impossible when cultural roles must be assumed and cultural performances enacted. Civilians increasingly may resort to culturally prescribed phrases because they have less intimate exposure to service members and veterans than in decades past. Whereas more than three quarters of adults over 50 have a family member who has

served, only one third of those 18–29 do (Pew Research Center, 2011). In the absence of family models and relationships, media depictions and news stories likely become the source of information for young civilians. As a result, this younger generation needs practice engaging with veterans as individuals rather than as stereotypes. Given that returning veterans more likely are younger, stereotypical perceptions by their generational peers can feel particularly alienating. Addressing the challenges to achieving I-thou interactions is important to veterans because research shows satisfaction with social support and a sense of community are protective factors promoting successful transition to civilian life (Hachey, Sudom, Sweet, MacLean, & VanTil, 2016). Yet, satisfactory support and community require a degree of mutual disclosure and vulnerability that is difficult to achieve when the veteran is struggling to understand his or her post-deployment identity and when the community regards veterans collectively as an archetype (e.g. heroes). Veterans' reintegration challenges therefore fall into two categories: individual and relational.

Individual challenges

Individual-level challenges refer to the physical, mental, and behavioral influences of deployment on the self. One theme that emerged in Durham's (2015) interviews with OEF/OIF service members regarding their family communication during deployment was a changing sense of self. Throughout the lifespan, dramatic shifts in the sense of self are disconcerting precisely because subjectivity is replaced with objectivity: the emerging self is experienced as alien to the familiar self. Adolescence is a similar experience and, like deployment, is marked by both physical and social changes, which can contribute to a sense of dislocation. The unitary "I" dis-integrates into two people: the person one was and the person one is becoming. People describe this feeling as being uncomfortable in their own skin. Until the new self is experienced as unitary, subjective, and integrated, an "I-it" relationship persists within the self, making communication with others challenging because the permanence of language and labels is ill-suited to expressing a self in flux.

A second individual-level challenge is that deployment requires communication patterns distinct from both regular military service and from civilian contexts. Of necessity, communication within the military is very task-oriented, and during deployment accurate, efficient, and circumspect communication is a requirement for survival. Heightened perceptiveness and responsiveness are crucial, but so is discretion. As a result, deployed service members tend to limit communication with higher- and lower-ranking members and also with family members (Durham, 2010). This emphasis on vigilance likely contributes to the changing sense of self, as maintaining vigilance is psychologically and physically exhausting.

A third challenge is likewise exhausting: attempting to code-switch between deployment and civilian modes of communication. Deployed service members filter or censor what they share with superiors, subordinates, and family members, but they seek support from deployed peers (Durham, 2010). The mutual dependence which develops among soldiers in war zones cultivates a sense of family among service members which may make the civilian family seem alien (Ahern et al., 2015). Advances in communication technology allow synchronous and regular communication between deployed service members and their families (Cigrang et al., 2014), which was unavailable to previous generations. Yet, significant proportions of both service members (Hinojosa, Hinojosa, & Högnäs, 2012) and their family members (Joseph & Afifi, 2010) avoid disclosure of some information. They have valid reasons for doing so, including protecting sensitive information, avoiding job distractions, or ensuring a positive interaction in case it is the final communication. One result of this frequent and active withholding, however, may be that the family and service member establish patterns in which each perceives the other more strategically—as someone to manipulate or manage into a better mood or a less distracted frame of mind. By default, strategic communication is

an I-it mode of interaction which could leave deployed service members and veterans identifying themselves more with their military family than with the family they return to.

Relational challenges

Relationship-level challenges refer to barriers to actively engaging with the family or with society. As Mokros (2003) asserts, identity is constituted in discourse, interaction, and reflection, so even the individual-level challenges above have a relational component. Although they are related, the struggles to understand one's experiences and how they have permanently altered one's sense of self are distinct from the struggles to actively engage with family and society on new, post-deployment terms.

Regarding family reintegration, a naïve assumption is that the veteran will return home and relational patterns will revert to what they were pre-deployment. Even in a best-case scenario, this outcome is unlikely because of the individual-level challenges (noted above) with which the veteran is contending. Further, partners, parents, and children mature during months-long separations and face life changes and life experiences which cannot be shared first-hand during deployment. For family members, personal changes can be magnified and accelerated by experiences of loss (e.g., from the long absence of a partner, child, or parent) and the assumption of new responsibilities and roles previously filled by the deployed service member.

