



Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans' Understanding of Followership and Following in the Civilian Workplace

Norma Caamal

Abstract

Numerous service personnel who served during the US Afghanistan and Iraq Wars have returned to civilian life. The purpose of this phenomenology study was to examine and explore how these veterans understood the followership phenomenon, their civilian workplace follower roles, and how they defined the word followership through their own lenses. Six veterans who reintegrated from military service into a civilian workplace volunteered for this study. The research analysis identified five themes: (a) my identities (b) organizational principles, (c) organizational knowledge, (d) organizational support, (e) and valuing of supporters. The significance of these findings was the veterans' follower-centric expression of their lived civilian followership experiences. The study afforded the veterans the opportunity to voice their desire to work in civilian organizations that provide a nurturing culture and environment where they can thrive and become effective followers. The findings can provide policymakers and organizational leaders data to plan training, coaching, and mentoring programs, peer-clubs, and services to express gratitude to veteran-followers as valuable members of the civilian workplace. The findings also provide scholars of Veterans Studies additional empirical data to enhance the knowledge base.

Keywords: Followership, Veterans Studies, Qualitative Research, Civilian Workplace, Self-concept

Introduction

The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars were a consequence of the September 11, 2001 terror attack on the mainland of the United States (US) (Salazar Torreon, 2016). Many service men and women participated in the Middle East conflicts, and then returned home to live the life they left behind. Obtaining a meaningful job, now as veterans, was vital for their successful integration into civilian life for the first time, or reintegration for those who previously worked in the civilian world (Liggans et al., 2018). Job satisfaction is a fundamental element "of a good quality adult life" (Yanchus, Osatuke, Carameli, Barnes, & Ramsel, 2018, p. 40). Many veterans have found work, but the job search has not been fruitful for others. Other veterans have met, and continue to face challenges when transitioning into the civilian life and workforce (Hodges, 2018; Liggans et al., 2018; Rausch, 2014; Smith, 2018).

Transitioning from military to civilian life can appear to be a seamless process for many former warfighters while others struggle with the change. Ahern et al. (2015) explained that many returning warriors found that the military service provided a sound structure, but the civilian institutions lacked direction, support, and structure. Crocker, Powell-Cope, Brown, and Besterman-Dahan (2014) warned that issues, whether isolated or combined, complicated the reintegration process. The authors emphasized that, typically, veterans who had a positive experience reintegrating after military service are industrious members at home, community, school, and the workplace. Greyvenstein and Cilliers (2012) stressed leaders' responsibility for supporting followers whose efforts enable organizations to succeed.

The purpose of the present study was to explore and examine the experiences that Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans lived during reintegration and to discern their understandings and definitions of the followership phenomenon and civilian follower roles. Several scholars have defined followership as an organizational position where the managers act as leaders to their subordinate followers (Mohamadzadeh, Mortazavi, Lagzian, & Rahimnia, 2015). Blackshear (2004)

regarded followership a positional role where followers were passive and subject to the commands of their leaders. Employed veterans, now in the civilian workplace, would enact their follower roles as employees.

Organizational success is contingent on follower performance and each veteran experience during military service and post-deployment is unique. Danish and Antonides (2013) explicated how unexpected changes in life circumstances, or crises, may occur. For veterans, such crises could result in adding stress, having minimal to no effect, or developing an optimistic outlook on life. Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) were concerned with the many veterans who suffered mental, psychological, and other injuries during military service that were not noticeable, but could have a negative impact in the academic or workplace setting. The authors warned that difficulties encountered by the veterans might be misunderstood or misinterpreted. As a result, some veterans may not be able to perform their follower roles as effectively as others in the civilian workplace. These findings made this research study essential. Gaining knowledge about veterans' understanding of their new civilian follower roles was vital because their understanding affects how they function in the workplace. The data from the present study can inform veterans studies scholars about the shared and unique challenges lived by veterans while navigating the civilian workplace, and encourage more leaders to enhance a workplace environment to influence optimal performance. The focus of this study was the lived experiences of veteran-followers.

Literature Review

Followership

Crossman and Crossman (2011) observed the lack of consensus by scholars on the definitions of *followership*. Kelley (1988) viewed followership as a role distinguished by the particular role that each follower and leader played. The author stressed that organizational success depended on effective followership and follower roles. In 1992, Kelley conveyed that followership took roots in an organization when leaders recognized followers as equal partners. Chaleff (2009) stressed the need for a dynamic followership model that balanced a dynamic leadership model that embraced the follower identity by addressing its courage, purpose to serve, duty, and power. Follower and leader roles should have equal value.

According to Carsten et al. (2010), followership was the manner in which followers perceived their behaviors and follower roles relative to their leaders. The authors also learned that followers possessing a positive view of their follower roles were more apt to be good employees. Problem solving, communication methods, and ways of providing support to the leaders exemplify followership behavior. Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014) considered followership as the effect that followers and following had on the process of leadership. Followership consisted of a position (follower role) and behaviors relative to the leader and leadership process results.

Self-concept

The self-concept is an assortment of identities of which the working self-concept, or the self-identity that is active at any moment, is a subset. Self-identities may be important, positive, negative, or involve past, current, or future experiences. Current social circumstances or the motivational state of an individual can trigger a particular identity (Markus & Wurf, 1987). These assertions suggested the activation of individuals' salient identities by their lived experiences within an environment, such as the civilian workplace. Many identities make up the total self of an individual (Carter, 2013) and examples may include the warrior, veteran, or civilian self.

Brewer and Gardner (1996) categorized the three levels of the self-concept into the individual, relational, and collective selves. At the individual level, the self makes a comparison of one's attributes to those of others to distinguish oneself as unique. At the relational level, individuals

define themselves in relation to another person using their roles as the basis, such as the follower-leader role. The emphasis at the collective level is how an individual enacts a social role within a group, abiding by the group's standards and goals. As followers in the civilian workplace, the veterans would classify themselves as similar or dissimilar to another coworker, develop one-to-one relations with peers and superiors, and enact social roles as team members. Veterans operating at each level of the self-concept during different situations within an organizational context will activate different salient identities.

