

RESEARCH

Mental Representations of Military Veterans: The Pictures (and Words) In Our Heads

Scott Parrott, David L. Albright, Nicholas Eckhart and Kirsten Laha-Walsh

The University of Alabama, US

Corresponding author: Scott Parrott (msparrott@ua.edu)

There has been much popular and academic discussion concerning the public's mental "pictures" of US military veterans, a group afforded symbolic capital but also stereotyped by American society. Nevertheless, we have little empirical research concerning how the public thinks about military veterans. The present study helps to fill the void by examining two mental representations of military veterans among 1,047 respondents to a survey of US adults. First, it examines semantic representations of veterans, employing a priming task to see which words Americans most often associate with veterans. Second, it employs a visual imagery approach to better understand the "pictures in our heads" of veterans, asking respondents to imagine veterans and describe their race, gender, age, and from whence those images came, focusing on mass media and personal experience.

Keywords: veteran; media; stereotypes; attitudes; military

Walter Lippmann's (1922) famous tome on public opinion began with "The world outside and the pictures in our heads," a chapter in which he discussed humanity's dependence on mental images in the absence of direct experience, and the importance of words in conveying information about the unseen world. As Lippmann noted, the "pictures in our heads" are important because they inform public opinion, which for veterans could shape everything from veteran identity to their transition and reintegration into civilian society as the proportion of Americans who serve in the Armed Forces declines. Indeed, Lippmann (1922) equated mental images with public opinion:

The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters. (p. 29)

Veterans organizations, military officials, and other commenters have expressed concern regarding the American public's "pictures" of US military veterans (e.g., Garamone, 2019), a group afforded symbolic capital (Hipes & Gemoets, 2019) but also stereotyped by American society (Philipps, 2015). Nevertheless, we have little empirical research concerning how the public thinks about military veterans, an

important area of inquiry given (a) the potential role of public opinion in policy concerning veterans and (b) the role of community support in veterans' reintegration into civilian society. The present study contributes to the literature by examining mental representations of military veterans among 1,047 respondents to a national survey of US adults. First, it examines semantic representations of veterans, employing a priming task to see which words Americans most often associate with veterans. Second, it uses a visual mental imagery approach to better understand the "pictures in our heads" of veterans, asking respondents to imagine veterans and describe their race, gender, age, and from whence those images came, focusing on mass media and personal experience. The results are important because these aspects of memory—verbal and visual—likely inform attitudes and behavior toward military veterans in US society. Further, the results highlight commonalities—and differences—in what comes to mind when veterans and civilian Americans are asked to think about a veteran.

Literature Review

Military Service in the United States

The number of active service members in the US Armed Forces has declined since 1973, when the country ended the draft and adopted an "all volunteer" military (US Department of Defense, 2017). Given the decline, the number of *veterans* in the country also decreased. An estimated 65%

of the nation's 19.5 million veterans (12.7 million) are 55 or older, and veterans of the Vietnam and Gulf War eras represent the largest cohorts of living veterans (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2018). For certain segments of society, such as young adults, the changes in the military population translate into a decreased likelihood they closely know someone who served in the military (Pew Research Center, 2011). This may be one factor behind a civilian knowledge gap in relation to the Armed Forces, in which people do not understand the military and what it means to serve (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Meanwhile, the diversity of the US veteran population is increasing in terms of gender and race (NCVAS, 2018). More racial minorities, including African Americans and Hispanic Americans, are serving. More women are serving, and they also are in more positions of authority (Barroso, 2019). There are an estimated 2.03 million women veterans in the United States in 2020, representing 10% of the veteran population, and the figure is expected to grow to 2.15 million by 2030, representing 13% (NCVAS, 2018). Still, the majority of service members are White and male, as White veterans represented an estimated 81% of the overall veteran population in 2020 (15.7 out of 19.5 million), while male veterans represented an estimated 89% of the veteran population (17.5 out of 19.5 million).

Public Attitudes Toward Military Veterans

The US public endorses positive attitudes toward military service members and veterans of the Armed Forces (Hipes et al., 2015), which consistently ranks as one of the most trusted institutions in the United States (Johnson, 2018) despite the unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, veterans are so popular among the American public that it could be socially undesirable to express opinions that portray veterans in a negative light. Scholars have described a "Support the Troops" norm in US society and an empirical study (Hipes et al., 2015) reported that the American public does indeed overstate its support for members of the Armed Forces because of social norms. Even after accounting for normative responses, however, respondents generally describe veterans in primarily positive terms (Hipes et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, American society and its cultural products (e.g., news articles, movies, television shows) perpetuate perspectives on veterans that are shallow in depth, associating all veterans with heroism and military service with mental and/or physical trauma (e.g., Philipps, 2015; Schmidt, 2020). It should be noted that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is prevalent among the veteran population, especially among veterans who experienced combat. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that about 11 to 20 of every 100 veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) have PTSD in a given year (National Center for PTSD, 2020). Comparatively, an estimated 7 or 8 adults in the US civilian population experience PTSD at some point during their lives (National

Center for PTSD, 2020). Nevertheless, veterans and the military describe the association between trauma and military service as problematic because it lumps all service members into one category and disregards potentially positive experiences in the military. Similarly, the positive stereotype of heroism can be problematic. As one veteran stated in a study by Schmidt (2020), "When we deem all veterans as heroes because of their service, we stunt that individual's transition to identity and purpose after the military" (p. 18).