The reintegration process is further complicated because individual members of military families vary in their general understanding of deployment and the stresses it entails. Experiences can range from family members with first-hand experience of their own deployment to family members with little comprehension of deployment from a service member perspective. Deployment to a warzone, moreover, entails stressors substantially different from the peacetime deployment stressors which families may have experienced (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). And those veterans contending with trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress also face greater problems with family adjustment (Taft, Schumm, Panuzio, & Proctor, 2008). The I-thou mode requires adequate intersubjectivity between communicators to allow for an understanding of the other's perspective. Absent this intersubjectivity, motivation to disclose is required. Yet, for a variety of reasons, veterans and their family members may opt not to discuss or ask about the most important experiences that occurred at home and in theater during deployment.

Societal reintegration can be more challenging for the veteran than reintegration to the family context because the broader society is less aware of veteran status and has less motivation than families do to deliberately accommodate veteran transitions to civilian identities. Indeed, this lack of awareness is the impetus for "thank a veteran" campaigns, which seek to acknowledge service members and veterans within the civilian context. The need for public awareness campaigns, however, is evidence that veteran voices are often unheard within the broader civilian context.

A result of this lack of voice is that others define who returning veterans are. This shift in voice necessarily objectifies veterans who do not participate or are denied the opportunity to participate in their own post-deployment identity formation. Although sincere I-thou communication is rare among non-intimates, the societal objectification of veterans is an extreme variety of I-it interaction. Muted group theory offers a useful lens for understanding the process by which this extreme I-it became society's default mode for interacting with veterans attempting reintegration to civilian life. Initially formulated by Edwin Ardener (1972; 1975) and elaborated by Kramarae (1981) as a feminist theory to explain how women's voices are discounted and therefore women as a group are marginalized, muted group theory has been extended to explain the relative silencing of a diversity of social groups (Hechter, 2004). The theory's three primary assumptions can be likewise

applied to civilians and veterans to explain how the latter fails to articulate an identity for themselves that is widely acknowledged.

As applied to veterans, the first assumption of muted group theory states that the different experiences of veterans and civilians result in different perceptions of the world. Certainly, the term “military culture” suggests how separate the military worldview is from the mainstream of civilian life. Even when not deployed to distant countries, military personnel at work are usually physically removed from civilian life by guards and barriers, reinforcing their social separation from civilian society. The endurance of that sense of separation is recognized by mental health workers who treat veterans (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011). Hall (2011) emphasized that clinicians’ effectiveness will be hindered, “unless we understand their language, their structure, why they join, their commitment to the mission, and the role of honor and sacrifice in military service” (p. 4).

Muted group theory’s second assumption holds that the dominance of civilian experiences mean that veterans struggle to articulate their experiences. Much of the research on disclosure of deployment experiences uses samples with post-traumatic stress symptoms, and among this group approximately half first disclose their traumatic experiences to a health care provider, and typically under pressure to do so (Leibowitz, Jeffreys, Copeland, & Noël, 2008). Further, 45% of those who do so perceive at least one negative response. Research on OEF/OIF veterans indicates that event-specific disclosures of deployment experiences can be therapeutic, but the effect occurs primarily among those with supportive social networks (Hoyt, Renshaw, & Pasupathi, 2013). Thus, the evidence supports the idea that disclosure of deployment experiences is frequently not even attempted, perhaps due to anticipated negative responses or lack of supportive audiences, or for other reasons.

The third assumption of muted group theory holds that veterans must translate their experiences into civilian language in order to participate in civilian life. The challenge of speaking about deployment experiences was framed above as both an individual challenge of relinquishing military secrecy and task-focus and a family context challenge of resuming “normal” (i.e. civilian) conversation topics and patterns. Muted group theory suggests that, in a larger societal context, military veterans must actually (re-)learn civilian “language.” That challenge has increased in recent decades, with the gap between military and civilian life growing due to multiple factors, including lack of a draft. Even before OEF/OIF, researchers had established The Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society (Feaver & Kohn, 2001), which addressed a problem previously articulated by Secretary of Defense Richard Cohen as: “a chasm developing between the military and civilian worlds, where the civilian world doesn’t fully grasp the mission of the military, and the military doesn’t understand why the memories of our citizens and civilian policy makers are so short, or why the criticism is so quick and so unrelenting” (quoted in Feaver & Kohn, 2000, p. 29).

