

RESEARCH

Between Order and Execution: A Phenomenological Approach to the Role of Relationships in Military Culture

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Despite the growing recognition that military identity and veteran identity are interrelated, there is scant literature that seeks to describe or define military culture—perhaps an indication of the degree to which veterans and civilians alike take military culture for granted as a factor in veteran identity. One important factor in veteran identity is relationship: relationships amongst veterans and between veterans and civilians. In the latter case, trust is often wanting, and that lack of trust seems to be connected to the experience of military service. To explore a possible connection between military culture and veteran experience, in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of veterans to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of relationship, or relationality, within military service. Close attention was paid to the daily routines and rhythms of military life. Veterans were given wide latitude to discuss both the positive and negative relationships that they regarded as key to their military experience. The results, presented here as case studies, suggest that relationships of trust in military service often develop out of routine training experiences and are grounded in unique military expectations regarding the public performance of common skills. This phenomenological study is a first step in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the many ways that military experiences may become veteran expectations with respect to relational ideas such as trust.

Keywords: phenomenology; relationality; military culture; military service; qualitative

Veteran identity is deeply rooted in the experience of military service and military culture (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Smith & True, 2014; Meyer et al., 2016; Lancaster et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2019). Despite the growing recognition that military identity and veteran identity are interrelated, there is scant literature that seeks to describe or define military culture—perhaps an indication of the degree to which veterans and civilians alike take military culture for granted as a factor in veteran identity. Following Brim (2013), I will regard military culture broadly: “the total of all knowledge, beliefs, morals, customs, habits, and capabilities acquired by service members and their families through membership in military organizations” (p. 31). Despite the focus on individual service members in Brim’s definition, much of the existing literature on the military treats military culture as a theoretical and often monolithic construct, rather than as a lived experience. Classic works like Samuel Huntington’s (1957) *The Soldier and the State*, and more recent entries on military culture in general (Wilson, 2008; Hall, 2013), begin with organizational elements—such as rank and role, the use of orders, and the mission of the military—and deductively construct the soldier. However useful this approach may be

when considering armies *en masse*, a different understanding of military culture is necessary when faced with a particular veteran with particular needs, and with a particular identity that is informed by their military service. We need a means to consider how the specific experiences of military service inform specific veteran knowledge, beliefs, morals, etc.; and further, a means to consider more fully how the customs and habits—what soldiers do in the course of service—are connected to the beliefs and morals that constitute military *ethos*.

Because of the gap between theoretical understandings of military culture and the particular experiences of service members, recent scholarship has turned to qualitative research to develop a richer understanding of military culture (McCormick et al., 2019; Lancaster et al., 2018; Smith & True, 2014). In this article I take up the call for “empirical research... to advance conceptualization of military culture from veterans’ perspectives” with a phenomenological approach to military service, and especially service since 9/11 (McCormick et al., 2019, p. 288). As well, I take up the idea of implicit elements of military culture (Brim, 2013), seeking to understand how phenomena that are

oft-noted but little-studied appear and develop in military culture—more specifically, I seek to understand how certain relationships of trust arise and grow within military culture, and how a deeper understanding of those relationships can inform relationships between veterans and civilians. My field is writing studies, and so I address pedagogical implications of trust; but in my discussion I suggest broader applications for an understanding of military culture through qualitative research (Reger et al., 2008).

Brim's (2013) description of military culture distinguishes between explicit cultural elements such as service branch, unit affiliation, and formal roles and relationships such as sergeant, or squad leader; and implicit elements—shared values or ideals that are fundamental to the military ethos. Where explicit elements such as rank are awarded to the individual and appear to prioritize individual performance, implicit elements are often collectivist in nature, as Brim notes, and can be at odds with both medical and academic cultures that tend to evaluate only individual performance or behavior. However, while the military relies on collectivist ideals and principles that are instilled beginning with the oath of enlistment, military *ethos* is not a monolithic entity; there is considerable variation in how individual service members take up implicit elements of military culture, and how those elements inform their experiences in service (Brim, 2013; DeVries & Wijnans, 2013). Nevertheless, collectivist implicit elements—such as trust, which is sometimes referred to as camaraderie in military discourses—are rightly associated with military service and are highly valued within the military (McCormick et al., 2019; Browning, 2015). Trust is fundamentally relational. It exists only in a relationship between people, and for this reason my research focuses on relationality within the context of military service. More broadly, it is in relationship that many fundamental questions of identity are worked out, and for many veterans, key ideas and attitudes about relationality are developed in the course of military experiences (Smith & True, 2014). However, there is little research that addresses the meaning that service members assign their experiences, much less the unique relationships that form and that form them. I am taking this opportunity to reevaluate how we think of both the origins and implications of trust in military culture, and to consider anew how these elements might persist beyond military service into the civilian lives of veterans.

My particular focus is a type of trust that exists in the superior-subordinate relationship in the military. I call this phenomena *ethical authority*—the authority that is achieved within the context of a community's shared values, or *ethos*. It is apart from institutional structures such as rank but is also interconnected. While the military hierarchy of rank and role is often regarded as sufficient to describe military authority, I argue that ethical authority within the military is better understood as a complicated intersection of explicit elements of military culture—rank and role—and the implicit element of military culture that is trust. In this article, I look closely at two different experiences with ethical

authority—one from a service member who is learning to trust a leader, and another from a service member who has earned trust in their unit. I attempt to discern the commonalities as a means of better understanding military culture generally; and the particularities, as a means of understanding the urgency to inquire after each service member's unique experiences.

