



Perceptions of Legal Legitimacy among University Students with and without Military Service

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Abstract

We know that individuals who have and have not served in the military often hold different assessments of social institutions. We also know from a separate body of research that perceptions of the legitimacy of a society's legal system is an important social indicator that varies on a number of demographics, experiential, and identity factors. Yet research has not explored if and how veteran status is associated with perceptions of legitimacy. We began addressing this gap in the literature by surveying veteran and nonveteran students. The results of this exploratory study showed that veterans did not differ from nonveterans in their perceptions of legitimacy, but a different set of factors shaped the assessments of veteran students. Further, our examination of veteran-specific factors showed that exposure to combat was negatively associated with legitimacy and that veteran identity contributed to increased trust in the legitimacy of legal institutions.

Keywords: legal legitimacy, civil-military relations, veteran identity, veterans, social identity

Introduction

Veterans of the United States military make up approximately eight percent of the adult population (US Census Bureau, n.d.) and the wider society holds them in high regard (Pew, 2013). Nonetheless, veteran status has received minimal empirical scrutiny in research on public attitudes (Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014) and for this reason, there is a need for important lines of sociological research (Camacho and Atwood, 2007). Although there is an inchoate body of research on how veteran status is related to political affiliation, attitudes, and behavior (Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014; Teigen, 2007), other important questions about veteran attitudes remain unexamined.

The present study explores if veteran status is associated with perceptions of the legitimacy of the US legal system. Faith in the legitimacy of a society's legal systems and its actors is an important social indicator (Jowell and Eva, 2009) that has implications for compliance with the law and the decisions of legal authorities (Eisner and Nivette, 2013). Research shows that perceptions of legal legitimacy vary with race, ethnicity, age gender, experiences with legal institutions, and the social identities of individuals (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Tyler and Jackson, 2014). Yet, we have no information on: (1) whether veteran status affects perceptions of legal legitimacy and trust in legal authorities, (2) whether the factors that shape perceptions of legitimacy in the larger US population function similarly among veterans, and (3) if factors unique to military veterans influence attitudes regarding the legitimacy of legal institutions. We begin exploring these questions with a sample of US university students with and without prior military service.

Civil-military relations

In the United States and other nations, there is long-standing interest in the relationship between the military and civilian institutions. This civil-military relations scholarship draws from diverse academic disciplines, with particularly important contributions from sociology and political science. Traditionally, this work has been concerned with implications for civilian control of the armed forces and military effectiveness (see Nielsen, 2005 for overview). Although fierce disagreements on its implications persist, much of this research draws on the idea of a gap between civilian society and the military. Recently, it has been suggested that the notion of a unitary gap is too simple and four types of gaps — cultural, demographic, policy preference, and institutional — have been offered (Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012).

Although the present study draws upon this body of scholarship, we are not directly concerned with the political manifestations regarding locus of military control and readiness. Instead, we are concerned about the implications of a cultural gap in attitudes between veterans and their civilian counterparts (who have not served in the military). Veterans are an important demographic in the United States. Thus, research into important social attitudes and perspectives should attend to potential differences between veterans and non-veterans.

Driven by a mix of self-selection and socialization, current and past members of the military tend to hold more conservative perspectives on political and cultural issues than do individuals without such service (Franke, 2001). Much of the early research on this subject focused on differences between active military elites and their civilian counterparts (see Feaver, Kohn, & Cohn, 2000 for overview). Similarly, recent research comparing cadets from service academies and/or Reserve Officers Training Corps' students with civilian undergraduates has largely supported this divide. The students with military affiliations had more conservative positions about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rohall, Ender, & Matthews., 2006), allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military (Ender et al., 2012), and attitudes towards transgender individuals (Ender, Rohall, & Matthews, 2016). More generally, research has shown higher rates of identification with the Republican Party in the US and/or conservative ideology among military-affiliated students when compared with nonaffiliated students (Ender et al., 2012; Franke, 2001; Rohall et al., 2006).

Research that contrasts the political and policy positions of veterans—as opposed to current members of the military—is less abundant and somewhat dated. However, a few methodologically strong surveys have explored the topic. Holsti (2001) reported on two separate surveys that compared the political attitudes of (1) elites with and without prior military service and (2) veterans and nonveterans drawn from the public. Although the differences were starker among those in leadership roles, veterans in both samples were more likely to identify as Republicans and conservative.