According to Lord and Brown (2001), there is a connection between workers' self-identities and their value systems, and leaders can guide a follower's work behavior and motivation through the activation of the salient self-concepts and values. By understanding follower self-concepts and values, organizational leaders can motivate veterans by developing positive workplace cultures.

Veterans

Salazar Torreon (2016) explicated that many Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans have participated in one or more conflicts since September 2001 when Congress authorized the military forces to defend the US against terrorists. The designated periods of war in Afghanistan are Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)–(October 2001 to December 2014 and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS)–(December 2014 and ongoing). The designated periods of war in Iraq are Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) – (March 2003 to August 2010), Operation New Dawn (OND)–(September 2010 to December 2011), and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), effective against the Islamic State terrorist group since October 2014.

Reviewing the parallels and distinctions among veterans from other wars is essential to understand the experiences of returning veterans. Richards (2011) noted that veterans met challenging health problems, such as muscle, joint, and chest pain. Chemical agents used during World War II and the Vietnam War caused skin rashes and birth defects.

Differences in wars included the existing political environment when veterans came home. During the unpopular Vietnam War, soldiers were unwelcomed, but today, political awareness and public sentiment reveal a positive change in attitudes toward Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans (Malmin, 2013). Another difference was the fact that soldiers typically served one tour in previous wars whereas current military personnel have served two or more terms. In addition, soldiers were drafted in past wars, but now the armed forces depend on volunteers. During the Vietnam War, a clear distinction existed between battle and safe zones. The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars offer no such distinctions and soldiers are in constant danger from snipers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Contemporary protective gear technology and field medicine has enabled soldiers, who would have otherwise suffered incapacitating injuries, to survive (Lafferty, Alford, Davis, & O'Connor, 2008). Malmin (2013) emphasized that military challenges had a different impact and degree of effect on each soldier. Consequently, it is difficult to judge if these challenges may affect a warfighter's followership performance in the civilian workplace.

Veterans are former followers of The Profession of Arms, or what the US military forces deem a profession of honor founded on leadership concepts, and they possess the behaviors of moral courage, honor, and loyalty (Dempsey, 2012). Similarly, exemplary followers share these behaviors (Kelley, 1992). Dempsey (2012) described the military structure as a learning organization where soldiers can benefit from lessons learned and stressed how influential they could be individually and collectively.

Former service members possess several identities such as the warrior, veteran, parent, follower, leader, military, and civilian identity. Many veterans have trouble negotiating between their former warrior and new civilian identities (Orazem et al., 2016). Doe and Doe (2013) suggested that

former military men and women apply the positive attributes of their military identity to the civilian identity to be successful in the civilian workplace or academic setting.

Need for Study

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to examine and explore veterans' understanding of followership, how they perceived their follower roles as civilians, to increase the literature on veterans studies, and increase followership literature as part of the leadership arena, in general and relative to veterans.

Numerous research studies address the health and social issues of US Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans during reintegration, but more scholars are acknowledging additional problems that veterans encounter during the reintegration process. According to Crocker et al. (2014), the reintegration experiences of veterans vary and many will encounter challenges during the process. This phenomenology research specifically examined this veteran cohort whose members work as civilians in a central region of Florida. The veterans received the opportunity to voice their understanding of the followership phenomenon through their own lenses and not those of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

How veterans understand the followership phenomenon and follower roles may be crucial for their success and for the employing organization. Part of a successful reintegration process involves finding a job and adapting to a civilian work environment. Ahern et al. (2015) believed that by providing support services to veterans, their confidence levels while performing civilian work roles could grow.

This study addressed the following questions: What meaning do US Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans in the civilian workplace ascribe to followership? How do veteran-followers experience identifying with civilian leaders, coworkers, and team members in the civilian workplace? What are veterans' experiences as they identify with their follower roles in the civilian workplace? What challenges do veterans experience in their civilian workplace follower roles? How do veterans experience identifying with leadership-like roles as followers in the civilian workplace?

The knowledge gained from this study can provide scholars of veterans studies with additional understanding of veterans' lived experiences and challenges as seen through their lenses in the civilian workplace; it can also assist organizational leaders when making educated decisions involving potential support programs for veterans. For example, leaders could determine if assigned jobs are a good fit, if veterans need additional support of which leaders were previously unaware, or if leaders should change the existing organizational culture. Doe and Doe (2013) professed that assisting veterans in need can mitigate psychosocial problems in the veteran community (e.g., suicides and homelessness). The veterans, as followers in the civilian workplace, contribute skills and talents to make their work organizations successful. Ryan and Currie (2014) expressed an interest in the factors responsible for making effective followers, and in the key roles that followers could play in effecting organizational success.

Although followership is a component of the leadership process, it continues to be under-represented within the research community (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The authors asserted that followers are excluded from the leadership equation, although leadership cannot exist without followership. In addition, follower literature lacks the stories and lived experiences of veterans in the civilian workplace as followers. Furthermore, followership literary works give follower roles a negative connotation where followers are powerless and lack capabilities. This study aimed to fill in the literary gaps.

Research Positionality

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers are the instrument for data collection and analysis and must disclose their perspective on the subject under study. The basis of my stance

revolves around the many Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans with whom I have had the pleasure to work. After several conversations with these courageous women and men, I learned about their military and civilian triumphs and challenges. Each story was as unique as the veteran who told it. A common theme among this veteran cohort was the difference between the military and civilian leadership and follower workplace roles.