Such criticism has not abated during the era of two protracted wars and the ongoing war on terror. Veterans are presumably not eager to explain themselves or their mission to a civilian audience with potentially critical or uninformed opinions on the wars or the way they have been conducted. Even when an audience is approving of the wars or the veterans who served in them, as muted group theory holds, veterans would struggle to translate the experience of war into language that would be appropriate and comprehensible to a civilian interlocutor within the confines of a social conversation. So, whether due to anticipated criticism or the inadequacy of language, the typical result is a veteran population, which mutes itself.

How Society Objectifies Veterans

In the relative absence of veteran voices, mainstream civilian culture discursively constructs the veteran identity through two primary means: elevation and instrumentation. Whereas muted

group theory typically denigrates less powerful groups (e.g. women and African Americans), the veterans are instead elevated in status, although the outcome is the same. Army veteran Ryan Kaufman expresses a common sentiment in saying, “Welcome home with a handshake is enough for me. Please do not place me on a pedestal” (*Task & Purpose*, 2015, para. 6). His preference for the nonverbal gesture is revealing because nonverbal communication is analog rather than digital (Bateson, 1972). Analog messages convey meaning in relationship to something else, thus a handshake necessarily communicates connection, although the meaning is open to interpretation by the sender and receiver. Language, on the other hand, is digital communication; it is representational and precise. Thus, “thank you” is much more restricted in potential meanings whereas a handshake is much more open to interpretation, in much the same way a digital clock is more precise than an analog clock. When engaging veterans, the analog communication code (e.g. a smile, a handshake) permits more flexibility and creativity in discursively constructing veteran experiences and identities.

By contrast, the digital code of speech is more definitive and therefore more restrictive, particularly when exalted terms like “hero” are used. Former Army Ranger Rory Fanning, who served two tours in OEF before turning into a conscientious objector, noted, “We use the term hero in part because it makes us feel good and in part because it shuts soldiers up (which, believe me, makes the rest of us feel better)” (Fanning, 2014, para. 27). Even when the term is deployed sincerely rather than strategically, it can have the effect of muting the veteran. Cara Hoffman is a novelist and sister of a combat veteran who spent three years interviewing soldiers and their families. She blames the use of terms like hero for the reluctance of veterans to seek help for post-traumatic stress and other mental health problems:

It sounds like praise, but it can be dangerously dismissive. 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’s 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. If you are a hero, part of your character is stoic sacrifice, silence. This makes it difficult for others to see you as flawed, human, vulnerable or exploited. And it makes it even more difficult for you to reach out when you need help. (Hoffman, 2014, para. 4)

In elaborating on motivations in his dramaturgical theory, Burke describes god-terms as “names for the ultimates of motivation” (1969, p. 74). Weaver elaborates the concept to represent ““rhetorical absolutes”—the terms to which the very highest respect is paid” (1985, p. 212). “Hero” is clearly a god-term, but is also, as Hoffman noted, a character or social role—to which the very highest respect is paid. In a *Parade* magazine article titled “Why you should thank a veteran,” the author credits veterans with securing the defining national virtues and sets an impossible standard of gratitude expression for civilians: “Next time you exercise the freedom of speech, to vote, to move freely about the country, to protect your family, and gather in your house of worship, you should thank a veteran” (Bolton, 2016, para. 3). One problem for the veteran hero is that from such an elevated perch one may only face the prospect of losing respect. Maintaining the heroic image by playing the role is exhausting, and it also feels false, as the term is typically applied by those who know little about the veteran at a personal level or the military at the organizational level. Marine James Kelly (2017) confirmed this perception among veterans that civilians’ thanks too often reveal they know little about the individual or about the military, and have not attempted to learn:

Like any organization, we have our screw-ups, our opportunists and people that joined for the wrong reasons. The simple psychology behind [resistance to thanks] is this: we

don't feel like we did anything special. This is a universal feeling among veterans.
(para. 3)

The desire to eschew the hero god-term is evident even among those to whom the label most accurately applies. Writing in the military news outlet, *Stars and Stripes*, Leo Shane said of the five living Medal of Honor recipients:

The common thread between the survivors' stories has been their humility, even compared to the proud-without-boasting heroes of the past. All of them said they were just doing their job, that any other service member would have done the same, that they aren't inherently different than any other American who joined the military. (2013, para. 11)

The elevation of veterans to heroes reflexively meriting thanks and respect by definition renders them cultural objects of adoration. Others who fill similar cultural roles include first responders, police officers, and teachers. As objects of reflexive adoration, the only possible mode of communication with them is the I-it mode. The resulting discourse is monologic (vs. dialogic) and reinforces the privilege of the civilian expressing gratitude to define the identity of the veteran by selecting language and vocabulary the veteran cannot refute without undermining his or her own attempts to reintegrate into a civilian society where the appropriate response is a "thank you" and a smile.