Origins of Military Culture

Trust is essential to military culture (McCormick et al., 2019; Browning, 2015); it is also understudied and is often left to literary or filmic expression. Because literary and filmic treatments of the military tend to be “war stories” in which scenes of combat figure as either the main event, or the predicate for post-service PTSD, these virtues are often associated in popular imagination with the battlefield. However, I propose that these implicit elements of military culture, while critical to military performance on the battlefield, are not formed on the battlefield but rather in much more mundane places such as the mess hall, the rifle range, and the PT field.

The great theoretician of European warfare Carl von Clausewitz (1976/1827) instructs that “everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war” (p. 119). His point, nearly 200 years old, remains relevant despite the technological advances of warfare: the fundamental skills of soldiering¹ are not complicated until they must be executed in combat. From my own first days in basic training to my education as an infantry officer, I was constantly reminded of the basic task: fire and maneuver. These simple tasks—accurately shoot a weapon and move quickly—are assigned standards of performance, and service members are routinely tested for their ability to meet the standard. This standardized testing regimen begins in basic combat training and continues throughout a service member's military career. The work of soldiering, and the training that occupies much of a service member's time, is physically and psychologically rigorous, and not just for the individual. The work requires collective strength, stamina, and resilience, alongside a constant collective mindfulness that there is a reason for which strength, stamina, and resilience are acquired. To this end, training and testing are always unit efforts, rather than individual efforts: routine collective and public tests (and demonstrations) of mastery. Service members can expect that the fundamentals of soldiering are constantly on display for the benefit of all.

The goal is always the development of a unit—although the definition of “unit” may be different depending on the nature of military service (e.g., platoon, shop, company). Some of the work, such as physical training, is daily and appears much the same from one service (e.g., Army or Marine Corps) to another. Similarly, some of the work is common to all services, but may be more or less frequent depending on the needs of the service: going to the rifle

range to develop marksmanship was a monthly ritual in my time in the infantry, but only happened once or twice a year when I served in a military intelligence unit. These skills are acquired in a group setting, with a strong emphasis on group performance, and these skills are regularly tested in a public setting. This latter point is especially important to understanding military culture: the routine public performance of basic soldiering skills is fundamental to military service. I will refer to this public performance as “demonstrated mastery,” although the baseline for performance is not—strictly speaking—mastery but rather proficiency.

We should seek for the roots of military culture, then, not in combat but rather in the common and collective experiences that form the everyday background of military service. The roots of military culture are formed in the very places that are taken for granted in military experience—the experiences, as von Clausewitz (1976/1827) notes (often with frustration) of “creatures of everyday life” (p. 193). The everyday life of the military remains at a remove from the everyday life of most American citizens; but it is closer than the rigors of combat. By turning our attention to these taken-for-granted experiences, we can gain a renewed appreciation for the way that relational bonds such as trust or distrust are built in the military, and we increase the chances as well of finding common ground with veterans. By understanding the place of relationships in military culture, we gain a new perspective on the constitutive relational elements of veteran identity.

Implications of Military Culture

Psychiatrist and author Jonathan Shay (2002) describes PTSD as “the persistence into civilian life of valid survival adaptations to combat” (p. 40). I suggest that the idea of cultural “persistence” is an important and useful one for veterans, regardless of the aspect of identity or behavior under discussion. Service members take up military culture in different ways; however, all service members take it up to some extent. The persistence of military culture into civilian life *to some degree* is inevitable. With respect to relationality: the persistence of implicit elements of military culture such as collectivist thinking or habits of trust may be of the utmost importance for anyone establishing a relationship with a veteran. Whether in a classroom or a clinical setting, the problem of veteran distrust of civilians is oft-noticed (Elliott et al., 2011; Sayer et al., 2010; Koenig et al., 2014). Whether or not the distrust exists, though, trust does not automatically arise in these settings. Knowing better how veterans’ identity is connected to their military service may be helpful in the development of trust; but knowing something of military culture is requisite to this understanding.

Methodology and Methods

Phenomenology as Methodology

To an understanding of relationships, and the everyday rhythms of life, the methodology and methods of phenomenology are uniquely suited. Broadly speaking, phenomenology seeks to understand the origins of and essence

of a *phenomenon*, by which we mean a specific lived experience, or the meaning of that specific lived experience (Smith, 2018; Husserl, 2014/1914). To seek the origin of a phenomenon is to understand the circumstances under which it arises; not the conditions under which a particular friendship arises, but the conditions under which friendships arise. The origin of a phenomenon is therefore closely connected to its essence: the characteristics that make the phenomenon recognizable as such (Dahlberg, 2006). It is therefore in our conscious encounter with the world that phenomena become discernible.

Phenomenology is rooted in the study of conscious experience, and it grew out of the epistemological position that knowledge arises from lived experience and is subjective. The epistemology led to a methodology, a way of knowing the world through “unprejudiced description” that was reflective and reflexive in nature (Wertz, 2011, p. 53). The methods adopted in phenomenological inquiry enable description of first-hand experience and careful reflection on those experiences, the narrator’s translation of their experiences, and the researcher’s analysis of the narrator’s experiences. Max van Manen (2014), one of the leading theoreticians of phenomenology, suggests that phenomenological inquiry is a mindset: “more a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meanings of lived meaning” (p. 26). Phenomenology begins with listening closely and asking questions that approach lived experience. Phenomenology is not necessarily concerned with tabulating and comparing data; rather, it is a means of asking what is meaningful in individual experience.