I became interested in the phenomenon of followership and how the phenomenon could apply to veterans as followers in the civilian workplace. Not only did I find paucity in follower literature, but also that US veteran followership literature was lacking. Were organizational leaders aware of the challenges met by some veterans during the reintegration process? Did the issues experienced by the veterans pose temporary or permanent negative consequences for them while trying to perform their civilian duties? Would leaders willingly create and develop nurturing organizational cultures if informed of the veterans' challenges or needs? Conducting this study gave me the opportunity to show my appreciation for the courageous veteran women and men who continue to keep us safe.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research method was used for this study, guided by an emphasis on the meanings people ascribe to their experiences, how their worlds are constructed, and how they interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological research design steered this study. Several elements comprise the philosophical basis of phenomenology research. It entails studying lived experiences to obtain a profound understanding of their true meanings, and attempts to explain the phenomenon as perceived through a person's consciousness (van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology explores the nature of essences and how they are sensed by exploring an individual occurrence as it is experienced. Practitioners consciously build thoughtful relationships with participants. Through phenomenology, people discover who they are upon reflecting on their lived experiences. This research design was suitable for this study because it focuses on discerning the essence of the connotation that veterans ascribed to the followership phenomenon and to their lived experiences in the civilian environment and workplace culture.

Study population and sample selection

Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans were the unit of analysis or the study sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Six veterans who live in a central region of Florida and work in the home improvement, government, and technical services industries participated in the study, which employed two types of purposeful sampling methods. First, nonprobability sampling provided participants possessing the characteristics of the phenomenon under study and who willingly shared their lived experiences. Women and men who served in the US military during any of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, whether as enlisted recruits or as commissioned officers, were purposely chosen. Second, this study applied snowball sampling, another example of purposeful sampling, where the researcher asks a few participants who meet the required study criteria to refer other potential candidates. After the first interview, I asked a veteran-participant to solicit other qualified veterans for the study.

Mertens (2015) asserted that approximately six to 10 participants would make an ideal sample for a phenomenology study, and that researchers make dynamic decisions based on obtaining enough data from which they can extract emergent themes. Conducting interviews with smaller groups allows researchers to capture their meaningful and unique lived experiences. Each veteran filled out a demographics form from which collective data were compiled (Table 1–Veteran Demographics):

Table 1. Veteran Demographics

Vet.	Gender Age	Current Occupation	Time in Job	Former Branch	Time Served	Highest Rank
E	Male 40	Sr. Data Manager	10 months	Air Force	14 years	Staff Sergeant
J	Female 52	Product Support Data Manager	6 months	Air Force Reserve	11 years	Captain
D	Male 60 ⁺	Tech Writer & Illustrator	13 years	Army	23 years	1 st Sergeant
B	Male 48	Industrial Specialist	2 ½ years	Air Force	8 ½ years	Staff Sergeant
T	Female 30	Contract Administrator	3 years	Air Force	7 years	Technical Sergeant
R	Male 41	Warehouse Manager	3 months	Marine Corps/Air Force	10 years	Master Sergeant

The forms revealed that two veterans reenlisted on a part-time basis to the Air Force Reserves and to the Florida Air National Guard and continued full-time civilian employment.

Ethical considerations

Protecting the rights and privacy of the veteran-participants is a vital element in any study. A northern university approved an Institutional Review Board (IRB) Application Request for Consideration of Human Studies. Mertens (2015) stressed the researcher's responsibility for developing an IRB consent form, and the veterans received a copy via email before the interview. The form explained the study purpose and informed them of their rights, such as confidentiality and the right to quit at any time with no questions asked. The researcher ensured the audio-recordings, interview transcripts, and all documents were secured in a locked desk drawer at home. In addition, the veterans received the questions prior to the interviews to mitigate any discomfort. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended that researchers design nonthreatening questions and structure questions that would not sway the participants in one direction or convey the appearance of an interrogation.

Data collection

After IRB approval, the researcher asked personal contacts to refer veterans who qualified for the phenomenology study. All veterans received the same information package before the interview: Participant Consent Letter, the Demographics Data Sheet, and the Interview Protocol (Appendix A) containing 11 questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), most qualitative research interviews are semi-structured, so the interview guide questions can be open-ended, followed by probing questions. Ten open-ended questions made up the original protocol questionnaire, and a fill-in-the-blank question was added during the first interview. Moustakas (1994) encouraged phenomenology researchers to add or remove questions to acquire more information on a topic of

interest. Based on the approaches Moustakas recommended, the researcher interviewed each veteran in a calm ambiance, and conducted informal conversations.

The veterans requested face-to-face interviews at their selected meeting locations, but one veteran called an hour prior to the interview to request a phone interview. Each veteran interviewed once during the months of May through July 2017 for 45 to 80 minutes. To protect the veteran's identity, each received the pseudonym of Veteran-X, where a letter each veteran chose substituted for the X. The veterans consented to audio-recordings during the interviews.

Data analysis process

This phenomenology study utilized the data analysis process to capture the meanings that the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans ascribed to followership and their follower roles precisely. The researcher practiced epoche, or consciously setting aside researcher biases to avoid changing the meanings that participants wanted to convey (Moustakas, 1994).

The veterans' responses to the Interview Protocol questions (see Appendix A) were the collective source of themes. The researcher followed an iterative and rigorous analysis process to identify emergent themes that became the study findings and answered the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher carefully transcribed the audio-recorded interview data into MS Word documents. Each recording was played back as often as necessary to ensure data accuracy. The validation method of member checking was employed by emailing each veteran a copy of her or his interview transcript for review. One veteran added remarks to the transcript before returning it, and the remaining veterans expressed satisfaction with accuracy. After receiving participant validation, each file was uploaded to Dedoose, a software program that helped organize data into themes, but did not actually perform the analyses. The researcher read and reread discrete sentences in each transcript to determine if and how they related to other sentences and paragraphs. Sentences with common and recurring themes were grouped into data chunks and coded. Each code received a name or phrase that closely represented the meaning of a theme (e.g., civilian-workplace veteran expectations). After repeated review and code comparison, codes were broken down into more specific categories (e.g., company human resource assistance). Finally, categories were broken down into salient themes which were further condensed into subthemes. The researcher repeated the analysis process for all transcripts and compared the codes and categories to each transcript. The emergent themes were organizational knowledge, organizational support, my identities, valuing supporters, and organizational principles. A definition of followership was developed from the themes. Table 2 (next page) contains the codes, categories, themes, and subthemes that surfaced from the analysis.