A second means by which the process of objectification takes place is through instrumentation. Buber (1958) criticizes the I-it mode precisely because it treats human beings as objects to be used for an instrumental purpose. If elevating veterans begins the process of stripping agency from veterans, treating those veterans instrumentally completes the process. The purposes of civilians discursively constructing veterans may vary. Some may simply want to feel they have done a good deed, as when they thank a veteran—any veteran. Others may use language instrumentally to silence veterans and thereby avoid uncomfortable or challenging conversations. Fanning notes this instrumental use of language when he says, "Thank yous to heroes discourage dissent, which is one reason military bureaucrats feed off the term" (Fanning, 2014, para. 27).

Others may be more strategic still in their instrumental veteran discourse, using veterans to advance commercial or political ends. Such objectification explicitly illustrates the processes by which society mutes veterans and creates a social context in which veterans struggle to define themselves, even in interpersonal relationships. Some objectify veterans to achieve commercial ends. A *Forbes* article titled "9 ways to say thank you on veterans day (and maybe even get a tax break)," includes the potential dollar value of tax credits for hiring veterans and guidelines for donating appreciated securities to enhance income tax deductions (Erb, 2013). Even those recommendations benefit veterans. More suspect are commercial messages that clearly use veteran discourses to achieve financial aims which benefit veterans not at all. Online retailer Amazon offers dozens of patriot-themed items on its Veterans Day page, where it declares, "We look forward to helping you celebrate the service of U.S. military veterans" (Amazon.com, 2016, para. 4). Even the dead are commemorated via retail discounts. Similar to other large retailers, Walmart issues the invitation: "On Memorial Day, don't miss out on Walmart's great savings" (Walmart, 2016, para. 1).

In addition to commercial objectification of veterans is political objectification. For example, the Obama administration's offer to accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement was forcefully opposed on several grounds. One of the counter-arguments held that assistance should not be provided to non-citizens when U.S. veterans are in need of aid, as if budgeters were threatening to divert VA funds for that purpose. In February 2016, Breitbart reported the Islamic Center of Irving, Texas was the site of an armed protest under the banner, "Veterans before Refugees" (Hope, 2016). The rally organizers, the Bureau of American Islamic Relations, issued a statement claiming, "We will not allow Syrian refugees to come here from a war zone while thousands of veterans are sleeping on

the streets and dying waiting for the VA healthcare they were promised when they took the oath” (para. 2).

Breitbart is a media outlet of the alt-right and widely criticized for failures to confirm the accuracy of its stories (Carroll, 2016). Yet, in an age of social media and fake news, discourses which are plausible even to a minority of people may attain a level of cultural circulation unattainable in the pre-Internet age. As early as 2014, FactCheck.org disproved a campaign claim by Rep. Bill Cassidy that his opponent, Sen. Mary Landrieu, voted to fund benefits for immigrants and deny benefits to veterans (Farley, 2014). As the Syrian refugee crisis became more urgent, the nationality of the immigrants in this discourse became more specific. On August 7, 2016, Snopes.com refuted a widely reported claim that President Obama cut \$2.6 billion in veterans spending in order to support Syrian refugees in the United States (LaCapria, 2016). Using veterans for both political and commercial ends, a “Veterans Before Refugees” t-shirt is available for \$21.95 online from GruntStyle.com of Carol Stream, Illinois (Grunt Style, 2016). Its website notes, “We support Americans and our Veterans who are willing to die for your freedoms” (para. 2) and the shirts are “designed, printed, shipped by the proud veterans & patriots of Grunt Style” (para. 6).

Veterans have been similarly invoked for a variety of other political agendas. When Chelsea Manning, serving time for espionage in Fort Leavenworth, sought gender-reassignment surgery, online comments to the story on TheBlaze.com immediately and repeatedly noted the challenges faced by veterans seeking help through the Department of Veterans Affairs (Street, 2016). When San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began protesting police shootings of African Americans by kneeling during the national anthem, many agreed with his former teammate, Alex Boone: “You should have some [expletive] respect for people who served, especially people that lost their life to protect our freedom” (Jacobs, 2016, para. 4).