More recent studies show mixed results. Using national polling data during the 2004 presidential election, Teigen (2007) found veteran status was not associated with party identification, candidate preferences and ultimate vote. In marked contrast, Klingler and Chatagnier (2014) analyzed survey data from the 2006 midterm elections and found veterans more likely to identify with the Republican Party, conservative ideology generally, and conservative positions on domestic and foreign policy matters.

Although limited and relatively dated, some research explores trust in civilian institutions based upon military service. Despite their limits, these studies are directly relevant to the issues explored in the present study. For instance, among male high school students graduating between 1976 and 1995, those intending to enter the US military did not differ in trust in government when compared with their college bound peers (Segal, Freedman-Doan, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2001). Whereas other surveys from the late 1980s found that veterans were more concerned with the decline in integrity among public officials (Holsti, 2001), but had higher levels of confidence in the US Supreme Court and law enforcement agencies. The extant research indicates that individuals who have served in the military often differ from civilians in values and attitudes regarding society. Yet, these divergences are far from universal and highlight the need to examine varying contexts related to military service and other factors associated with attitude formation.

Legal legitimacy and social identity

The study of legal legitimacy is concerned with the extent to which a society's members feel that they should obey its laws and legal actors. In contrast with deterrence-based perspectives, theories of legitimacy see legal compliance as motivated by the belief that it is the right thing to do

rather than complying with laws out of fear. The work of Beetham (1991) is helping to integrate diverse perspectives on legitimacy that includes content from moral, legal, and social theories. His theory assumes that legitimacy involves: (1) conformity with established rules, (2) the ability to justify rules and laws with values shared by dominant and subordinate groups, and (3) consent and agreement by the governed. Beetham (1991) convincingly argued that the three-part nature of his framework on legitimacy allows for exploration of points of consistency as well as divergence between the rules, beliefs, and actions of individuals within a given power relationship. For this reason, his theory provides a useful structure for examining the role of legitimacy in predicting compliance with the law (Jackson et al., 2011).

Beetham's (1991) call for an increase in inter- and intranational research into legitimacy has resonated with a larger movement committed to incorporating attitudinal constructs into sociological and socio-legal inquiry. For instance, Jowell and Eva (2009) argue for augmenting traditional social indicators that focus on economic well-being (e.g. GDP), health (e.g. life expectancy), and social outcome (e.g. educational attainment or incarceration rates) with assessments of the cognitive judgements citizens make regarding their societies. They recommend giving increased attention to the study of trust in social institutions and perceptions of fairness in social systems. They also advocate for the development of measures to study these important constructs (Jowell and Eva, 2009). Indeed, Beetham's (1991) framework provided a theoretical basis for a measure of legitimacy constructed for the European Social Survey (Jackson et al., 2011) and used in a population-based survey in the U.S. (Tyler and Jackson, 2014). These and other surveys document associations between perceptions of legitimacy and different forms of law-abiding behavior (Jackson et al, 2012; Tyler and Jackson, 2014). Research, for instance, shows that positive estimations of legal legitimacy are associated with a decreased likelihood of carrying a gun among recently released prisoners (Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012) and with increased compliance with tax regulations among previous tax offenders (Murphy, Bradford, & Jackson, 2016).

We also know that perceptions of legitimacy will vary with a mix of demographic, experiential, and psychological factors. Tyler and Jackson (2014) found, for example, that race, gender, age, and level of income were all significantly associated with perceptions of legitimacy. In addition, adults in the US and in France who had negative experiences with law enforcement held lower levels of perceived legitimacy than individuals without such experiences (Roux, Roche, & Astor, 2011; Tyler and Jackson, 2014). We do not know, however, how this mix of factors interact with other relevant contextual factors for examining questions of legitimacy.