Table 2. Codes, Categories, & Salient Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes	Subthemes
Self-concept Theory- Individual Level: Veteran as an Individual	Self-concept Individual Level	Self-concept: Individual Level My Identities	Followership Defined by Veterans
Self-concept Theory- Relational Level: Veteran relationship with another person	Self-concept Relational Level: Veteran in relation to a peer in civilian workplace	Relational Level Organizational Principles	Understanding from a leader or peer
Self-concept Theory- Collective Level: Veteran relationship with groups	Self-concept Collective Level: Veteran relationship with civilian workplace team members	Collective Level Organizational Principles	Understanding from a leader or peer Work ethics of leaders or peers
Veterans' personal and work experience	Developing veterans as leaders and followers	Organizational Knowledge	Support values Military lessons Personal Growth
New civilian job	Learning within organization		Mentoring
Civilian-workplace veteran expectations	Active recruitment and hiring efforts	Organizational Support	Civilian Jobs Structure Culture
Navigating job hunt process			
Translating military to civilian skills			
Unfamiliarity with civilian workplace	Differences between military and civilian workplace		
Appreciation of veteran- followers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to fit in • Pride serving 	New follower roles as civilian employees	Valuing Supporters	Valuing Supporters

The emergent themes consistently answered the research questions designed to discover the meanings that Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans ascribed to following in the civilian workplace.

Trustworthiness of the study

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stressed the need for researchers to utilize research methods that provide results that reading audiences can agree with and trust. The researcher memo, audit trail, and member checking, three reliability and validation approaches, were research methods employed in this study. The researcher memo documented thoughts, feelings, and biases while reflecting continuously during the study. An audit trail ensured that all research documents were readily available. In member checking, the participants received a copy of their interview transcript to ensure that the researcher accurately captured the meaning of their words.

Research Findings

This phenomenology research study examined and explored the lived experiences of the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans as followers in a civilian workplace. This section presents the findings from the analysis of the interview data, including the definition the veterans ascribed to followership, and emergent themes.

Essence of followership

The researcher added a fill-in-the-blank question: "Followership is" to the interview protocol (Appendix A) during the first interview to discover the essence and definition of followership as seen through the veterans' lenses. Moustakas (1994) encouraged inserting or changing questions to enable the gathering of in-depth data regarding a particular subject.

Each veteran provided a unique definition of followership. Most shared the belief that being a subordinate was a common element, and two veterans did not mind the negative connotation. Veteran-T stated that followership was following in line, but it was "not a bad thing." Veteran-E stated,

'Shut up and color.' It means you . . . have been given this task. Do it. [Followership is] doing what's expected of you by your leader. You're the subordinate—you are following their orders whether it be civilian or military even if someone has to follow your lead. So, leader and follower are kind of fluid terms.

Two veterans disliked the subordinate label. Veteran-R articulated: "I really don't do a lot of following anymore because I don't want to be subordinate to people that know less than I do. I was in a position where I was in charge of command and ran stuff."

To the two remaining veterans, followership meant supporting goals and team members to achieve successful results. Veteran-D described his responsibility taking assignments from his supervisor's inbox and working them until completed within a set cost, quality, and on time. Helping the team to succeed and shine was also crucial. Similarly, Veteran-B stated that followership was being a team member and performing a mission set by the supervisor. People should take responsibility as followers to ensure "the deliverables are on time, within quality, and for the price with the quality."

Collectively, the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans defined followership as following directives purposely established by their leaders and accomplishing objectives with efficacy.

Themes

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: my identities, organizational principles, organizational knowledge, organizational support, and valuing supporters who support

leaders. The themes addressed the organizational elements that the veterans believed would help them enact their follower roles successfully.

My identities. The self-concept posits that the self exists at the individual, relational, or collective levels (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This section addressed the US Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans' identities at the individual level, where their self-meanings identified them as either similar or different from others. To determine if veterans considered that they possessed a follower self-concept or identity, they shared personal experiences identifying with people they followed. Veterans also discussed their experiences when others identified with or followed them. Once employed, the veterans held follower roles as employees in the civilian workplace. Collectively, the veterans held follower identities. Veteran-J stated: "Pretty much any job I've had, I've been a follower to a certain extent. I know I like to kind of take over. I want to be in control of everything but I'm not always the *best* leader." Veteran-D said, "Let's start [the discussion] as a follower in the military. My first organization was the Special Forces Group."

According to Carter (2013), a set of identities constitutes the individual self. The six participants held the follower identity, and their interview answers suggested that they possessed additional identities. For example, Veteran-B stated, "I never really had a break in service because when I left, I went straight into the reserves. I became a weekend warrior. I've always had the military since I was 23." According to Veteran-R, "Military people, we all know we're cut from the same cloth pretty much so it's like, you know, all you have to say is, I'm a veteran." Finally, Veteran-J described her veteran identity: "Honestly, I don't know that I'm a typical veteran at all and also, being that I haven't—I haven't been to war actually, you know." She also stated that she was still a veteran, just not a combat veteran. The examples suggested that besides possessing a follower identity, the participants displayed combinations of the warrior, military, or veteran identities.

Organizational principles (relational level). At the self-concept relational level, people distinguish themselves from others based on the roles they play (e.g., superior/subordinate or leader/follower). The veterans were asked to describe their personal and military experiences with their colleagues and leaders. The phenomenology study sought to understand the relational level of the veterans as followers in the civilian workplace. The veterans voiced a desire to work in supportive companies exhibiting organizational principles, such as understanding of its employees and work ethics.

The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans shared their follower experiences while identifying with colleagues. Four veterans lived positive experiences where peers displayed understanding. Veteran-R felt understood by a few civilian individuals and former military coworkers. He stated, "Once my [civilian] coworkers know who I am and know that I'm a veteran, they understand me a little bit better. Military people—you don't have to explain what you did in the war, nothing or anything." According to Veteran-D, understanding the needs of a new employee helped forge a healthy job relationship: "We hired a new guy . . . and I was asked to show him the software, the mil [military] standards, how we do things in the office and Grant became a really decent technical writer."