Among politicians, patriotism and military reverence have long been themes of campaign rhetoric. During the last presidential election, Donald Trump’s strategic employment of veteran rhetoric was particularly pronounced, given the minor scandal after evidence surfaced that he failed to fulfill his high-profile promise to fund veterans’ charities (Bethea, 2016). By early fall, 2016, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs publicly stated, “I don’t think veterans should be used for political reasons” (Wolfson, 2016, para. 5). In keeping with muted group theory, that criticism received far less coverage than the original invocation of veterans for political purposes. As long as veterans embody the god-term “hero” they will be susceptible to strategic political discourse, but that discourse is increasingly controlled by those who are not veterans and therefore have little say in how they are used.

In the current Congress, only 20% of senators and 19% of representatives have military service backgrounds, a decline from more than 70% in the 1970s (Geiger & Gramlich, 2017). That decline parallels a decline in the general population: the proportion of U.S. adults with military experience declined from 18% in 1980 to only 8% in 2014 (Livingston, 2016). In short, as those with the most social influence talk to others about veterans and their concerns, increasingly neither party has any direct experience as a service member. Even when the speakers and listeners have benevolent motivations, excluding veterans from conversations which construct their societal and self-perceptions is problematic because veterans then become an object to be talked about (I-it) rather than people to be talked with (I-thou).

Recommendations to Communicating in I-Thou Mode

Finding ways to counter the I-it objectifying mode of discourse is itself challenging, given that Buber notes it is pervasive in modern society. Yet, even if I-thou encounters do not become normative, efforts to cultivate them could mitigate the alienating effects of I-it experiences, which

objectify veterans and strip them of agency, particularly during difficult times of transition to civilian life. Numerous articles and books have suggested useful strategies that both veterans and civilians might employ to humanize the other. A few of those strategies merit mention here.

Recommendations for veterans

Veterans should look for ways to resist objectification by asserting their individual and collective voices in conversations which exclude them. I-thou relationships are possible only when both parties are willing to disclose intimate information and to listen. So one recommendation is for veterans to start talking: to seek a supportive listener or group and to share deployment experiences in a safe interpersonal context. Supportive family members, fellow veterans, and counselors are candidates for this role.

Second, veterans should develop and practice effective responses to those who objectify them, inadvertently or strategically. For inadvertent objectification such as, “Thank you for your service,” the response will depend on the veteran’s comfort with such remarks. Those who are comfortable with a benign statement of appreciation can simply say, “Thank you.” Those who are uncomfortable should consider why they are uncomfortable and generate a nonthreatening way to equalize the engagement rather than feeling placed in an objective position. One potential response might take control of the exchange: “I appreciate it, but so many other people deserve those thanks. Let me tell you about my wife’s sacrifices.” Another response could emphasize equality between the civilian and the veteran: “Thanks. All of us are threatened by global terrorism and I think all of us do our part to fight it—or at least we should!” Veterans can also restore subjectivity by requesting the speaker respond: “Thank you for saying that. Do you have a military background?”

Third, veterans can counter their objectification at a societal level by using traditional and new media to amplify their voices. Individually, veterans who oppose commercial and political use of the military should publicly voice their opposition through calls to broadcast programs, letters to newspapers and magazines, and posts to social media. In doing so, they are likely to find many allies among civilians, veterans, and active-duty service members. Persistent and credible statements of opposition to glib and manipulative invocations of veterans would eventually stigmatize the practice and alter the cultural context which currently permits it.

Collectively, veterans should continue to become politically and socially active through groups like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Participating in groups which span the political spectrum would reinforce the idea that service members and veterans remain individuals: their common mission and service does not erase their individuality or humanity. Returning veterans do not need additional expectations placed on them, but if those veterans collectively become more willing to disclose general or specific thoughts on their deployment experiences, the disclosures could dramatically shift popular understanding of veterans and ultimately could benefit the veterans themselves.