Although there are a variety of approaches in the human sciences to phenomenology, I am following the work of Husserl (2014/1914) and Merleau-Ponty generally, and more specifically the contemporary scholarship of Karin Dahlberg. Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945) and Dahlberg (2006) approach lived experiences as fundamentally embodied and subjective. That is, our bodies experience the world in ways that our minds sometimes have trouble encompassing, and that the two exist in an interconnectedness of subject and object. Phenomenology was thus founded on the idea of relationship—between persons and their environment and between people. For the phenomenologist, to examine consciousness is to examine relationship. As Mark Vagle (2018) puts it, summarizing Husserlian phenomenology: “Living and experience take place in the intentional relationship between the subjective and the objective—and this ‘between’ space is ever expansive” (p. 7). The notion of an expansive space, in which there are possibilities of human experience, is helpful when considering the myriad experiences that military service members carry into civilian life, and the myriad ways that each service member can experience military life.

In Husserl’s work, the work of systematic reduction of the preconceptions that the scholar brings to their

phenomenological analysis is critical. Phenomenology is often exploratory in nature—looking into mundane areas of life that are so thoroughly familiar that they are, paradoxically, unexplored. To see the familiar anew requires reduction. My research is exploratory to the extent that there has been little scholarship concerning the experience of military service. For me to approach military service anew, I must reduce my own experiences as a service member. However, we might reasonably suspect that this is an impossible request; at least, impossible to achieve completely.

More recent phenomenologists have addressed the difficulty of the reduction: Dahlberg (2006) prefers the word *bridling* to reduction. She borrows from horseback riding a term that implies looser control; and she means that we place a bridle upon our own understanding of a phenomena. We are not cutting ourselves off from the world—we live in the world, after all, and in the same world as the phenomena we observe. Rather, we are deliberately loosening our connections to the world so that we can give space for the phenomena and the essence that makes the phenomena what it is to appear in its own time. For Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945) and Dahlberg (2006), the phenomenon is not separable from the particular context of its manifesting, which means that my interpretive work must incorporate the world (and the experience of living in the world) into the interpretation as an essential component. The context—the lived experience—of each service member is inherently essential to the interpretation of their experiences.

One example of bridling might be my deliberate turn away from the term camaraderie. The word is, after all, broadly appropriate for the relational phenomena I am interested in: it denotes a deep trust that is often considered specific to the military. However, as the work of Browning (2015) and McCormick et al. (2015) make clear, there is such variation of connotation—even amongst veterans—as to make the word a hindrance to me. I bridle my notions of trust in the military by using a less specific term, trust, so that the manifestations of a phenomena are not hampered by my preconceptions about special forms of trust that are unique to the military, or worse yet, unique to combat. I bridle so that I can see the everydayness of military experience.

Phenomenology is always interested in everyday or obvious things—things that are routine or normal in ways that make it hard to notice our assumptions or preconceptions (Vagle, 2018). It is in the everyday relationship—and here I might suggest the daily routine of physical training, or PT—that reflection and reduction are the most profitable, precisely because we are most likely to take the experience for granted. Through reduction, I recall the key elements of physical training: roll call in the pre-dawn darkness, the cadences that give structure to the shared repetition of sit-ups and push-ups and side-straddle hops (because “jumping jacks” sounded too juvenile?), the growing sense of competitiveness that drives me to run faster than my buddy, and to call back over my shoulder for him to catch up; as the

recollections gather, I become present again in that moment. I become fully present to an everyday moment, and so I can gain insight into the meaning of one of the many everyday relationships that made up our lives. I can find the relationships between me and the world, and—more importantly for my research—between me and my *battle buddies*, in Army parlance. The experience of PT was not constructed by us; we hardly even noticed the specific and granular nature of the activity at the time. The very everydayness of the activity made it very much a taken-for-granted experience. But we find meaning for ourselves in the experience when we reflect on it. We come to understand what PT continues to mean to our lives today.

My Status as a Veteran and Scholar

It is undeniably true that my own military experiences inform my identity as both a veteran and as a scholar. It is therefore worth taking the time to identify specific military experiences alongside aspects of self that bear on my research. I am a white male who enlisted in the US Army at the age of 27 shortly after 9/11. I served 4 years in the Military Intelligence Corps, having been trained to read and speak the Arabic language. I deployed once to Iraq as an enlisted soldier, and upon my return I attended Officer Candidate School and commissioned as an infantry officer. I served another 5 years in the infantry and deployed twice more to Iraq. I separated from the Army at the end of 2010 as a Captain—an O-3, in the military parlance of officers' ranks. I had a bachelor's degree prior to enlisting in the Army as did many of my peers in military intelligence. Like many of them, I entered military service in response to 9/11; and like many of those peers, I did not expect to fight in Iraq, but did so nevertheless. White men in the Army are common; men my age somewhat less so. My educational background set me apart from many enlisted soldiers—whereas in the officers' ranks a bachelor's degree is requisite. And while I was raised in the middle class, by the time I entered the service the paycheck of an enlisted soldier looked pretty appealing. To my mind, the most notable feature of my service is my transition from the enlisted to the officer corps, which gives me some access to frames of mind across the rank hierarchy of the Army; with reference to the particular goals of this article, I understand both what it means to give and receive orders, from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of settings. I mention these factors not to make generalizations about my perspective, but to offer some context for my observations. One particular point: this research has made me realize the extent of my own continued investment in collectivist ethics, and the idea of the *unit*, even in civilian life. As a teacher, I value the classroom *ethos*. As a scholar, I value the veteran *ethos* that continually refers back to service experiences. I have a hard time bridling my own preferences and seeing both the benefits and drawbacks to the collectivist mindset shared by many.