Social identity is another factor that can interact with perceptions of legitimacy and willingness to cooperate with authorities. Tyler and Huo (2002) found, for instance, that legitimacy was associated with pride and respect for one's group. The current literature on legitimacy considers the effect of group identity broadly but does not include veteran status as an identity. Moreover, the current literature on veteran identity is quite limited (Gade and Wilkins, 2013). Nonetheless, there are a small number of studies on how identification as a veteran can affect preferences for and utilization of medical services (Di Leone, Wang, Kressin, & Vogt, 2016; Locatelli, Turcois, & LaVela, 2014; Matthias et al., 2016). Yet the veteran identity construct remains understudied and requires further articulation and investigation.

Social identity theorists (e.g. Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1982) offer promising insights into how veteran identity may be associated with perceptions of laws and legal institutions. First, there is the notion that all people have multiple social identities and their respective importance vary over time and between individuals. Second, social identity theory posits that as identification with a particular identity group becomes more salient, the norms of that group will exercise greater sway in shaping

thoughts, feelings and behaviors of group members. With these assumptions in mind, it is important to know how identification as a veteran contributes to perceptions of legal legitimacy.

Summary and research questions

We know from prior research reviewed in this paper, that a history of military service can be associated with differences in how individuals view social institutions and the values they hold. We further know that a person's values, past experiences, demographics, and the groups that they identify with can shape their perceptions of legitimacy. Research also shows that perceptions of legitimacy is an important social indicator that helps explain why individuals do or do not obey the law. However, a gap emerges in the current literature about how veterans perceive the legitimacy of current legal institutions and its potential implications for understanding veteran compliance with legal authorities.

To begin addressing this gap the study examined three research questions. The first two were concerned with between-group distinctions and the third focused on within-group analyses.

1. Does perception of legitimacy differ between university students with and without a history of military service?
2. Do traditional correlates of legitimacy function in similar ways in veteran and nonveteran student samples?
3. What effects do exposure to combat and veteran identity have on perception of legitimacy among students with a history of military service?

Methods

Sample

The participants were all students at a large public university in the United States. The study's design was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University and found to be exempt. The survey was administered via Qualtrics between September and October 2015. The recruitment script and survey link were distributed through (1) an announcement on the web portal of all students, (2) course announcements by instructors in a variety of disciplines, and (3) two emails from the university's veteran support center to all students on their distribution list. The survey was anonymous, voluntary, and not incentivized beyond the opportunity to enter a raffle for six gift cards totaling \$100. The survey utilized an implied consent approach. That is, the welcome screen provided IRB approved consent information for potential participants. Completion of the survey was deemed to constitute consent.

The survey was started by 1,154 students. However, 138 failed to complete it and were removed from the dataset. An additional four students reported being under 18 years of age and considered ineligible for this study because of their age. Finally, we removed four individuals who did not identify as veterans, but instead as active members of the military.¹ Thus, our final sample consisted of 1,008 individuals. We created two subsamples to facilitate comparisons between veteran and nonveteran students. As illustrated in Table 1, the veteran and nonveteran students differed on most measures.²

¹ We removed these current military members as research in the civil-military relations area tends to find attitudinal differences between veterans and current members of the military.

² Descriptive and bivariate statistics give the impression that veteran students are significantly more likely to be arrested than nonveteran students. However, this seemed likely an artifact of the demographic differences between the subsamples as opposed to veteran status. Thus, we tested a logistic regression model and found that veteran status was not significantly associated with arrest history when controlling for age and gender.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Full Sample*

Characteristic	Nonveteran (<i>n</i> = 931)	Veteran (<i>n</i> = 77)	Test of difference
Female gender	72%	25%	$X^2(1) = 73.79, p < .001$
Age (mean)	26	34	$t(1002) = -8.12, p < .001$
Age (categories)			$p < .001$ (FET)
18 to 24	63%	4%	
25 to 29	16%	33%	
30 to 39	13%	38%	
40 to 49	6%	22%	
50 and above	3%	3%	
Race and ethnicity			$p = .004$ (FET)
African American	5%	5%	
Asian/Pacific Islander	10%	1%	
American Indian	2%	5%	
Hispanic	18%	10%	
White, non-Hispanic	59%	73%	
Multiracial or ethnic	7%	5%	
First-generation college	46%	62%	$X^2(1) = 7.54, p = .006$
Undergraduate	77%	69%	$X^2(1) = 2.49, p = .126$
Full-time student	86%	78%	$X^2(1) = 3.19, p = .095$
Have dependent child	17%	46%	$X^2(1) = 36.85, p < .001$
Ever arrested	7%	21%	$X^2(1) = 18.82, p < .001$

Note. FET = Fisher's Exact Test.