Such associations are likely rooted in the military-civilian divide, in which the civilian public does not understand military culture, structure, or the experiences of service members, veterans, and their families (Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012). Commenters blame the divide, in part, on the end of compulsory service in the US Armed Forces (also known as the draft), which is leading to fewer people serving in the military and fewer people with direct ties—whether through family or close friends—to the military (Pew Research Center, 2011). When people lack direct experience, noted Lippmann (1922), they depend on mental imagery and the words used to convey those images to others.

Semantic Associations and Visual Mental Imagery

The human mind is complex and theories concerning memory abound (see Ashcraft & Radvansky, 2010). However, research has frequently underscored the importance of both semantic associations and visual mental imagery in social cognition, or how people think about social groups such as military veterans (Libby & Eibach, 2013; Monteith et al., 2013). Network models propose that memory involves a network in which nodes—or concepts—are linked via associative pathways (Monteith et al., 2013). When one concept is primed by an external stimulus, activation spreads via the pathways, triggering closely related concepts and rendering those concepts more readily accessible. The closer two concepts are linked in the network, the greater the likelihood they will be activated in unison (Monteith et al., 2013). To illustrate, the conceptual associations of bread-butter or nurse-doctor should be more readily accessible than nurse-butter or doctor-bread. The proximity of concepts is partially a function of the frequency with which they are associated (Monteith et al., 2013). In the context of veterans, one might expect certain associations (veteran/hero or veteran/PTSD) to be readily accessible given the frequency with which society—including mass media—reinforce these associations.

Visual mental imagery also represents an important component of human memory and social cognition. Visual mental imagery is the ability to call to mind images of people, places, and things in the absence of the actual object (Ashcraft & Radvansky, 2010). The images we call to mind when we think about other people can inform memory and social interaction (Libby & Eibach, 2013). To illustrate, when asked to picture a military veteran, different attitudes and emotions might be triggered when one calls to mind an image of a World War II veteran versus an Afghanistan/Iraq

veteran, or a man versus a woman, or a homeless person versus a suburban neighbor. While we know of no research concerning mental imagery and veterans, anecdotal evidence does suggest veterans may be treated differently when they do not fit the image of what the public considers a veteran. For example, news stories abound of female veterans being accosted for parking in “veterans only” spaces, the assumption being a woman did not serve in the military (e.g., Alter, 2015; Associated Press, 2016; Foster, 2019).

Personal Experience and Media Exposure

Several sources may contribute to the creation and reinforcement of mental associations and our visual imagery, including direct personal experience and the mass media (Lippmann, 1922). A veteran might hold different associations concerning military service than a civilian, given the former service member’s direct experience in the Armed Forces. Similarly, a person whose mother served in the Armed Forces might more readily call to mind an image of a woman when asked to envision a military veteran. Given the military/civilian gap, however, an alternative source may exercise substantial influence over people’s thoughts concerning veterans: the mass media.

A growing body of research suggests the mass media afford audience members a narrow representation of what it means to serve in the military (e.g., Parrott et al., 2019; Rhidenour et al., 2019). Thus far, scholars have focused primarily on the textual and visual representation of veterans in news content. Whether national or local news organizations, newspaper or social media posts, common themes have emerged across content: journalists often portray former service members as heroes and/or victims of military service and bureaucracy (e.g., Parrott et al., 2019; Rhidenour et al., 2019; Wilbur, 2016).

An extensive line of research in the field of media effects suggests exposure to media messages can affect both short- and long-term thinking (see Bryant & Oliver, 2009). First, research suggests even short-term exposure to mass media content may nurture cognitive and affective associations (Dillman Carpentier, 2017), which can subsequently affect the way people perceive one another based on the social groups to which they belong (e.g., Johnson et al., 2009). In addition to one-time exposure, media effects researchers have found that long-term exposure to homogenous media messages can make similar thoughts more readily accessible among media consumers, which can inform consumers’ subsequent beliefs about the real world. Specifically, research suggests people develop mental models concerning the real world based on what they see in the media, and the more time people spend immersed in the media world, the more their beliefs will reflect the media world (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004).

Research Questions

Given the literature, the present study investigates American adults’ semantic associations and visual mental imagery concerning veterans while exploring the potential role of media

exposure and personal experience in informing these mental constructs. Eight research questions guide this study. The study first asks: What words most often come to mind when respondents are primed with the term “military veteran?” As noted, the mass media afford audiences narrow representations of military service, focusing on positive stereotypes such as heroism and negative stereotypes such as physical/mental trauma. An individual whose family member(s) served in the Armed Forces might hold more nuanced associations.