Recommendations for civilians

Civilians, too, bear a responsibility for engaging with veterans in an I-thou mode. West and Turner (2010) suggest several strategies for avoiding the muting of marginalized groups. Two of these strategies could be adapted for elevated groups like veterans. The first is to identify silencing factors, much as this article and similar popular press articles have attempted to do (e.g. Klay, 2014). The second is to embrace military discourse in a way that would allow veterans to communicate more, or more often, in terms which foster easier expression of deployment experiences. To achieve this, civilians could familiarize themselves with a range of deployment experiences through veteran

narratives available online and in the mass media. First person accounts would provide the most authentic and least sensationalized representations and those which include analog (nonverbal) cues might convey the experiences more fully than written accounts. Thus, the American Folklife Center's Veterans History Project (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>) and StoryCorps (<https://storycorps.org/listen/>) provide audio access to compelling monologues and interviews with veterans from a range of backgrounds and with a range of experiences. Similarly, YouTube (www.youtube.com) has channels for *Frontline* (presenting ground perspectives on war) and for the Veterans History Project (presenting recalled experiences of deployment).

Civilians could also participate occasionally in encounters in which they are the minority and military and veteran voices are dominant. Attending public events on military installations is an excellent way to meet and talk with veterans and the context inevitably requires a broader conversation than a simple, "thank you for your service." On military bases, service members and veterans are in a position to vividly describe the military and their place within it. Beyond attending events, organizations are eager to enlist civilian volunteers to work alongside veterans on a one-time or ongoing basis. VA Voluntary Service (<https://www.volunteer.va.gov/>) and the Honor Flight Network (<https://www.honorflight.org/>) are two of the better known organizations seeking both civilian and veteran volunteers.

In casual conversations, civilians who position themselves as listeners rather than talkers may achieve Buber's (1958) dialogic encounter, an I-thou relationship. Inviting a veteran to share experiences of deployment risks objectifying the civilian as receptacle, perpetuating an I-it encounter. At worst, however, if this possibility materializes it may temporarily alleviate the veteran's burden of maintaining the hero role. Of course, disclosures may be traumatic, so civilians who do not know the veteran well might ask specifically about positive experiences, such as the funniest thing that happened in Iraq. Research by Hoyt and Renshaw (2014) indicated that disclosure of positive deployment-associated emotions is a protective factor against post-traumatic stress, particularly if the audience includes civilians. Alternatively, civilians can shift the focus from deployment to the present. Marine James Kelly wrote, "If you run into a vet that doesn't want to talk about it, ask what he or she is doing now. Are they going to school? Where do they work now that they are out? Help destroy the anonymity that many vets feel" (2017, para. 9). Halverson offers similar advice: "So the next time you meet a veteran, don't say, "Thank you for your service"; instead try shaking their hand and saying, "Welcome home, how was it, and how are you?" (2016, para. 33).

Finally, civilians should resist the cultural impulse to label any veteran a "hero" and to reflexively thank veterans for their service, but expressing gratitude should not be avoided altogether. One approach is to offer a rationale for the thanks: "I lost a college friend on 9/11, so I want to thank you for serving in our military." Offering a reason humanizes the civilian and offers the veteran a range of potential responses beyond, "You're welcome." The exchange is open rather than closed. Similarly, rather than disclose about themselves, civilians could initially find out about the veteran. When asked how civilians should express thanks, Navy Reservist Marissa Cruz stated, "Talk to me. Ask me what my job entails, what I enjoy about the military or why I chose to serve. Not because I like talking about myself, but because it's a more meaningful way to engage if you have a better understanding of what you're actually offering thanks for" (*Task & Purpose*, 2015, para. 15). This statement eloquently clarifies that the adjustment challenges faced by returning veterans are equally civilian problems and ultimately societal problems. Only when citizens of a democracy understand the significant challenges and sacrifices entailed in deployment and reintegration can that society make wise decisions regarding war and its repercussions. Those decisions are contingent upon authentic interpersonal engagement between a society's warriors and its civilians.

Conclusions

This article used Buber's (1958) two modes of discourse to explain how military veterans reintegrating into civilian life are often objectified through discursive processes of elevation and instrumentation. The widening gap between military and civilian culture increases the likelihood that veterans will be assigned the hero role and thereby stripped of agency and muted. Restoring the voice of veterans, collectively and individually, requires deliberate and sustained effort by both veterans and civilians, but shifting from objectifying I-it experiences to intersubjective I-thou encounters with veterans could dramatically improve the well-being of both veterans and the society which produced them. Such an improvement would be the ultimate expression of thanks for their service.

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