Table 2 provides service-related characteristics on the veteran subsample and highlights some of the diversity that lie beneath the term *veteran*. The strong majority of individuals served in the current era. Additionally, the veteran subsample reported relatively high rates of combat experiences. Almost two-thirds reported deployment to a combat theater. One half-reported personally experiencing the stressors of combat.

Table 2. *Service-Related Characteristics of Veteran Subsample (n = 77)*

Characteristic	Number and percentage
Branch(es) of service	
Army	35 (46%)
Navy	18 (23%)
Air Force	14 (18%)
Marine Corps	12 (16%)
Coast Guard	1 (1%)
Era(s) of service	
Post-September 2001	63 (82%)
August 1990 to August 2001 (includes Gulf War)	20 (26%)
May 1975 to July 1990	11 (14%)
Deployment to combat zone	50 (65%)
Personal exposure to combat stressors	41 (53%)

Note. Some individuals served in more than one branch and/or era. Thus, those percentages do not total to 100%.

Measures

Legal legitimacy. We measured legitimacy with the multidimensional instrument developed for the European Social Survey by Jackson and colleagues (2011). This 43-item measure has a total

score and several subscales. The instrument contains items regarding perceptions of three types of legal authority: laws, the police, and courts. Items also cover the following three theoretically informed aspects of legitimacy. Items on the *trust* subscale measure whether the respondent expects legal authorities to act in a fair manner. The *normative alignment* items ask respondents if they believe legal authorities share their values. Finally, the *obligation to obey* items assess the extent to which respondents believe legal authorities are owed their compliance and cooperation. It has demonstrated solid psychometric properties with samples from Europe (Jackson et al., 2011) and from the U.S. (Tyler and Jackson, 2014). In the present study, responses were on a 1 to 5 scale with higher scores indicating higher positive perceptions.

Veteran identity. Due to the lack of a scale focused on veteran identity and our desire to connect this construct with a larger theory of identity, a 12-item measure of social identity designed for use with diverse social groups (Cameron, 2004) was administered to all veterans.³ The scale contains a total score and three theoretically informed subscales. Items on the *in-group ties* measures perceived social bonds with other group members. The salience of group identification in informing one's self-conception is measured by the *centrality* subscale. Finally, the extent to which group membership is associated with positive emotional feelings is measured by the *in-group affect* subscale. Although the tool has not been used to assess veteran identity previously, Cameron (2004) reported solid internal consistency and construct validity. The items were scored on a 1 to 5 scale with higher scores indicating stronger identification with the veteran identity. **Veteran.** Respondents were considered veterans if they answered yes to the following question: "are you a veteran of the US Military?" Individuals were not given any further parameters or guidance (e.g. length of service, type of discharge, and eligibility for Department of Veterans Affairs benefits). **Combat exposure.** Personal exposure to combat was measured by a single, binary item. Individuals who reported military service were asked if they had been, "personally exposed to combat-related situations (including, but not limited to, receiving fire, taking part in offensive activities, or exposure to dead or seriously wounded comrades, enemy combatants, or civilians)."

History of arrest. History of arrest was measured by a single, binary item. All participants were asked if they had, "ever been arrested (taken into custody by the police for suspected criminal behavior)." **Race and ethnicity.** Individuals were asked to identify with one of the racial and ethnic categories listed in Table 1. During the first phase of analysis—comparing the veteran and nonveteran students—all categories were used in the analysis. The white, non-Hispanic group was treated as the reference category and dummy codes were created for all other groups. However, there was not sufficient statistical power to use all categories when conducting analyses with the veteran subsample. Thus, a binary variable was made, contrasting white, non-Hispanic individuals with all others. We used this variable when conducting analyses with the subsamples. **Socioeconomic variables.** Being a first-generation college student was assessed with the following dichotomous item, "has at least one of your parents/guardians graduated from a four-year college or university?" Respondents were also asked the following yes/no question, "do you have any dependent children?"