Therefore, the study asks: Will respondents be less likely to associate veterans with (a) homelessness, (b) heroism, and (c) trauma when they have a family member who served in the Armed Forces? Additionally, will civilian respondents be more likely to associate veterans with (a) homelessness, (b) heroism, and (c) trauma than respondents who served in the Armed Forces?

Furthermore, how do the overall words called to mind differ based on the respondents’ own military experience (versus lack of service)?

As noted, visual mental imagery is important in shaping the way we think about others, including social groups such as military veterans. The images we immediately call to mind may conflict with the people we encounter in the real world, such as the female driver parking in the “veterans only” space. Conversely, they may mesh with our mental images. Images may inform our behavior and attitudes. For example, a high school student who is a racial minority might be inclined to pursue a career in the military based on whether they see similar others in the field, and an individual might be inspired by veterans when they envision someone who is physically strong and adventurous. Similarly, a parent who calls to mind physical or mental trauma might be less inclined to support their child’s decision to join the military. Given the importance of mental imagery, the study examines the following: When respondents are asked to picture a military veteran, what do they report “seeing” in terms of (a) age, (b) gender, and (c) race? And beyond demographics, what other characteristics do respondents associate with veterans in these visual mental images?

Finally, given the potential role of media in shaping our visual mental images, the study seeks to understand whether the images respondents call to mind differ depending on what they perceive as the source of the information. It asks:

What is the source of this image of a veteran, according to respondents?

Do the image descriptions differ based on whether they come from personal experience or mass media?

Materials and Methods

Overview

To answer the research questions, a national survey of US households was conducted between March 7, 2019, and June 26, 2020, by the Veterans & Media Lab, Office for Military Families and Veterans, and the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Alabama. The survey was funded through an internal grant from the Office for

Research & Economic Development. Questions were drawn from a larger questionnaire concerning public attitudes toward US military veterans. The survey employed a two-prong sampling approach: telephone interviews and online panels. First, the authors contracted an on-campus telephone interviewing facility to conduct a nationally representative survey of US households using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and randomly selected cell and landline phones. The survey was conducted in English. Data collection occurred between March and August 2019, resulting in 543 completed surveys (a 2% completion rate). The research team sought to conduct the survey over an extended period of time to account for typical and holiday periods (e.g., Memorial Day, Veterans Day). However, given the response rate, the research team ultimately contracted an Atlanta-based marketing firm to use its nationally representative participant panel to supplement the original dataset through an internet-based questionnaire containing identical questionnaire items and order ($n = 592$). The research team compared responses to the variables of interest and noted no significant differences between samples; therefore, the samples were combined for this study. In total, 1,135 respondents participated in the survey. Answers provided by 88 online respondents were removed from the final dataset because the respondents did not complete the questionnaire, provided false responses, or spent an inadequate amount of time completing the survey. Additional information concerning survey administration is available through the corresponding author.

Variables

Word Associations

Once respondents consented to the survey, they were first asked “When you hear the term ‘military veteran’ what words come to mind?” The question was placed first in the survey to avoid other questions clouding the priming task. Responses were open-ended. In the telephone interview, surveyors noted every word the respondent mentioned. The online survey permitted respondents to enter words themselves.

Visual Mental Imagery

Next, respondents were instructed to “please take a moment and picture a US military veteran. Now describe that person.” Respondents provided open-ended descriptions. Next, respondents were asked “what is the gender of the person you pictured” followed by “what is the person’s race,” and finally, “what is the person’s age?”

Image Source

Respondents were asked “when you think of a military veteran, where does this image come from? For example, is it someone you know personally or maybe someone you saw on television or in the movies?” Again, respondents were afforded an opportunity to respond in an open-ended fashion.

Following these items, respondents were asked questions concerning their attitudes toward news media and military veterans, which are beyond the scope of the present manuscript. The survey concluded by gathering demographic information concerning respondents, including whether they served in the military and whether family members (by blood or marriage) served in the military. Demographic information is reported below. In the interest of clarity, analytical approaches are described with each research question in the results section.

Results

Demographics

In terms of gender, 540 respondents (52%) were female, 496 were male (47%), and 10 indicated either “other” or provided no response. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 93. One hundred twenty seven respondents (12%) were between ages 18 and 29; 131 were aged 30 to 39 (13%); 142 were 40 to 49 (14%); 203 were 50 to 59 (20%); 229 were 60 to 69 (22%); 167 were 70 to 79 (16%); 41 were 80 to 89 (3%); and 4 were 90 to 93 (<1%). Seventy-two percent answered yes when asked whether someone related to them by blood or marriage is a US military veteran ($n = 749$), while 222 (21%) indicated no, and 75 (7%) were unsure, did not know, or did not answer. Fourteen percent ($n = 147$) indicated they at one time served in the military, while 880 (84%) indicated they had not. Most respondents were White ($n = 836$; 80%), followed by Black/African American ($n = 91$, 9%); other ($n = 36$; 3%); Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 34$, 3%); mixed race ($n = 28$; 3%); and Native American or American Indian ($n = 11$, 1%). Ninety percent were non-Hispanic ($n = 947$), while 7% were Hispanic ($n = 75$). All 50 states and the District of Columbia were represented by the respondents.