Phenomenological Methods

This article draws from one-on-one interviews conducted with 20 veterans of American military service, all of whom served at least part of their time after 9/11. I conducted the interviews between March and July of 2020; interviews lasted between 3 and 7 hours and were conducted either in a public area at the University of Michigan, or more recently (due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic) via video-conference. My work was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB). All interviews were audio-recorded; the recordings were transcribed by a commercial service and by the author. All names used in the article are pseudonyms. The sample was broadly representative of the diversity of the current military. However, the two cases that are presented here come from white males, Roland and Perry. Their experiences with the relational phenomenon of ethical authority struck me as similar, straightforward, and complimentary—concerning the granting and earning of such authority. Both of them share the discourse of white male power that dominates the US military; the complications that arise from dynamics of gender and race I will present in future research.

Though phenomenological inquiry does not focus on sample size, and qualitative research does not strive for generalizability, there was a certain degree of commonality in the conditions under which participants—who represented service in the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Navy—served in the military and that commonality is military life Post-9/11. Not all participants deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, although the constant deployment cycles and the perpetual possibility of deployment were a fact of life for all participants. However, the circumstances of training and preparing for those particular wars were common to all participants.

All phenomenology begins with listening closely and asking questions that approach lived experience; the researcher's goal is to capture an event or phenomenon as it was experienced, in all its nuance and specificity and uniqueness, while also enabling discussion of connections or patterns that appear across unique experiences. Max van Manen (2014), one of the leading theoreticians of phenomenology today, suggests that phenomenological enquiry is a mindset, "more a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meanings of lived meaning" (p. 26). It is in this spirit that I used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions about service history and important relationships in service. Typical prompts included: "Tell me about a normal day for you in the military. Who did you work with on a regular basis? What is your earliest memory of this person?" Although service history provided a chronological structure to the interviews, the participant's particular service history and their priorities with respect to particular relationships were given great deference. The goal of the interviews was

to encourage participants to re-engage the relationships or relational experiences that mattered most to them in their military service. The goal of the analysis that follows is two-fold: to find the meaning that my participants attach to the stories they related and to discern patterns of meaning that reach across various participants' experience, without losing sight of the context of that experience.

In the two cases that follow, I offer a relational experience from each veteran, along with the context of their military service. I then analyze the anecdote—within the context of the participant's service—to discover the meaning of the experience for the relational phenomena of ethical authority. In the first case, we meet Roland and see how he came to trust an instructor in his military training program. In the second case, we meet Perry and see how he earned trust. By analyzing the experiences of granting and gaining ethical authority, we can better understand possible attitudes about trust that service members might carry with them as veterans.

Discussion

Case Study No. 1: Granting Ethical Authority

Roland meant to join the Army straight out of high school. In the fall of 2007, he had all but signed a contract to be an Army medic. Roland was waiting on the Army recruiter one morning when the Navy recruiter across the hall called him over, offered him a protein shake, chatted with him. The recruiter mentioned that Roland would make a good SEAL: a football player in high school, Roland had the physical toughness that the program was looking for. Roland signed a contract on the spot to become a Navy medic—in Navy parlance, a corpsman; the SEAL training would follow on, although the Navy never did send Roland to the SEAL program. Instead, Roland spent the next 6 years as a medic.

Corpsmen serve as medics for both the Navy and the Marine Corps. The former is called "blueside" work and the latter "greenside." Roland's chief instructor in Naval Hospital Corps School was Chief Metzger, and he had a clear preference for the latter:

He was former greenside, he was infantry, he was weapons company. He was used to hauling mortars and the shit life of a grunt. He'd always tell us that, "If you're going to go greenside, you can't just be as good as the Marines. You have to be better. They are going to look to you and they are going to depend on you when the worst possible thing happens, and you need to be ready for it. That means you need to fucking train. You need to have that knowledge."

In 2008, the military was "surging" troops into Iraq, and there were high odds that the corpsmen-in-training would soon be in combat—as it turned out, nearly everyone in Roland's class would be assigned greenside. Roland, who arrived to Corps School with an urge to work with the com-

bat-oriented SEALs, admired the “greenside” experience that Chief brought to his instruction. He suggested that because of that combat-oriented experience, Chief held his trainees to a high standard of both knowledge and expertise that could only be achieved through rigorous training. Roland recounted for me some of Chief Metzger’s chief virtues: he was a “PT god,” physically fit and tough; knowledgeable in a field that requires both the skills to treat severe wounds and injuries but also to do so under intense pressure; and “very supremely disciplined, but also incredibly personable as well.” Although Chief’s primary authority in military training, which is often called “schoolhouse,” is a function of both his rank as a Chief Petty Officer, which is a noncommissioned officer, and his role, which is that of instructor. But Roland did not focus on rank or role in his stories. He focused on instances of demonstrated mastery of the basic soldiering skills and medical skills that are requisite for the corpsman:

Because he’s telling us these sea stories about his time with the grunts and this time on a minesweeper [ship] with sixty other sailors and he’s the only corpsman and he has to know pretty much fucking everything about... should something terrible happen. And the guy had been there and done that and had all this experiential knowledge. And it’s just one of those people that you think, “Holy shit, I just want to be like him.”