Veteran-B had trouble identifying with civilians who just did not understand:

My coworkers . . . don't really know what I do or what I did when I was in country. I worked on planes that went to go save people. I didn't get shot at but I did get to see the faces of the kids that did get shot at and got their legs blown off It's unrelatable to a civilian who has never experienced anything like that and you can only explain it.

When identifying with a leader, two Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans said that they lived positive experiences. For example, Veteran-E stated that his supervisor was understanding of his medical issues and had no problem letting him attend his medical appointments.

Two veterans could not identify with their leaders. Veteran-J shared that an employee with leadership status would never identify with her, and she could not understand why.

The veterans felt that another element of organizational principles, work ethics, was very significant, and two Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans complained about civilian work ethics when working with a peer. Veteran-R worked in a company where young civilians only wanted to play with their cell phones and not perform any work. Veteran-T shared: "I feel that my standards of work are just way higher than the others . . . Their level of effort is like, subpar low effort, zero discipline, zero accountability. . . that's just like the culture."

When relating to leaders, two veterans explained how these leaders lacked work ethics. Veteran-D explicated how the store manager hired him as a merchandise stocking clerk although he had bachelor's degree in business management. The veteran concluded that the managers never even read his resume. Veteran-T made a comparison between the work ethics of military and civilian leaders: "People in the military get very power drunk very fast. As soon as they become leaders they forget all about followership, [but] I definitely feel as though civilian leaders . . . let people off the hook a lot."

Organizational principles (collective level). At the collective level of the self-concept, people who belong to the same social category (e.g., group, team) interact with others, and self-conceptualize during these interactions. The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans described their civilian workplace follower experiences as organizational team members. The need to work in principled organizations was the salient theme at this level, similar to the results at the relational level. The veterans wanted to work in organizations that showed understanding, work ethics, and support values in the form of veteran services.

Two Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans expressed success identifying with their civilian team members at work. Veteran-J belonged to a work team that probably understood her because most members were former military personnel. However, Veteran-B stated that trying to identify with civilian team members was hard because they never experienced or understood the stress that military people went through in war zones.

The veterans expressed the desire to work in ethical organizations, and Veteran-D exhibited exceptional work ethics by performing additional tasks to support the team. He undertook assignments to make the team successful but that were "not in my job description."

Two veterans felt that civilian team members held unethical work practices. Veteran-R explained how he worked in teams during military service and that "when you go out in the civilian world—they put you in a group setting where you have to work with people, you know, and more people start trying to take advantage."

Most veterans sought to become part of an organization that emphasized support values for former service personnel. The results of Xenikou's (2014) collective self-concept study revealed the importance that organizational identity plays in the way people self-define. The author explained organizational identity as the degree to which people internalize belonging to a group within their work organization, and how organizational support values predict the degree to which an individual will internalize her or his group's membership.

The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans shared the experiences they lived while working in organizations offering support values that enhanced their effectiveness as followers and their followership sense of purpose. Only Veteran-E considered support values to come from within a person, where an individual's sense of purpose was guided by how useful that person deemed he or she was to an organization.

Two veterans experienced positive organizational support values. Veteran-T received benefits from the work organization in collaboration with the Veterans Administration (VA):

The VA On-the-Job Training (OJT) program is a phenomenal program. It's underutilized and they almost make it very difficult to use This has been a great veteran retention tool. It basically lets veterans use their GI Bill to get their stipend while they're in the [internship] program at [the DOD agency] if they're not going to school.

Unfortunately, Veteran-R received no special veteran incentives in any civilian workplace. Although some companies honored their presence, others did not care about veterans except as tax write-offs. He criticized companies that advertised posters of checks showing a donation to veteran causes because he felt the companies had not really been helpful.

Organizational knowledge. The veterans explained the value of practical military lessons learned and their application to the civilian workplace to increase knowledge within the civilian organization. Veteran-E recounted that he learned what not to do again when he broke an expensive piece of equipment. He disagreed that success was not ever failing; it was knowing how to handle failure. Veteran-R learned the importance of decision-making while a member of the Special Forces Group, stating that you must "question what you've been told especially if you're the only one out there or you're in a three-man or four-man team. [The warfighter] is feeling it—he's smelling it—he's tasting it—he's hearing it." This veteran's command decision-making skills overwrote the instructions obtained by a commander from a computer screen.

Three veteran-participants stressed the worth of professional growth in the civilian workforce to gain organizational knowledge. Veteran-T's goal was to become a supervisor someday. Veteran-B's strategy was to rise up the corporate ladder by employing his technical talents. He recognized that even as a leader, he would always be a follower.

Five of the six Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans stated that they either provided or desired mentoring to gain or to contribute organizational knowledge. Veteran-J recounted, "When I became a civilian, I always found mentors because I learned in the Air Force [Reserve] that a mentor is the person that paves the way for you and they teach you your job and they're encouraging."

Veteran-D provided mentoring to a new employee in the civilian workplace:

I can't give her everything at once. You have to give it in small bits - and it takes multiple exposures, and you have to be patient, and you have to let her play and risk, and you allow for mistakes. It's a learning job It's my job to mentor and make her successful.

The veterans voiced the importance of acquiring knowledge about their civilian work organization in order to contribute valuable knowledge to achieve organizational success. The most useful tools for the veterans were lessons learned, professional knowledge, and mentoring.

Organizational support. The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans voiced the need to obtain organizational support in the form of job acquisition and supportive structures and cultures in the civilian workplace. Three veterans experienced many difficulties when trying to find permanent jobs after leaving the military. Veteran-T recounted, "It took about a year to find anything just in the civilian world. It was very defeating because I was already almost done with an MBA by the time I got out of active duty."

Veteran-B explained that he received help when trying to get civilian employment, making the reintegration experience much smoother when he located an employment agency that was provided by the government as a free service. Veteran-B stressed that many veterans were unaware of this benefit. Thanks to an agent who helped translate his military electronic skills, the veteran received various job offers. Once in the civilian workplace, he realized that "many of the individuals were ex-military and that made me comfortable."

The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans understood the military and civilian structures as differing immensely. Veteran-E said, "I think in the military there's, not officially, a total disregard

for the person but the mission does have to take precedence. Here, the feeling of being a person rather than equipment has made the experience much more enjoyable.”