Research Questions

The first research question sought to identify the most frequent words that came to mind when respondents were primed with the term “military veteran.” To examine the question, respondents’ open-ended answers were uploaded into NVivo12, a data analysis application, and a word frequency analysis was conducted using a minimum word length of 3 letters and including stemmed words (e.g., “talk” and “talking” would be included together in the tally). **Table 1** includes the 20 most prevalent terms for all 1,047 respondents including the frequency with which they appeared. Meanwhile, **Figure 1** is a word cloud that visualizes the most prevalent responses with larger sized words indicating greater frequency of reference. Respondents provided 6,967 words in total text in response to the prompt, including 4,489 individual terms. As illustrated in **Table 1**, respondents frequently associated positive adjectives with veterans including service, honor, and sacrifice. Only one potentially negative term appeared among the top 20: wars.

The second research question sought to determine whether respondents would be less likely to associate

Table 2: Words Recalled by Veterans When Primed with “Military Veteran”.

Word	Frequency	Weighted %
served	38	5.65
military	28	4.16
service	26	3.86
country	25	3.71
honor	17	2.53
patriotic	13	1.93
veteran	12	1.78
hero	12	1.78
someone	11	1.63
person	8	1.19

Note: Weighted percentage represents the frequency of the word relative to the total words counted.

Table 3: Words Recalled by Civilians When Primed with “Military Veteran”.

Word	Frequency	Weighted %
serving	175	4.09
services	140	3.27
military	125	2.92
hero	102	2.32
country	94	2.20
honor	93	2.17
someone	91	2.13
war	66	1.54
sacrifices	64	1.50
person	61	1.43

Note: Weighted percentage represents the frequency of the word relative to the total words counted.

and age when describing the veteran they pictured. Using SPSS Version 26, frequencies were performed to answer the question. In terms of gender, 753 respondents (72%) described the veteran as male, while 174 (17%) described the veterans' gender as “none in particular,” 95 indicated female (9%), and 24 said they did not know (2%). In terms of race, 575 respondents described the veteran they pictured as White (55%), while 136 respondents (13%) indicated “none in particular,” 84 described the veteran as Black or African American (8%), 17 indicated multiple races (1.6%), 17 indicated Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6%), and 7 indicated Native American (.7%). Several respondents were hesitant to answer the question concerning race, as 176 (16%) did not answer the question or indicated they did not know. Finally,

in terms of age, respondents primarily described the veteran as middle aged or senior. Sixty-eight respondents described the veteran as 18 to 24 years old (7.9%); 159 respondents 25 to 34 (18%); 151 respondents 35 to 44 (17%); 138 respondents 45 to 54 (15.8%); 111 respondents 55 to 64 (12.7%); 144 respondents 65 to 74 (16.5%); and 98 respondents 75 or older (11.3%).

The sixth research question sought to identify other characteristics that respondents associated with former service members when they envisioned a veteran. To answer the question, an emergent thematic analysis (Tracy, 2013) was conducted in which two coders reviewed participants' open-ended descriptions and developed broad-based themes and specific codes for the images. NVivo 12 was then used to code participant responses. This coding was used to identify the frequency with which each of these themes emerged within the responses. When respondents were asked to picture and then describe the veteran, their responses often fell into four overarching domains, which the coders labeled *demographics*, *specific aspects of the military*, *negative qualities*, and *personal qualities*.

Regarding *demographics*, 105 descriptions (10%) referenced age, using terms such as “elderly” and “old,” or “young,” and “middle aged” to describe the veteran they pictured. Twenty respondents (2%) made specific reference to poverty or need, describing the veteran as “needing help from the government to get reestablished,” or “homeless and unwanted,” or “needs help financially,” “street begging for money,” or “struggling to survive.”

Regarding *specific aspects of the military*, 32 respondents (3%) referenced branches of the Armed Forces, describing the veteran they pictured as “Marine lieutenant,” “Air Force Veteran,” and “Army,” for example. Forty respondents (4%) mentioned specific deployments, such as “Vietnam” and the “Iraq War.” Sixty-seven respondents (6%) specifically referenced the veteran's uniform, mentioning “bars across chest,” “wearing fatigues,” and “wears bball [sic] cap for representation for their branch.”

Negative qualities were generally rare. Seventeen respondents (2%) referenced negative characteristics such as “broken,” and “sadness,” “disgruntled” and “aren't as strong as expected.”

In terms of *personal qualities*, 62 respondents (6%) described the veteran as “physically fit,” “strong,” or in “good physical condition,” one of the most common descriptors. The most prevalent descriptor addressed traits unrelated to physical appearance. One hundred respondents (10%) described the veteran they pictured using terms related to heroism, including “hero,” “honorable,” “patriot,” and “brave.” Eighty-one respondents (8%) described the veteran they pictured by referencing pride, while 18 mentioned toughness (2%). Meanwhile, 40 (4%) used the terms “loyal” or “honest” to describe the veteran they envisioned. Forty-six respondents (4%) used terms related to mental illness, including “PTSD,” “mental toll,” “flashback,” and “depression.” Further, 43 respondents (4%) specifically referenced missing limbs or physical injury associated with service.