And I think I even took it down to the same way that he called cadence for PT, just like that. Just even down to that minutiae of behaviorisms of this is what I saw in a person that I want to be like, so I’m going to do things that he did... in Corps School, prior to [Field Medical Training Battalion], he would do the commands for PT, “I’ll count the cadence, you count the repetitions,” the drill and ceremony for PT formations. He was very good at that, which was different from everything else that we had seen in the Navy so far, which was kind of haphazard, I guess. I don’t know. I just remember being very impressed with how he managed things.

Chief’s authority began with his experiential knowledge, “sea stories” that demonstrated his skills under pressure and offered by a clear sense of the stakes of mastery: when an injury occurred—and for Roland, the first serious injury occurred during a field exercise with his first Marines Corps unit—there would be no assistance and no back-up. It was of the utmost importance to be prepared for that moment when a corpsman must call on their medical training under pressure—as Roland put it, Chief made sure they would be ready for “the suck” of combat. Roland saw in Chief’s instruction a consistent approach to the daily routine of fundamental soldiering skills—physical training—and to the skills required for corpsmen. The same expertise that looked out for 60 Marines and sailors on a minesweeper is on dis-

play at PT every morning, and these seemingly disparate performances are connected by an attention to detail: by minutiae. But Roland saw something more than just experience. He saw behavioral traits to be emulated that would lead him to become like Chief. Although the experiential knowledge came from experience with deployment-readiness (if not necessarily with combat), the “minutiae of behaviorisms” that Roland focused on were training-oriented. Yet these minutiae seemed to Roland a connection between the PT god of training scenarios and the battle-tested master of medical knowledge. That connection was cadence.

The use of cadence—calling out precise orders that have a prescribed response—to govern activities is common throughout the military. Cadences are used only for physical training, but they can be considered a subset of commands for which there is a particular sequence of words and phrases and often a particular rhythm. Most importantly, though, cadences are orders. They order and define well-conducted physical training. When a unit gathers for physical training, there are routines around warm-up and cool-down. Push-ups, sit-ups, side-straddle hops are all conducted on a single count, so that the unit performs the exercise as one. The unit leader will call out the repetitions for the exercise, beginning and ending each sequence with a command. During training programs in the military, even the movement from one training event or site to another is governed through marching commands similar to cadence, such as “left face,” “forward march,” or “about face.” (Roland later told me that Chief was also the only instructor who required his troops to march in formation, rather than walk, to meals each day. More minutiae.) While calling cadence, the leader is also executing the same commands, establishing a clear connection between mastery of the skill and authority to instruct others in that skill. Well-executed cadence is, on the one hand, often regarded as part of the “spit and polish” approach to military life, wherein highly shined boots and neatly pressed uniforms are considered soldiering. On the other hand, though, cadence can be seen as a demonstration of mastery that establishes ethical authority. Roland sees them as the latter, entirely compatible with the experiential knowledge that Chief brings to his instruction. In fact, as Roland adopted Chief’s perspective, hard training was constitutive of experiential knowledge, and Chief’s cadence-calling was evidence that the training had paid off.

Roland learned from Chief Metzger to value knowledge and see it as both instrumental for skill acquisition *and* the acquisition of ethical authority—an authority grounded in demonstrated mastery of the fundamentals of soldiering rather than in rank or role alone. Roland’s application of that learning can also help us understand the ethical—communal—nature of the authority: it facilitates his contribution to a collective effort. Granting and earning ethical authority alike are connected to—but not identical to—an assurance of belonging in the military unit. Following Chief’s example from his greenside days, Roland pursued the fundamentals

alongside the Marines in his unit and in so doing he gained ethical authority and a sense of belonging:

I slowly built up knowledge base with my Marines down in the motor pool, learning how to do the preventative maintenance on the seven tons, and how to bust tires and eventually learning how to do the radios and mounting, assembling the machine guns and getting all of that knowledge, which I thought would be just as useful in executing my duties down with them as my medical knowledge would be. So I think that my Marines also saw my eagerness to learn that and were like, “Oh, shit, doc. Yeah. You want to learn this? Fuck yeah, we’ll show you.”

Case Study No. 2: Earning Ethical Authority

Perry’s entire career as an infantryman, in the Marine Corps before 9/11 and the Army National Guard after 9/11, was garrison life—the stateside service that is the majority of most soldiers’ service. Despite his enthusiasm for the work—Perry asked his recruiter for “a hard job,” and was sent to the infantry—he could recall from his 8 years of service few positive relationships. In fact, he spoke of feeling isolated in each unit he served with; of never really connecting with either his fellow Marines or soldiers; of rarely being mentored or taught to excel. The isolation in the Army was partly the result of an injury to his ankle—an injury that worsened with time, as Perry continued to stress the injury: “I was under a doctor’s note: said, ‘PT, can’t do that.’ My command understood that. I just duct-taped my boot because I was a hard infantry sergeant. I ended up really damaging my ankle.” His opportunities for promotion and, ultimately, for continued service in the military, were cut short by his injury. In his 8th year of service, Perry was scheduled for a medical separation from the Army.

At that time his unit was preparing for deployment to Iraq, and the senior noncommissioned officer in his company—First Sergeant Jameson—approached Perry for a favor. Perry tells it:

When he came into the barracks and he stood there and he’s like, “Perry, can you run this?”, I was immediately conflicted and I really wanted to say, [in reference to his injury] “Do you not see where I’m at? Do you not see what I’ve done?” And I knew that he was in the Scout platoon. That’s where he came up through... We had a little bit of commonality in that respect, that he understood there’s a job to be done. I knew he wouldn’t come to me unless he was absolutely in a corner. So I had to immediately go to the range safety officer—the civilian that runs all the ranges—and take the class and get signed off. I asked the First Sergeant, I said, “Who’s going to be safety officer?” Because being in Headquarters, I’ve done this before as the ammo NCO. He said, “Well, we’ll get you over there but we need to go and do this range

today.” So real quick, went to the class, got signed up. It took the first sergeant to go with me, to tell the civilians, “Yes, we’re having a sergeant as both range safety officer and instructor.”