Veteran-R compared the military and civilian organizational structures:

In the military, you know, if you have a mission that's going on you have to do it. You have to follow the mission or get kicked out whereas here [civilian workplace], if I don't freaking like you or like the job I just leave. I don't have to worry about somebody dying.

The veteran-followers described the differences between the civilian and military organizational cultures. Veteran-E shared: “I'm used to telling my [military] peers like, “Dude, that's stupid.” You really can't do this in the civilian job. You spend enough years in the military. You are used to a certain culture.” Veteran-B's perspective was that the level of responsibility in the military culture was higher than that of the civilian culture. He spoke of the high-pressure support work required to get tanker aircrafts in the air to refuel fighter planes. While his future civilian job required meeting tight schedules, it was not a life or death situation unlike his active duty mission.

The veteran-followers felt that receiving support could have helped them to find work, be effective civilian employees, and to understand the organizational culture and structure.

Valuing supporters. At times, supervisors assign veterans tasks requiring higher responsibility in their civilian jobs. When supervisors trusted them to perform in a leadership capacity or role, the collective majority of the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans agreed that it was essential for organizations to value the supporters of the leaders (followers). The veterans' answers ranged from considering leadership as equal to followership, feeling appreciation, and feeling belittled.

According to Veteran-E, leader and follower roles are equally valuable because cooperation, for example, is a trait displayed both during leadership and followership interactions.

Veteran-T was one of four veterans who felt valued after enacting a leadership role. She stated, “I think it gives me an edge and it makes me stand out. I like it 'cause it really grows me and 'cause I do want to be a supervisor.” Similarly, after filling in for the boss in a meeting, Veteran-J stated:

I just sit quietly and watch what's going on . . . if I think something is not quite right, I'll take notes. I won't chair up and say it myself but I'll go confirm and then just send an email to whomever it is and correct it. But, it's kind of weird 'cause I've never been that high on the food chain or a place where I'm expected to be that autonomous.

Veteran-R was not valued as a follower by a civilian superior who delegated a great responsibility and then fired the veteran once his services were no longer required.

Discussion

Followership: The essence

Followership, a part of leadership, has not received much recognition from leadership scholars. This study sought the essence of followership through the phenomenology research method, where the essence of a phenomenon is the inner makeup of a lived experience (van Manen, 2016). Followership has numerous attached definitions, but this study defined it as an organizational position where followers are subordinates who obey the mandates of their leaders (managers) within an institution (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015). To the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans, as followers in the civilian workplace, the essence of followership was following directives purposely established by their leaders and accomplishing objectives with efficacy.

Most veterans who understood the phenomenon of followership in terms of subordination viewed it in a positive way. One veteran explained that a leader who an individual followed was simultaneously a follower of a superior, making that person a subordinate. Other veterans agreed that subordinates followed leaders' orders (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015) but recognized their roles

and responsibilities within the civilian organization. However, one veteran who had been a previous military leader disliked the subordinate label (Hoption, Christie, & Barling, 2012). In addition, the veterans felt strongly that followership meant actively supporting activities and contributing to the success of organizational goals. Similarly, Kelley (1988) described effective followers as motivated individuals who act on a leader's behalf to meet organizational goals, and recognize their roles and duties as followers. Chaleff (2009) referred to them as courageous followers.

My identities

One purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans playing their civilian follower roles. Consequently, it was necessary to determine if the veterans possessed the individual level self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) of a follower. The findings revealed that all veterans held a follower self-conception and several additional identities, thus supporting the my identities theme. The veterans offered examples from their lived experiences to reinforce their follower identities. They had followed others in the military service and throughout their careers, from above and below their job statuses, and shared their belief that everyone in modern society is a follower. Markus and Wurf (1987) explicated that of all the identities people hold, the working self-concept can surface when triggered by a specific context. This suggests that the veterans' civilian workplace environment could elicit the emergence of follower identities, or the working self-concept salient identity.

Similar to Carter's (2013) assertion, the findings of this phenomenology study suggested that the many identities that individuals hold make up the total self. In addition to the follower identity, the veterans held at least the veteran, military, and warrior identities. Veteran-B became a weekend warrior by enlisting in the Air Force Reserve while working a full-time civilian job. Of the two veterans who identified their military selves, Veteran-R felt that all military people were "cut from the same cloth." Veteran-J identified weakly with the veteran identity only because she considered the combat soldiers to be the real veterans. Several identities constitute the participant selves making the participants unique and valuable individuals.

Organizational principles

The theme 'organizational principles' surfaced as the need for veterans to work in institutions exhibiting understanding for veteran affairs and outstanding work ethics. This theme arose at the relational (one-on-one leader-follower and follower-follower) and collective (team member) levels of the self-concept. Additionally, the veterans revealed their lived experiences at the collective level relating to organizational support programs for veterans. At the relational and collective levels, the veterans' experiences identifying with a leader or a peer ranged from identifying fully to not at all. According to the veteran-followers, their necessity to work in a civilian organization demonstrating organizational principles was potentially due to the military structure and culture they once lived.

The veterans who sensed their leaders' understanding in the civilian workplace believed this was due to the supervisors being former military members or relationship with veterans. The other veterans voiced disappointment with their civilian leaders' misunderstanding or lack of concern for their issues. Yanchus et al. (2018) recommended the development of "organizational leaders' understanding of military skills and culture to enable a better use of veteran employees' strengths at civilian jobs" (p. 37).

Although most veteran-followers found some degree of connection with a civilian peer (relational) and team members (collective), they attributed this understanding to many of them being veterans themselves. The one veteran who experienced no understanding from a peer and team members stated that these civilians had never participated in the military service. "Veterans bring to

the workplace their experience with military culture, training, and combat, to which civilians are not exposed" (Yanchus et al., 2018, p. 37), suggesting that civilian unfamiliarity of veterans leads to misunderstanding. Smith (2018) referred to this lack of understanding as the military-civilian gap. For the veterans, finding understanding in the civilian workplace was vital for their successful work performance (Danish & Antonides, 2013). The authors stressed the significance that understanding possible post-deployment challenges makes, and how these challenges could inhibit a veteran's work performance, suggesting that companies employing supportive leaders facilitate veterans' enactment of their follower roles with efficacy.