Research question seven sought to understand the source of these images, according to respondents. Personal experience dominated, as 632 respondents (60%) described the source of their mental image as a friend, family member, or themselves. Meanwhile, 166 respondents referenced mass media (16%), primarily television, movies, and news. The remaining respondents who provided an answer ($n = 209$, 20%) indicated generic sources such as “the community” or “my imagination.”

The final research question sought to determine whether respondents’ descriptions of their mental imagery differed based on whether the images came from personal experience or mass media. The overall dataset was split based on whether respondents described the source as based in personal experience or media exposure. Next, analyses were run using NVivo to identify the top 20 terms used for each group. The groups shared 11 terms in common: served, person, country, military, proud, strong, someone, older, patriotic, veteran, and uniform. Otherwise, people who described the *media* as the source of their image most often used terms related to stereotypical images (homeless, male, man, PTSD, help, hero) and the words tall, patriotic, and many. People whose image came from *personal experience* used the terms service, honor, bravery, work, family, respect, good, dedicated, and wars.

Discussion

Lippmann’s treatise on public opinion remains influential nearly 100 years later in part because the journalist understood the importance of the “pictures in our heads” in shaping our perception of the world around us, including social judgments. Public opinion represents an important component of veteran identity. As social animals our perceptions of ourselves are shaped not only by our own thoughts but by the opinions of others. As Schmidt (2020) wrote, “Just as individuals understand their physical appearance by looking in a mirror, individuals also develop a sense of self and come to understand who they are by considering how they and their peers are reflected by others” (p. 19). The present study sought to better understand that reflection in relation to veterans, asking 1,047 American adults what words and images came to mind when they thought about US military veterans. On face value the results appear positive: veterans are heroes. When one considers the diversity of the veteran population and experiences such as moral injury, the picture becomes more complicated.

Cognitive associations have been described as an initial step in the articulation of an attitude. The terms most readily called to mind—hero, villain, good, bad—inform our subsequent thinking about other people and social groups, providing the kernel by which fully formed beliefs and attitudes may emerge. Cognitive associations have been described as implicit attitudes, automatic evaluations that inform explicit attitudes and behavior even though individuals might not be cognizant of the implicit attitudes. A voter might feel they can trust the politician who once

served in the Army, or an employer might have a bad feeling about hiring a veteran for a sales position. Similarly, cognitive associations may inform our perceptions of people and events, especially when they are ambiguous. For example, an individual might attribute a neighbor’s outburst at the cable repairman as a bad day for a civilian neighbor but wonder whether it has to do with PTSD when the neighbor served in the military.

Overall, respondents in the present study called to mind positive terms—service, hero, honor—when they thought about military veterans. The positive terminology emerged regardless of respondents’ own military experience or whether a family member served in the Armed Forces. Granted, people whose family members served in the Armed Forces were more likely than other respondents to call to mind hero-related terms, but overall, most respondents expressed appreciation of veterans by associating them with terms such as “hero,” “honor,” “sacrifice,” and “service.” The results lend further support for previous research that suggests the American public holds its nation’s veterans in high regard.

Nonetheless, the prevalent association between heroism and service does raise potential issues. The association represents a positive stereotype, one that appears a compliment but might nurture negative outcomes for the person (or people) it describes. To illustrate, a veteran might experience moral injury during service, perpetuating or witnessing events that conflict with the individual’s moral beliefs, and experience dissonance when described as a hero upon returning home. In addition, with more than 1.3 million active service members, one should expect the men and women of the Armed Forces to embody diversity in terms of not only demographics but moral beliefs, experiences, political leaning, and worldviews. To describe every veteran as a hero, veterans say, is simply inaccurate. As Moore (2018, para. 9) wrote in *Task & Purpose*,

Somewhere between ‘patriotic correctness’ and ‘the sea of goodwill,’ society has determined that expressions of respect and thanks without true engagement or depth is understanding enough...Public denialism that favors the patriotic action hero image of the military often refuses to acknowledge the varied and complex identities and experiences of those who serve.

While respondents generally used positive terms to describe veterans, one interesting exception did emerge. Veterans were less likely than people who have not served to associate physical or mental trauma with service. The finding provides empirical support to back the anecdotes of veterans who have commented on the civilian public’s perceptions of service. Brian M. Thompson (2019), a US Army combat veteran who served in Afghanistan, wrote about his experiences with the military-civilian gap as a Washington, DC, school teacher in an opinion piece for the *Washington*

Post. Thompson described students—and even teachers—buying into stereotypes about veterans perpetuated by movies and video games. “During my time in the classroom,” Thompson wrote, “I was able to share my unique experience that my war did not transform me into a hero or leave me a broken man, but it did change me. In many ways, it made me stronger. And this is the case for many veterans, who return from war eager to continue serving their community and country” (para. 12). Similarly, national surveys suggest veterans hold mixed views on their experiences during the service in terms of whether they experienced physical or mental illness related to service, financial problems, or difficulty finding employment upon returning to the civilian world (Parker, et al., 2019). Many veterans recall their service with pride (Parker, et al., 2019).