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 24. Although the legitimacy and veteran identity measures both have subscales, all analyses used their respective full-score means. The first research question was explored through bivariate and multivariate tests. We began by using an independent sample t-test to explore if prior military status was associated with different perceptions

³ Nonveteran students were also administered the Cameron (2004) instrument and prompted to focus on their identity as students of the university. However, those responses are not used in the present study.

of legitimacy. Next, to partial out the potential effects of variables known to affect perceptions of legitimacy generally and/or on which the veteran and nonveteran subsamples in the current study differed, we regressed legitimacy on veteran status, demographic variables, and arrest history.

To explore the second research question — regarding the functioning of traditionally important correlates of legitimacy in the veteran and nonveteran subsamples — we conducted two separate analyses. Using each subsample, we regressed legitimacy on the same variables: age, gender, being a racial or ethnic minority, having a dependent child, and arrest history.

Finally, the third research question was explored through hierarchical regression. Building off the regression of legitimacy with the veteran subsample described above, combat exposure and veteran identity were added as a second block to explore how veteran-specific factors affected perceptions of legitimacy and the contributions of other correlates.

Results

Prior to conducting the core of the analyses described above, missing data and scale reliability were assessed. Among the 1,008 individuals in the final sample, a small number skipped items regarding gender ($n = 4$) or age ($n = 8$). These individuals were left in the sample but were omitted listwise when the variable in question was involved in a tested model.⁴ Although only the scale totals for legitimacy and veteran identity were used in analyses, we include psychometric and descriptive statistics for the subscales.

Both multiitem measures demonstrated solid reliability in the present study. As can be seen in Table 3, the full measure of legitimacy and all six of the subscales, had Cronbach's coefficient alpha values indicative of high levels of internal consistency for both subsamples of students. This was also the case for the full measure of veteran identity and its three subscales all had at least adequate reliability.

Table 3. *Scale and Subscale Characteristics*

Scale	Non-veteran students ($n = 931$)		Veteran students ($n=77$)	
	M (SD)	α	M (SD)	α
Legitimacy				
Total (43 items)	3.31 (.58)	.96	3.34 (.65)	.96
Obligation (17 items)	3.35 (.61)	.90	3.35 (.70)	.92
Trust (14 items)	3.10 (.67)	.90	3.11 (.73)	.91
Norms (12 items)	3.52 (.69)	.94	3.58 (.82)	.96
Laws (16 items)	3.26 (.60)	.90	3.20 (.71)	.92
Police (15 items)	3.36 (.70)	.93	3.53 (.75)	.93
Courts (12 items)	3.33 (.62)	.87	3.27 (.67)	.90
Veteran identity				
Total (12 items)	--	--	3.94 (.77)	.92
Ties (4 items)	--	--	3.87 (.83)	.82
Centrality (4 items)	--	--	3.68 (.92)	.83
Affect (4 items)	--	--	4.27 (.95)	.94

It is also helpful to consider the two key constructs descriptively. The nature of Cameron's (2004) identity measure does not provide meaningful cut-off scores and the lack of its prior usage to

⁴ The cases were deleted listwise as opposed to imputed, as the number and percentage of cases removed from both the veteran ($n = 1$, 1.3%) and nonveteran ($n = 11$, 1.1%) were very small and unlikely to bias estimates.

assess veteran identity precludes comparison against established means. The fact that all means were on the positive side of the 1 to 5 scale suggest that the subsample tended to identify with their status as veterans.

The measure of legitimacy also does not contain thresholds for interpreting high or low responses. Both subsamples of university students had mean scores between 3 and 4, suggesting slightly to moderately positive perceptions of legitimacy.

Research question 1

In bivariate testing, veteran status was not associated with perceptions of legitimacy ($t(1008) = -.34, p = .089$). As legitimacy varies by a number of sociological factors and the veteran students differed from the nonveteran students on these measures in the present study (see Table 1 p. 141), we used multivariate linear regression to examine if this finding persisted in multivariate analysis. The results are presented in Table 4. While the overall model was significant, military service was not significantly associated with perceptions of legitimacy. Instead, perception of legitimacy was positively associated with age and having a dependent child and negatively associated with being African-American, Hispanic, or multiracial/multiethnic, and having ever been arrested.