And the battalion commander would be the OIC. So we got there and I asked him, I said, “What are your expectations?” He said, “Well, we need to qualify everyone.” I said, “Well, what’s the qualification for the 249?” And he says, “I don’t know. Do you know it?” And I said, “I do.” And at that point I realized that this is a man that didn’t have control—when he always has control. And so I basically resolved in myself that I would just deliver. I would just take it over. I’d give it everything I got and get it done.

Perry respected First Sergeant’s experience as a leader in “Scout” platoon, which was a difficult combat-oriented role. First Sergeant Jameson, in turn, respected Perry’s infantry background enough to ask Perry to take on a responsibility normally reserved for someone of greater rank—the task of ensuring that soldiers were qualified on the light machine guns (M249s) they will take into combat. First Sergeant Jameson was in a tight spot, Perry says, and needed someone who knew how to run a machine gun qualification. None of the other senior leaders in the unit—including the battalion commander, the most senior officer in the unit—knew how to run a range or teach soldiers to “qualify,” or demonstrate proficiency, with the weapons.

As it turned out, Perry didn’t know what the Army standards for qualification were, either. But he had mastered the Marine Corps standards, and he proceeded to test soldiers to that standard. His mastery carried the day:

Now, what I didn’t know, is in the Army and the Marine Corps, your qualifications are quite different. In the Marine Corps it’s an area weapon, in which you use iron sights and you walk it up on target then light it up. In the Army they want [soldiers] to shoot paper targets at 25 yards... We had the ammo, we had the guns, we had everyone standing around doing nothing. And I rolled up, they gave me the bullhorn and I said, “All right, line up.” And I just shot from the hip. “Guys, load up. Five rounds. Acquire your target, walk it up.”

I was recognized as a 249 expert, because when we went through 249 orientation nobody could disassemble it. In Marine Corps, that was my lifeblood... When I talked to these soldiers and trained them, I said, “How would you zero it?”

[They said,] “Well, I think I’d do that.”

“No, let me tell you guys how to do it. Hit the ground in front of it, walk it up. There, lock your arms in. Put your feet forward and just rock it, right? Hold it on target.”

“Okay, got it.”

....And of course, I'm also trying to get the order of operations going. So while I'm instructing these guys and being the range safety officer, I'm also telling this line of crew, "Hey, start breaking your belts. I need five, ten and thirty-five [rounds of ammunition per belt]. And then you guys cue up." And then I'd tell the other sergeants, "Hey, go over disassembly and remediation of misfires." So all this is going on. I'm shouting into the microphone and... I turn the Marine on in me and I was like, "Get some. Light it up." And everyone was just having a great time.

So anyway, I get through everybody. I walk over to the commander and the first sergeant. And the First Sergeant's like, "Shot all the ammunition, commander, we're all good." And the commander's like, "Where's the paper targets?" And I'm just like, "There are no paper targets, Sir." And he's like, "First Sergeant, how am I going to report this back to battalion?" And the First Sergeant's standing there, and I said, "You know what, Sir? You tell them we killed every fucking tank on this range. You tell them that we lit them the fuck up and everyone hit combat readiness." And I remember 2 days later, they started for me for medical. And then 30 days later I was out.

Despite the pending discharge, and the injury and his "non-deployable" status, Perry's demonstrated mastery with weapons earned him the ethical authority required to take charge of the qualification range. His authority began in reported experience, specifically, his experience as an infantryman in the Marine Corps. But he demonstrated his mastery of soldier fundamentals to his unit during training with the M249, where his experiences in the Marine Corps enabled him to disassemble and reassemble a weapon that nobody else was familiar with. Beyond familiarity with the weapon itself, Perry's mastery on the range that day consisted in familiarity with the specific sequence of tasks and orders that were conventionally used in weapons qualification: from the need to "zero" the weapon—to ensure that the weapon sights are accurately aligned to the weapon—to the specific sequence of ammunition belts (and the rounds in each) that are used at each phase of qualification. His confidence in the delivery of instructions, at every phase of the training, earned him sufficient authority and even the authority to dictate the range report to his battalion commander—a remarkable triumph of mastery over rank or role.

The sequence of orders on the range might call to mind Roland's admiration for Chief's mastery of physical training. The military has a prescribed sequence (and cadence) for everyday activities, and mastering the prescribed order of everyday activities such as PT and marksmanship can lead to ethical authority. It is in the public demonstration of a generally-recognized standard that the authority is gained. And given a chance to spend a little of his newfound ethical authority with the battalion commander, Perry did so by stating confidently that, in effect, his estimate of the battalion's

performance was sufficient because he had demonstrated mastery of soldier fundamentals. For Perry, whose military experience often made him feel marginalized, the sense of contribution he felt that day—of belonging to a collective effort to prepare for deployment—was rich and deep.

Synthesis: Ethical Authority and Orders in Military Culture

The giving and receiving of orders are everyday occurrences in the military and are used to govern even the most mundane tasks. Some of those tasks are fundamental to soldiering: especially tasks that deal with physical fitness or marksmanship. As we have seen in both Roland's and Perry's tales, there are very detailed and precise sets of orders that accompany PT and marksmanship, and in both cases, there was a connection between the orders—or more precisely, the perceived mastery with which orders were issued—and the trust that developed in a relationship between givers and receivers of orders.