Work ethics in the civilian workplace also mattered, and several veterans spoke about a leader and peer, and team members who lacked this organizational principle. One veteran explained how he enacted work ethics by helping team members be successful. Overall, the veterans had difficulty identifying with workplace civilians lacking discipline, camaraderie, and accountability (Orazem et al., 2016). In addition, Zogas' (2017) study revealed that veterans had trouble adapting to the civilian workplace because their military identity, distinguished by attributes of respect for authority, punctuality, and professionalism, was undervalued.

At the collective level, the veterans shared their lived experiences about institutions that either provided support programs for veterans or not. The findings were similar to those of the 'valuing supporters' theme where veterans wanted to feel valued as individuals contributing toward organizational success when assigned leadership-like duties. However, the veterans specifically addressed the organizational value systems and programs implemented to promote veteran follower experiences in the civilian workplace, which varied from complete to no support. A study conducted by Kirchner and Minnis (2018) indicated that many veteran friendly firms provided benefits to veteran employees, such as personal development (e.g., business and communication skills, and money management) and leadership development programs. The fact that three Afghanistan and Iraq War veteran-followers did not receive civilian workplace support suggests that they worked in companies that were not veteran friendly or that did not distinguish among veterans and non-veterans. The veterans who benefitted from the programs were satisfied and wished to stay. For the three veterans who worked in companies offering no veteran assistance programs, their strength of organizational identity was low. These results echoed those of Xenikou (2014) who realized that organizations with employees showing higher levels of organizational bond exhibited and afforded support value systems. In conclusion, this phenomenology study found that most Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans could identify with other followers at each of three self-concept levels when executing civilian follower roles.

Organizational knowledge

This study sought to discover the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans' experiences identifying with their new follower roles in the civilian work context. Most veterans concurred that obtaining and applying organizational knowledge through military lessons learned, professional growth, and mentoring was essential for career success.

The veterans asserted that applying military lessons learned helped them enact their follower roles. Having served in a learning organization, the armed forces (Dempsey, 2012), the former military followers applied these military lessons learned to the civilian workplace, such as learning from errors, competitiveness, decision-making, and serving others. According to Doe and Doe (2013), it is unnecessary for veterans to abandon their military identity and experiences, and they should apply the lessons learned to influence a positive civilian work environment. In addition, veteran-participants expressed a need for professional growth to acquire organizational knowledge, enabling them to move up the hierarchical ladder. Examples included becoming a supervisor,

employing professional skills, and providing structure. The Demographics Form revealed that each veteran held military leadership positions responsible for subordinates' morale and welfare (Doe & Doe, 2013) including mentoring, another need that most veterans voiced. The authors explained that many employers focus on ensuring that veterans accept the new corporate expectations by providing training about the company, mentoring, and on-the-job training. Kirchner and Minnis (2018) found that over half of the 16 veteran/military friendly companies they studied provided leadership development programs as part of the veteran professional development plan. These companies also implemented mentorships to promote the development of veteran employees. As former leaders, the veterans felt capable of holding leadership positions once again to care for and grow civilian followers and their careers.

Organizational support

The Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans desired support in the form of civilian employment, strong organizational structure, and a veteran-friendly culture. Nearly all veterans either faced issues gaining employment or within the workplace. Although one veteran landed a good job with government-sponsored assistance, the others found civilian organizations unaccommodating to employment necessities. In a 2015 study, Ahern et al. learned that veterans lacked connection with the civilian environment because of unsupportive institutions.

The veteran-participant who received support during his civilian job search heard about the government-sponsored program and utilized the services. According to Zogas (2017), federal funding for veteran employment and education programs has increased substantially from 1996 to 2015. In a study by Kirchner and Minnis (2018), 25 companies (81%) reported using recruitment and hiring strategies that included veteran job fairs, veteran referrals by current employees, and apprenticeships to relate to veterans during the integration process. However, three participants in this study felt unsupported when trying to find civilian jobs. This suggests that these veterans may have applied for jobs at companies that did not deem hiring veterans a priority. Additionally, this may suggest that federal and local governments, military/veteran friendly companies, and non-profit firms were unsuccessful broadcasting the message of their priority to employ veterans.

The veterans also revealed concerns about the difference between military and civilian structures, finding them challenging or very different from their lived experiences. Similar to Ahern et al. (2015), the veterans asserted that military service provided structure that the civilian context lacked. Veterans stated that the military structure placed priority on missions that could involve loss of life, but others felt comfortable working in the more lax civilian realm. Because all veterans have different reintegration experiences, some accept the different civilian structure that others reject. In addition, most veterans were vocal about the different civilian work culture in which they interacted. Some felt strongly that the civilian culture was lax, focused on meeting cost, schedule, and quality, was composed of civilians who resisted change, and that the workplace frowned upon the use of odd humor or bad language. Orazem et al. (2016) asserted that veterans missed the military culture with which they were familiar.

Valuing supporters

"Valuing supporters" who enable organizational success was a salient theme among the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans. Each veteran received opportunities to enact leadership-like roles within the civilian work organization. Most veteran-followers were satisfied and identified with their hiring organization when leaders recognized their talents and trusted them to perform greater obligations. While one veteran believed that value comes from within a person's self-worth, another veteran shared that he felt unappreciated when fired once no longer needed. These findings

paralleled Xenikou's (2014) research results indicating that organizational identification is a function of an organization's value systems designed to show employees consideration as valued contributors. Xenikou professed that the strength of an employee's organizational identity could increase when leaders show appreciation. Job satisfaction may increase and the intention to leave can decrease, indicating that a relationship exists between organizational identity intensity and an organization's success. The veteran who suffered an unjustified dismissal considered this lived experience a profound and negative one. Hayes, Caldwell, Licon, and Meyer (2015) warned that leaders could place barriers on followership creation by treating employees as commodities and not as valued members of the organization, possibly resulting in waning follower commitment, and harming organizational achievements and trust.