Table 4. *Linear Regression of Legitimacy, Full-Scale, Full Sample (N = 996)*

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Constant	3.22	3.10, 3.35	.06	--	<.001
Age	.01	.00, .01	.00	.09	.010
Male gender	.05	-.03, .12	.04	.04	.256
African American	-.56	-.72, -.39	.09	-.20	<.001
Asian/Pacific Islander	-.04	-.16, .09	.06	-.02	.557
American Indian	-.13	-.39, .12	.13	-.03	.297
Hispanic	-.22	-.31, -.12	.05	-.14	<.001
Multiracial or ethnic	-.22	-.36, -.08	.07	-.09	.002
First generation college	.04	-.04, .11	.04	.03	.313
Have dependent child	.16	.06, .26	.05	.11	.001
Ever arrested	-.46	-.56, -.33	.07	-.22	<.001
Veteran student	-.06	-.20, .08	.07	-.03	.408
<i>F</i>	12.14				
<i>R</i> ²	.12				
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	.11				
<i>p</i>	<.001				

Research question 2

Legitimacy was regressed on the same set of variables using both the nonveteran (see Table 5) and the veteran (see Table 6, model 1 below) subsamples. Although the model was significant in both, the variables explained almost four times more of the variance in the veteran subsample as measured by the adjusted R^2 . Focusing on the variables' significance and magnitude, as measured by the standardized regression coefficients, some differences emerged as well. Although age and having a dependent child were significant predictors with nonveterans, neither was significantly associated with legitimacy in the veteran subsample. Additionally, although being a racial or ethnic minority as well as having ever been arrested were each significant in both subsamples, the magnitude of the negative associations were larger among the veterans.

Table 5. *Linear Regression of Legitimacy, Nonveteran Subsample (n = 920)*

Variable	B	95% CI	SE B	β	p
Constant	3.25	3.12, 3.38	.07	--	<.001
Age	.01	.00, .01	.00	.08	.042
Male gender	.07	-.01, .15	.04	.06	.080
Racial or ethnic minority	-.19	-.27, -.12	.04	-.17	<.001
Have dependent child	.18	.07, .29	.06	.12	.002
Ever arrested	-.39	-.53, -.25	.07	-.17	<.001
F	15.61				
R ²	.08				
Adj. R ²	.07				
p	<.001				

Table 6. *Hierarchical Regression of Legitimacy, Veteran Subsample (N = 76)*

	Model 1						Model 2					
	B	95% CI	SE	β	p	B	95% CI	SE	β	p		
Constant	3.24	2.65, 3.84	.30	--	<.001	2.09	1.29, 2.89	.40	--	<.001		
Age	.01	-.01, .03	.01	.12	.274	.01	-.01, .02	.01	.09	.328		
Male gender	.08	-.23, .39	.16	.05	.600	.06	-.21, .34	.14	.04	.646		
Minority	-.36	-.66, -.05	.16	-.24	.025	-.33	-.60, -.05	.14	-.22	.020		
Dependent child	-.07	-.35, .21	.14	-.06	.604	-.13	-.38, .13	.13	-.10	.321		
Ever arrested	-.77	-1.10, -.44	.17	-.48	<.001	-.56	-.87, -.25	.15	-.35	.001		
Veteran identity	--	--	--	--	--	.34	.18, .50	.08	.40	<.001		
Combat exposure	--	--	--	--	--	-.24	-.48, -.00	.12	-.18	.048		
R ²	.32					.49						
Adj. R ²	.27					.44						
ΔR^2	--					.17						
ΔF	6.56					11.21						
p	<.001					<.001						

Research question 5

In this section we focus on the results presented in Table 6, model 2 to discuss the correlates of legitimacy among the veteran subsample when including traditionally important variables as well as two veteran-specific factors. The addition of veteran identity and combat exposure resulted in a significant improvement in the model's fit and explained an additional 17% of the variance. As with model 1, age, gender, and having a dependent child were not associated with perceptions of legitimacy. The negative relationship between minority status and legitimacy remained significant and of a similar magnitude. Although arrest history continued to have a significant negative relationship with legitimacy, the introduction of the veteran-related variables reduced the magnitude of this association.