The orders themselves serve a number of ends, including efficient military operations. But the orders do more than just achieve practical ends; the manner in which the orders are given and received can also have relational purpose, and in the space between order and execution there are possibilities beyond simple obedience or disobedience. The manner in which orders are given and received becomes the basis for a relationship that is not apart from the relative rank or role of the service members but is intertwined with it. That expansive space is what phenomenology is directed toward: the meanings and relational possibilities that arise from everyday orders concerning mundane tasks.

One possibility is revealed in Roland's story: trust, in the form of ethical authority, begins when a leader demonstrates mastery of the fundamentals of soldiering. To the demonstration of mastery, the military is particularly well-suited. Soldiering at its most primal level consists in simple tasks executed under complicated conditions: fire and maneuver. Physical fitness is requisite to the latter and is governed through cadence. The cadence is a set of orders, and we can assume that every corpsmen in Roland's class will perform the exercises as Chief commands. But there is something more happening in Roland's perception of the orders. In his view, there is a direct connection between Chief's PT regimen, and his precise cadences, and the level of fitness Chief himself achieved. In other words, there is a metacognitive pathway from mastering a skill for oneself to training others in the development and mastery of that skill, and cadence is a visible indication of that path. Cadence is not itself the path—Roland tells us that Chief's cadence is akin to a behavioral trait. Cadence is representative of knowledge, a "whole package" of mastery that he admires. Roland listens to Chief because he has experiential knowledge and because he is an assigned instructor. But as Roland's relationship with Chief develops through everyday training activities like PT, he is willing to grant Chief not merely authority that his rank—Chief Petty Officer—and

role—schoolhouse instructor—require but is also willing to grant an ethical authority apart from rank and role. That grant generates a deeper trust and makes Chief stand out as a key mentor in Roland's military experiences. That ethical authority is granted upon Chief's demonstrated mastery of soldiering skills.

Perry's experience is the other side of the coin: earning ethical authority through demonstrated mastery. Perry's experience, though, is different in this key respect: Chief's ethical authority seems to be in a harmonious relationship with his rank and role, and likely his rank and role serve to make the grant of ethical authority easier for service members in training. His mastery seems to be in keeping with his role as an instructor, and with his higher rank in the Navy. However, Perry's story offers another possibility: that ethical authority can be achieved in spite of rank and role. Perry understands as Roland does the importance of cadence—in Perry's case, the rhythmic orders that govern a machine gun range—and demonstrates mastery thus. His skill with the orders earns him ethical authority sufficient to not only coach his battalion commander, but to later be awarded a "challenge coin"—a coin unique to each unit that is given to service members as a sign of high respect—as a mark of respect.

In both cases, there are appreciable stakes for the training: in Roland's case, the "sea stories" that Chief shares are an assurance that the skills he teaches will be of use in real crises; and in Perry's case, the preparations for deployment are an assurance that these skills may be employed in combat. Yet the preparations themselves are part of the everyday business of military readiness. These two cases can help us to see that while the giving and receiving of orders are an everyday occurrence, there are also everyday relational possibilities that accompany the orders, including the origins of trust. Far from a simple "Yes, Sir. No, Sir," exchange, orders can convey how trustworthy a service member is. More particularly, the meaning that service members might assign to orders, in the context of a relationship with the person giving them, can have much to do with whether they grow to trust a person more deeply.

Conclusion

For many veterans entering civilian life, trust can be difficult because the perceived gap between civilian and military culture is wide (Elliott et al., 2011; Sayer et al., 2010; Koenig et al., 2014). Beneath veteran perceptions of the civil-military gap there is truth that civilians today, by their own admission, know little about the military (Mattis & Schake, 2016). Thus, transition is fraught with misunderstanding, no matter what path veterans take upon separation. For the many veterans who take advantage of the educational benefits they receive, the college campus becomes an early site for this fraught transition into civilian life to play out (Hart & Thompson, 2020). Colleges and universities have made great strides in the past 10 years to develop programs and various forms of assistance—financial, educational,

and social—for veterans on campus; but Blackwell-Starnes (2018) suggests that while the assistance is good, especially in forming student-veteran peer groups, it does not foster a sense of *belonging* where it matters most: the classroom. We might trace back the desire for belonging to the collectivist *ethos* of the military; Blackwell-Starnes points out as well that the collectivist *ethos* serves all students regardless of background. One aspect of belonging is the ability to trust instructors (Wright, 2016); furthermore, the need for a trust that exceeds the conventional student-instructor dynamic can be of the utmost importance to veterans in college classrooms (Morrow & Hart, 2014; Mallory & Downs, 2014).

In the field of writing studies, the composition classroom has been identified as an important part of the college transition for veterans, and a place where the differences between military and civilian cultures can be explored—or exacerbated (Hart & Thompson, 2020; Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Wright, 2016; Leonhardy, 2009). Micah Wright's (2016) experience offers insight into one veteran's need to be able to trust instructors, and the ways that his writing instructor built trust in his classroom. Wright's (2016) story also makes clear that while instructors on college campuses do not need to be subject-matter experts on military culture, knowing a little about it can make a big relational difference. To establish a sense of belonging for veterans in the classroom requires of the instructor some understanding of the possibilities inherent in military culture, and the relational possibilities that arise when a veteran carries military culture into civilian life.