The demographics of the United States military are becoming more diverse as women and racial minorities make up a growing proportion of service members and veterans. Nevertheless, respondents’ mental images of veterans proved homogenous. When asked to picture a veteran, most respondents pictured someone white and male. Psychologists note the importance of visual mental imagery in everything from memory to emotion, persuasion to judgment (Libby & Eibach, 2013). Such homogenous visual mental imagery may be one reason women veterans report mistreatment from the public, including regular anecdotes about being accosted for parking in “veterans only” spaces (e.g., Associated Press, 2016; Foster, 2019), and even in Veterans Affairs facilities where they are greeted by an assumption that they are the wife or partner of a veteran rather than a veteran themselves (Steinhauer, 2019). The result also demonstrates the importance of initiatives that increase the visibility of the Armed Forces’ growing diversity.

Interestingly, respondents used terms unrelated to physical appearance to describe the veterans they pictured in their heads. While “physically fit” ranked among the most prevalent descriptions, respondents primarily focused on internal characteristics of the men and women who served in the Armed Forces: terms related to heroism appeared most often, followed by terms related to pride. Meanwhile, about 1 in 20 respondents referenced mental illness, especially PTSD, and missing limbs when describing the veteran they envisioned. As fewer people serve in the Armed Forces, commenters argue that the mass media may step into the knowledge gap and exercise sway over how the public understands veterans. Here, we found some evidence that might indeed be the case. When asked to picture a military veteran, people whose example came from the mass media were more likely to call to mind those stereotypes related to who serves (men) and consequences of service (PTSD, homelessness). Meanwhile, people who drew on personal experience used terms that draw a more intimate and nuanced portrait: respect, dedication, wars, honor, bravery, family.

For many Americans, veterans are not real—they are screen images. Veterans are *sui generis* with little or no personal presence in their lives beyond TV news, video games, and

movies. Veterans, commenters, and others have expressed concern over American households no longer having “skin in the game” following the end to the draft, especially when compared to the households during the eras of the World Wars and Vietnam. While shedding light on public thinking the present study presents a problem: How do veterans, advocates, and others navigate the increasing dominance of the screen in our language, relationships, and even the way we imagine the world?

In addition, the study raises interesting questions for civilians about their relationship with veterans: As civilians “picture” veterans, how do they picture themselves in that moment, and how much does this subjective self-image say about the how, what, and who of their projection of veterans? Conversely, and particularly important for veteran identity: How do veterans “picture” civilians, and why? In answering each question, we must consider how we are profoundly shaped by images that are not our own but provided to us by screens. The problem of the image-makers is real, especially when one considers the shrinking number of corporate entities that control media ownership in the United States. Indeed, when one considers this study’s results in the context of attachment theory, they raise questions about the emotional bonds that connect people, underlie relationships, and, for many, may be increasingly lacking in modern life. The problem might stretch beyond cultural separation (i.e., the military/civilian divide) and be indicative of a much larger societal issue: dehumanization and increased dependence on technology.

Finally, the study carries implications for military-to-civilian transition and veterans’ re-integration into civilian society. When the general public—and veterans themselves, it seems—use terms such as “hero” and “honor” to describe the men and women who serve, it stands to reason that veterans would perceive themselves as either fitting the mold or not upon returning to American communities and encountering news stories, social media posts, and other cultural representations of these norms. Future research should examine the potential downstream effects of such perceptions, which could range from awkward social interactions to veterans experiencing a sense they do not belong—which could nurture depression, substance abuse, or even suicidal ideations in the extreme. Put simply, what happens when society describes you as a hero, but you do not feel like one? What happens when you feel like others assume things about you because of the group to which you belong? What if you were part of a military team and culture with shared values and experiences, a group of people who were mixed across demographic categories, only to separate from service and enter a civilian society where there were little connections between minority and majority social networks? What role do these images have on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender and consequent privilege or disadvantage, structural inequality, and systemic inequity?

While the present study does not directly answer such questions, it does suggest public thinking can be re-directed

or altered. Persuasion research suggests people's attitudes are especially prone to influence when they (a) lack substantial knowledge and (b) hold the communicator of the persuasive message in high regard (Petty et al., 2009). The results outlined here—images lacking depth but overall positive—suggest veterans, advocacy organizations, and others who are interested in challenging beliefs and cultural norms concerning veterans may begin the task on solid footing. We join scholars (e.g., Ramasubramanian et al., 2020) who call for a paradigm shift in the field of media stereotyping scholarship, encouraging researchers to understand how communication and images might be used to challenge stereotypes. If mental images can cause dysfunction, might they also cure it? Yes, according to a budding line of inquiry in the field of media effects that suggests people's beliefs and attitudes may be re-trained through exposure to counterstereotypical representations (for a review, see Ramasubramanian et al., 2020). It is not difficult to imagine, and empirically test, how images could be iteratively designed and deployed to more closely align service members and veterans with civilians and vice versa, potentially easing the military-to-civilian transition, accelerating acculturation, and perhaps even facilitating homophilous relations in our social systems. Such challenges would certainly necessitate care and ethical approaches. For example, the images would need to interrupt and redirect public notions of military veterans while not exacerbating existing stereotypes and mental images. In addition, veteran needs should drive the effort rather than unacknowledged ulterior motives.