Both new variables were significantly associated with legitimacy. Of greatest interest for the present study, veteran identity was positively associated with perceptions of legal legitimacy. In fact, as evaluated by the standardized beta weights, this was clearly the most potent correlate of legitimacy in the model. Finally, highlighting the importance of differential military experiences, exposure to combat had a significant negative association with legitimacy.

Discussion

Although prior military service is often associated with differences in attitudes towards politics and social issues, the results of this study did not find differences in perceptions of legal

legitimacy between veteran and nonveteran students. Both subsamples of students endorsed perceptions of legitimacy that can be thought of as positive, but slightly less so than found in the general US adult population. Respondents in the national probability sample administered by Tyler and Jackson (2014) had a mean score of 3.47 on the full legitimacy measure, while the veteran and non-veteran students in the present study had mean full-scores of 3.31 and 3.34 respectively. Nonetheless, the full sample's perceptions of this social indicator were shaped by a mix of variables generally consistent with prior research on legitimacy: perceptions of legitimacy were positively associated with age and having a dependent child and negatively associated with identifying as African-American, Hispanic or multiracial, and having ever been arrested. The lack of a significant association between gender and legitimacy is the one deviation from past research.

Although the level of legitimacy was not associated with prior military service, the pattern of associations between the construct and predictor variables differed between the subsamples. In contrast with the nonveterans, age and having a dependent child were not significant correlates among the veteran students. The lack of a significant association between age and legitimacy also deviates from prior research with the US adult population. Additionally, although minority status and arrest history were negatively associated with legitimacy in both subsamples, the magnitudes were larger among the veteran students.

Further, although the model used to explore the second research question was significant in both samples, a much larger proportion of the variance was explained with the veteran students. Despite only the two significant covariates—membership in a racial or ethnic minority and having ever been arrested—the model was approximately four times more efficient at explaining levels of legitimacy among the veteran students.

The introduction of two veteran-specific variables in the final model resulted in another significant and large increase in the ability to explain perceptions of legitimacy. The extent to which an individual identified as a veteran was positively associated with the belief that legal institutions are fair, based on shared values, and should be obeyed. In fact, veteran identity was the most potent correlate of legitimacy as measured by standardized regression coefficients. Although the magnitude of the association was somewhat surprising, the general finding is largely expected based upon associations previously established between a positive social identity and belief in the legitimacy of a legal system (e.g. Tyler and Huo, 2002).

The strong, positive association between veteran identity and legal legitimacy is interesting to consider alongside emerging interventions that aim to reduce recidivism among justice-involved veterans. In recent years, criminal justice systems have modified and created programs to meet the unique needs of this population. These interventions are based on the same behavioral health, vocational and supervision components typically used in criminal justice interventions. Although it is not consistently articulated, programs for justice-involved veterans often add a novel element. That is, they frequently attempt to increase the participants' identification with their status as veterans and interactions with the veteran community.

Describing one of a growing number of veteran-only prison units, Tsai and Goggin (2017) noted the use of patriotic murals and military rituals to support "a military culture of discipline, pride, and respect" (p. 45). Similarly, veterans treatment courts (VTCs) have built upon the older drug and mental health court models by attempting to increase participant connections and identifications with the larger veteran community and its behavioral norms. A key modification is the use of veteran

mentors.⁵ During a swearing-in ceremony at the Justice for Vets, Mentor Boot Camp, mentors pledged to “demand of my veteran mentees, and demonstrate by my own example, the highest standards of personal conduct, morality and citizenry” (National Association of Drug Court Professionals, 2015). Qualitative studies have documented veteran culture or military comradery encouraging cooperation among VTC participants (Ahlin and Douds, 2016; Baldwin and Rukus, 2015; Clifford, Fischer, & Pelletier, 2014). The results of the present study give reason to believe that these nascent attempts of practitioners to increase ties with other veterans and their shared identity warrant exploration.

The negative association between exposure to combat and legal legitimacy is worthy of a brief discussion. It raises issues germane to a body of research concerned with the correlates of veteran involvement in the criminal justice system. Recognizing that attitudes regarding the legitimacy construct are not a perfect proxy; low levels have predicted criminal behavior (e.g. Eisner & Nivette, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that the factors that shape criminal behavior among veterans may also shape perceptions of legitimacy.