Perry and Roland can help us understand that veterans might expect a good relationship with an instructor to extend beyond the norms of organizational structure. They are not seeking fraternization—the military stance on that is more complicated, of course, than a simple prohibition, but former and current service members understand that leadership and caring are compatible. (We might recall here Roland's comment that Chief was "personable.") They may, though, desire the ethical authority that they expect in the military: in the context of writing instruction, a clear sense that the instructor has mastered the aspect of writing under discussion, and is instructing students in a way that will lead to similar mastery of tasks. The relational aspect of ethical authority may work in the classroom to give student-veterans a sense of shared purpose and therefore a sense of belonging. However, this expectation is likely to be frustrated by the norms of authority in the academy, wherein (in simplified terms) most people would shy away from either demonstrating their mastery—which would be showing off—or being required to demonstrate mastery for students, who should trust that the authority granted the instructor by the university is sufficient proof.

Perry and Roland also point us to an everyday way that ethical authority is established or developed in the military: the giving and receiving of orders. The use of orders—more or less routine ways of asking a person to behave—is common in civilian life as well. Whether in the clinical setting

or the writing classroom, veterans will be asked to comply with certain requirements. A commonplace around veteran compliance suggests that veterans desire orders or understand orders because their compliance is conditioned by military service. Service members comply unconditionally and leaders are charged with using clear orders (Mallory & Downs, 2014). To be sure, these are also possibilities of military experience, and a habit of unconditional compliance can be carried by veterans into civilian life. But Perry and Roland remind us that there are other possibilities within clear orders: namely, the establishment of ethical authority and deeper trust. When a student in a writing classroom expresses frustration with instructions—an oft-cited concern in the literature on student-veterans—the frustration is explained in terms of the commonplace. Scholars suggest that the veteran requires clear instructions because they know no other way (Mallory & Downs, 2014), or because they are anxious about their academic capacities, and seek familiar conventions (Morrow & Hart, 2014). These are, again, possibilities; and possibilities that these authors address with specific pedagogical recommendations.

But with Perry and Roland in mind, I address one further possibility that is grounded in military culture and may also explain student-veteran frustration with unclear instructions: in the space between order and execution is a deep desire for relationship that is being frustrated. If this is the case, then instructors may seek out other means to establish the ethical authority that students desire, including in office hours or other settings where instructors can come to better understand what student veterans are expecting of them as leaders and teachers. There are ways that teachers can address this relational need. Sean Morrow (Morrow & Hart, 2014) mentions that offering student-veterans exemplars of good writing can be very helpful. The exemplars constitute a form of demonstrated mastery—albeit at a remove, since the exemplar probably does not come from the instructor's own pen. However, Morrow differentiates his instruction for student veterans and finds that the exemplar-based approach does indeed build trust in the classroom. Not all instructors will wish to differentiate or see the sort of imitative work that Morrow describes as helpful for the project of developing rhetorical expression (Mallory & Downs, 2014), but there are other ways to establish the ethical authority that student veterans might desire. For instance, an instructor might offer Roland a chance to see their own writing, published or otherwise; they might use an office hour session to coach Perry through a particular rhetorical move in a way that demonstrates mastery of that skill. Blackwell-Starnes's (2018) work with writing workshops and peer review suggests that student veterans might profitably be given a chance to earn ethical authority through peer leadership in group setting. She offers examples of student veterans who are either assigned or assert within a peer group the responsibility for managing internal deadlines and group meetings—in brief, they assert ethical authority over a

limited range of skills required to succeed in a group setting. Ethical authority begins in the demonstration of basic skills learned in the military such as clear communication and time management (which might be considered a form of order giving) but leads toward a greater sense of being able to contribute to the collective classroom mission of becoming better writers.

These are possibilities: the instructor's approach must be guided by not only relational possibilities that a veteran *might* carry with them from military experience, but also by the particular knowledge they have of the veteran's lived experience. These case studies are offered not to suggest that all veterans carry into civilian life the same adaptations of military culture, nor that those adaptations are carried in the same way. Rather, and in the spirit of phenomenological inquiry, these cases are offered as possibilities. They offer insight into how some military service members build trust, and with that insight we can shed light anew on civil-military relations in the classroom and elsewhere. Knowing more about the possibilities of military experience matters—especially at a moment in American history where the gap between civilians and veterans is dangerously wide. Continued qualitative research that develops clearer and more nuanced understandings of military culture is essential; in particular, clearer understandings of relationality in military culture might lead to better civil-military relations at the individual level. Additionally, exploratory work such as this can inform quantitative work by assisting in the development of more precise quantitative instruments (Fetters et al., 2013).

Finally, the context of a veteran's military experience matters—especially if that experience informs their ideas about relationality as veterans. What matters most, though, is the willingness to ask veterans about their experiences in the military; and asking about the everyday experiences is a good place to start. American popular culture tends to equate military service with combat; but one of the possibilities that my research reveals is that military culture precedes combat. If this is so, then anyone seeking to connect with a veteran, or establish ethical authority with a veteran, might rely on the everyday nature of military service—this is a far easier place to begin conversation than with questions of combat and trauma. The experiences of physical training and the rifle range are nearly universal, as are the experiences of writing classrooms and clinical offices. It makes sense to seek common ground in the everyday.

Note

¹ The verb "soldiering," with its implication that there is a discreet set of activities encompassed therein, is one rationale for my use of the generic term "soldiers" for service members from all branches of the US military. But I am also an Army veteran and tend therefore to think of service members as "soldiers," even though only the Army uses that term.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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