Implications

The findings of this study can help the Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans enhance their follower roles in the civilian workplace. The literature has portrayed followers as individuals playing subordinate roles in reference to organizational leaders, although various researchers have identified many of them as effective followers who are driven by motivation and an understanding of their roles (Kelley, 1988). The research results suggest that the participants held various identities, such as the follower and veteran identities. The veterans, as effective followers, are responsible, ethical, and productive individuals in the civilian work arena. The findings that veterans value organizational principles, knowledge, and support have implications for veterans studies scholars who now have additional empirical evidence validating these veteran attributes.

The findings also have implications for organizational leaders who hire, develop, and want to retain veterans. Leaders should develop veterans as effective followers by providing a motivational work environment and culture where they can thrive through on-the-job training, coaching, and mentoring, professional growth opportunities, and rewards for excellent performance. Leaders should consider setting up or developing structures, such as Human Resource departments, to facilitate employment information to reintegrating veterans. For example, officials should have the ability, such as software tools, to find parallels between military and civilian experience. The organizational workplace should also afford the veteran-followers a chance to exercise their military identity to make contributions from lessons learned, and for veterans with leadership experience an opportunity to work in positions requiring high responsibility (Doe & Doe, 2013). The organization can benefit from the veterans' resulting effective performance leading to goal accomplishment and enhancing the two-way flow of organizational knowledge. Various military/veteran friendly companies and government agencies provide avenues for veterans to succeed in the civilian workplace, and more institutions should follow their example. Organizational leaders are responsible for ensuring that veteran job seekers have easy access to job-fair information and other employment-seeking events.

Lord and Brown (2001) stressed how leaders could influence followers' work behavior and motivation by means of their values and self-concepts, such as those of the veterans. The findings of this research paralleled those of Ahern et al. (2015), showing that veterans preferred the robust military structure over the civilian organizational structure which provided little guidance, and was relaxed and unsupportive. The implication of these results was for organizational leaders to provide support by changing organizational structures, aligning policies and work ethics with those of the veterans, and continuing to educate the civilian workforce to prevent preconceptions about veterans. Fortunately, strategies designed to help leaders interested in narrowing the military-civilian gap exist. "College and university courses are one site in which the military-civilian gap can be addressed, and academic-community engagement projects are one strategy for addressing the gap" (Smith, 2018, p.

1). Hodges (2018), a veteran who instructed a veterans studies college seminar, felt that an academic course focused on addressing the gap is a step in the right direction.

The veteran-followers demonstrated organizational identification in the civilian workplace, and Xenikou (2014) stressed that the intensity of this identification predicted employee satisfaction, the intention to leave, and how much followers were willing to contribute toward organizational success. These results have implications for leaders to implement organizational value systems, such as veteran support or retention programs. The programs can include veteran-peer clubs, and collaboration with government, private, religious, medical, and charitable organizations that offer support to veterans. On a national level, the results of this phenomenology study can help policy makers and change agents develop reintegration programs with many options for veterans to choose from helping them to find assistance and feel valued, mitigating social problems such as homelessness and suicides.

Finally, this study added to the scant literature of followership in general, and veteran followership, specifically. The acquired knowledge can help shed positive light on followership, replacing the negative connotation the phenomenon has sustained. The implications of these findings for leadership researchers is to focus on growing the followership literature. The implications for scholars of veterans studies is to continue conducting research on reintegration challenges affecting all veterans.

Limitations and Future Studies

This phenomenology study was limited to participants from a cohort of US veterans from the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. Other limitations may have involved not discerning additional themes due to the phrasing of questions, not asking sufficient probing or follow-on questions, or veterans' interpretation of questions. Another potential limitation was researcher bias during each interview or analysis, even if unintentional. In addition, the study revealed that the sample was limited to veterans who held military leadership ranks, inadvertently excluding lower ranking veterans. Most veterans had served in the Air Force and many workplace civilians were veterans themselves. This research did not distinguish if participants suffered physical or psychological problems, although individual veterans shared issues they had experienced.

In the future, researchers should study veterans who served in other military conflicts, former non-leadership military personnel, and veterans from specific military branches. Researchers should consider studying veterans who endured physical or psychological issues and combat veterans to examine their civilian workplace lived followership experiences. More studies could address civilians' perceptions of veterans in order to understand their possible misconceptions of veterans with potential issues (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011).

Another worthy future study is defining the terms veteran or military friendly. Kirchner and Minnis (2018) raised the concern because "business organizations freely use the term as a recruitment tool without critique from veterans, human resource (HR) practitioners, or researchers" (p. 95). The establishment of a standardized definition could also benefit from the critique of veterans studies scholars.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Department of Defense or the US government.

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Norma Caamal, PhD
Professional Engineer
Department of Defense
education2020@rocketmail.com

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your experiences as a follower and provide examples.
2. What has been your experience as a follower in the military?
3. Please explain your experiences as a follower in the civilian workplace.
4. What follower experiences in the military differ significantly from those follower experiences in the civilian workplace? Please give some examples.
5. Tell me about the challenges experienced in your follower role in the military. Please give examples.
6. Tell me about the challenges experienced in your follower role in the civilian workplace. Please give examples.
7. What has been your experience, as a veteran, identifying with leadership-like roles as a follower in the civilian workplace?
8. a) What has been your experience, as a veteran-follower, identifying with civilian leaders? Please provide examples.
b) What has been your experience, as a veteran-follower, identifying with coworkers in the civilian workplace? Please provide examples.
c) What has been your experience, as a veteran-follower, identifying with team members in the civilian workplace? Please provide examples.
9. a) What has been your experience with civilian leaders identifying with you as a veteran-follower? Please provide examples.
b) What has been your experience with coworkers identifying with you as a veteran-follower? Please provide examples.
c) What has been your experience with team members identifying with you as a veteran-follower? Please provide examples.
10. What is your experience with civilian workplace programs/activities/benefits meant to help increase a veteran's effectiveness and sense of purpose as a follower?
11. Followership is _____