Although the idea that combat exposure per se will increase criminal behavior has deep roots (Abbott, 1918), research has painted a more complex picture. For instance, research conducted with combat veterans from Vietnam (Fontana and Rosenheck, 2005; Wilson and Zigelbaum, 1983) as well as Iraq and Afghanistan (Elbogen et al., 2012; Sayer et al., 2010) has identified a complex mix of pre-service factors, service-related experiences, clinical issues (especially PTSD), and post-combat homecoming and reintegration issues that are associated with criminal behavior among veterans. We know that these other factors—as opposed to simply experiencing combat—are better at explaining justice-involvement among veterans. Thus, if perception of legitimacy is shaped in the same way as illegal behavior, the seemingly important role of combat observed in the present study may be better explained by factors not included in our survey. Specifically, the relationship between combat exposure and perceptions of legitimacy may be mediated by PTSD and moderated by perceived homecoming and civilian reintegration, which is clearly an area for future research.

Finally, although the research base is not as mature as that into PTSD, incorporating insights informed by moral injury scholarship (Frankfurt and Frazier, 2016; Litz et al., 2009) may help understand the nexus of exposure to combat, identity estimations, and normative-oriented perspectives on civilian institutions. The moral injury construct focuses on transgressive acts committed by soldiers or comrades during combat hypothesized to cause some veterans to see themselves and/or the society that sent them to combat as morally tarnished.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Although this study begins an important synthesis of distinct bodies of scholarship regarding legal legitimacy and sociology of military veterans there are indeed some limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the study prevents a richer exploration of the relationship between veteran identity and perceptions of legitimacy. The binary question about arrest history was also a crude measure of criminal justice involvement. There are also limitations specific to the veteran subsample. Chief amongst them is the reliance on a convenience sample of university students. The extent to which the findings will generalize to the larger veteran community is unclear. Lastly, the relatively small and heavily white, non-Hispanic subsample, precluded a nuanced analysis of racial and ethnic differences among the veterans sampled in this study.

⁵ According to the most recent national inventory of Veteran Treatment Courts, mentor programs are operational in 69% of courts and under development in another 10% (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017).

Several avenues for future study arise out of the study's findings as well as its limitations. Increased attention to legitimacy in surveys designed to represent the adult population would help us understand how a diverse array of groups view this important social indicator. In addition, future studies can reduce some of the limitations with this study by adopting improved measures of prior criminal justice involvement and utilizing multiple measurement periods.

Future surveys of veterans on this topic should have larger and more diverse samples drawn from the general population instead of relying on university students. Larger samples would allow for the inclusion of additional service-related variables. For example, including length of service and time since separation may be important in identifying and controlling for exposure to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which operates quite differently than civilian legal systems (Dunlap, 2013). Similarly, including era of service in models may lead to useful distinctions because there is an association with this factor and risk of criminal behavior among veterans (Culp, Youstin, Englander, & Lynch, 2013). Samples that allow comparisons with current members of the military—as well as civilians—would also allow for a more refined exploration of the civilian-military gap in this area.

Finally, the connections drawn between the findings of this exploratory study and interventions for justice-involved veterans warrant focused examination. Future applied research should seek to integrate the normative theories of justice and social identity at the core of this study with the research into predictors of criminality among veterans discussed above.

Conclusion

As is common with early attempts to integrate disparate lines of research, our study is more effective at posing questions than settling them. Nonetheless, it advances our knowledge in both areas we drew upon to shape the research questions. It helps the civil-military relations area identify a previously unstudied area that is gaining increasing international attention as a social indicator. Simultaneously, the study extends research into the relationship between social identity and legal legitimacy into a new population. The importance of normative considerations in shaping prosocial attitudes, intentions and behaviors is well-established (Tyler and Huo, 2002). The positive social position of veterans and psychological implications of that status provide an exciting venue for this line of research.

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Authors' contributions

The authors have collaborated on this project from design to preparation of this manuscript. In all areas—study design and implementation, data analysis, and writing—Dr. Gallagher has had primary responsibilities with significant contributions from Dr. Ashford.

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