Challenging the mass media represents a David versus Goliath battle of sorts, especially given the growing concentration of corporate control over mass media in the United States. Nevertheless, alternative routes exist by which advocates might circumvent the traditional gatekeepers, including the proliferation of social media, alternative communication avenues such as blogs, YouTube, and media literacy. Media literacy occurs when mass media consumers are trained to understand the production practices and motivations of content producers such as Hollywood, television networks, and journalists. Initiatives have appeared to challenge mainstream media representations of veterans and encourage more behind-the-scenes work by veterans (e.g., *Got Your 6*). It might be beneficial to also launch grassroots campaigns to educate the public about media stereotypes concerning veterans, nurturing a more "literate" populace.

Limitations

As with any research, the present study had limitations. The questionnaire referenced media and personal experience when asking respondents about the source of their mental image. While the approach could lead respondents, it was used because pre-testing indicated confusion at the question "When you think of a military veteran, where does the image come from?" In addition, the survey provides no insight into causation because it is correlational; therefore, conclusions cannot be drawn about mass media exposure

causing changes in public associations or images concerning military veterans. The survey took place over an extended period of time, which carries benefits and detriments. One benefit is that the questionnaire administration spanned a period that included routine time periods as well as major military-related holidays, such as Veterans Day and Memorial Day, as well as holidays that might nurture more family-related and positive attitudes, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Finally, 72% of respondents indicated they had blood relations who served in the US military. The high direct knowledge rate may be attributable to the average age of respondents which was 55. Younger adults (i.e., people in their 20s) are less likely to personally know someone who served.

Conclusion

The words and mental images we hold in mind shape our perceptions of the world, including social groups such as military veterans. In the present study, a national survey of 1,047 American adults identified words commonly associated with "military veteran" and commonalities in the images people called to mind when asked to envision a veteran. Respondents most often focused on terms related to heroism, associating veterans with terms such as hero, honor, service, and sacrifice. These terms came to mind regardless of respondents' own military experience or whether they had blood relations who served in the US Armed Forces. Strikingly, terms related to heroism were used to describe the veterans that respondents pictured, even though the characteristic has nothing to do with physical appearance. Less prevalent were descriptions that associate military service with mental or physical trauma.

The words and images people call to mind when thinking about the social world are important because they inform public opinion, which ultimately could influence everything from personal relationships between civilians and veterans to governmental policy and social support for military veterans. Throughout his seminal text on the subject of "the pictures in our heads" and public opinion, Lippmann often appeared prescient. As he wrote in 1922, well before the introduction of television, social media, smartphones, and a world in which communication occurs 24 hours a day 7 days a week:

...modern life is hurried and multifarious, above all physical distance separates men who are often in vital contact with each other...There is neither time nor opportunity for intimate acquaintance. Instead we notice a trait which marks a well known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry about in our heads. (p. 89)

We see people and we judge them based upon our mental images and the words we use to describe those images. When we hear someone is an *agitor*, Lippmann wrote, we assign the person traits and characteristics based on our

stereotypes concerning *agitator*. The same goes for other social groups, which Lippmann listed off: intellectual, plutocrat, Harvard Man, Yale Man.

"He is a regular fellow," Lippmann (1922, p. 89) wrote, running down the list of people. "He is a West Pointer. He is an old army sergeant."

And for many Americans, that means hero.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

- Alter, C.** (2015, January 22). Female veteran shamed for parking in veterans-only spot. *Time*. <http://time.com/3678382/female-veteran-shamed-for-parking-in-veterans-only-spot/>
- Ashcraft, M. H., & Radvansky, G. A.** (2010). *Cognition*. (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Associated Press.** (2016, June 14). Female veteran criticized for using veteran's parking space. *Military.com*. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/06/14/female-veteran-criticized-using-veteran-parking-space.html>
- Barroso, A.** (2019, September 10). The changing profile of the US military: Smaller in size, more diverse, more women in leadership. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/>
- Bryant, J., & Oliver, M. B.** (Eds.). (2009). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203877111>
- Dillman Carpentier, F. R.** (2017). Priming. *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, 1–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0050>
- Foster, A.** (2019, December 2). 'Women serve too'; Note left on veteran's car prompts conversation among female vets. *live5news.com*. <https://www.live5news.com/2019/12/03/women-serve-too-note-left-veterans-car-prompts-conversation-among-female-vets/>
- Garamone, J.** (2019, May 16). DOD official cites widening military-civilian gap. *Department of Defense*. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1850344/dod-official-cites-widening-military-civilian-gap/>
- Hipes, C., & Gemoets, D.** (2019). Stigmatization of war veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Stereotyping and social distance findings. *Society and Mental Health*, 9(2), 243–258. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318801889>
- Hipes, C., Lucas, J. W., & Kleykamp, M.** (2015). Status and stigma-related consequences of military service and PTSD: Evidence from a laboratory experiment. *Armed Forces & Society*, 41(3), 477–495. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X14536710>
- Johnson, C.** (2018). Trust in the military exceeds trust in other institutions in Western Europe and US. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/04/trust-in-the-military-exceeds-trust-in-other-institutions-in-western-europe-and-u-s/>
- Johnson, J. D., Olivo, N., Gibson, N., Reed, W., & Ashburn-Nardo, L.** (2009). Priming media stereotypes reduces support for social welfare policies: The mediating role of empathy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(4), 463–476. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208329856>
- Libby, L. K., & Eibach, R. P.** (2013). The role of visual imagery in social cognition. In D. Carlston (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of social cognition* (pp. 147–166). Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730018.013.0008>
- Lippmann, W.** (1922). *Public opinion*. Harcourt, Brace, & Co.
- Monteith, M. J., Woodcock, A., & Lybarger, J. E.** (2013). Automaticity and control in stereotyping and prejudice: The revolutionary role of social cognition across three decades of research. In D. Carlston (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of social cognition* (pp. 74–94). Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730018.013.0005>
- Moore, E.** (2018, August 2). How the media's narrow portrayal of service members does the military a disservice. *Task & Purpose*. <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/media-portrayal-service-members-veterans>
- National Center for PTSD.** (2020). How common is PTSD? <https://www.ptsd.va.gov>
- National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics.** (2018). Race/ethnicity. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp
- Parker, K., Igielnik, R., Barroso, A., & Cillufo, A.** (2019). The American veteran experience and the post-9/11 generation. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>
- Parrott, S., Albright, D. L., Dyche, C., & Steele, H. G.** (2019). Hero, charity case, and victim: How U.S. news media frame military veterans on Twitter. *Armed Forces & Society*, 45(4), 702–722. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X18784238>
- Petty, R. E., Briñol, P., & Priester, J. R.** (2009). Mass media attitude change: Implications of the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion. In J. Bryant & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Routledge.
- Pew Research Center.** (2011). The military-civilian gap: Fewer family connections. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/11/23/the-military-civilian-gap-fewer-family-connections/>
- Philipps, D.** (2015, February 5). Coming home to damaging stereotypes. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/us/a-veteran-works-to-break-the-broken-hero-stereotype.html>
- Ramasubramanian, S., Winfield, A., & Riewestahl, E.** (2020). Positive stereotypes and counter-stereotypes:

- Examining their effects on prejudice reduction and favorable intergroup relations. In A. C. Billings & S. Parrott (Eds.), *Media stereotypes: From ageism to xenophobia* (pp. 257–276). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Rahbek-Clemmensen, J., Archer, E. M., Barr, J., Belkin, A., Guerrero, M., Hall, C., & Swain, K. E.** (2012). Conceptualizing the civil–military gap: A research note. *Armed Forces & Society, 38*(4), 669–678. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12456509>
- Rhidenour, K. B., Barrett, A. K., & Blackburn, K. G.** (2019). Heroes or health victims?: Exploring how the elite media frames veterans on Veterans Day. *Health Communication, 34*(4), 371–382. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2017.1405481>
- Roskos-Ewoldsen, B., Davies, J., & Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. R.** (2004). Implications of the mental models approach for cultivation theory. *Communications, 29*(3), 345–363. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.2004.022>
- Schmidt, H.** (2020). “Hero-worship” or “manipulative and oversimplifying”: How America’s current and former military service members perceive military-related news reporting. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 6*(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.156>
- Steinhauer, J.** (2019, March 12). Treated like a ‘piece of meat’: Female veterans endure harassment at the V.A. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/politics/women-veterans-harassment.html>
- Thompson, B. M.** (2019, January 9). Educator: ‘When my students learned I was once a soldier, they fell for many of the pervasive stereotypes of veterans.’ Why that’s a problem and how we can fix it. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/01/09/educator-when-my-students-learned-i-was-once-soldier-they-fell-many-pervasive-stereotypes-veterans-why-thats-problem-how-we-can-fix-it/>
- Tracy, S. J.** (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- US Department of Defense.** (2017). Population representation in the military services. *Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness*. <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/MPP/Accession-Policy/Pop-Rep/>
- Wilbur, D.** (2016). Defining the Iraq-Afghanistan veteran in American newspapers. *Sociology, 6*(4), 267–276. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5526/2016.04.006>

How to cite this article: Parrott, S., Albright, D. L., Eckhart, N., & Laha-Walsh, K. (2020). Mental Representations of Military Veterans: The Pictures (and Words) In Our Heads. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 6*(3), pp. 61–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i3.207>

Submitted: 29 September 2020

Accepted: 08 October 2020

Published: 10 December 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.