Stranger in a Strange Land: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteranness

SHARON YOUNG (iD)

GEORGE ONDEK (iD)

GLENN ALLEN PHILLIPS (iD)

Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

Veteran identity and veteran experience are growing areas in veteran studies. Between and across these topics lives the characteristics of veteranness. This paper uses a rigorous, iterative qualitative approach to identify and understand the characteristics of veteranness as described by eight Post-9/11 veterans. The major themes were camaraderie, military "habitus", stranger in a strange land, veteran worldview, and transformation.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Sharon Young

Western Connecticut State University, US

youngs@wcsu.edu

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "veteranness" and the impetus for this research began with a discussion with a Post-9/11 veteran when he asked, "how do I hide my veteranness at work?" The meaning behind this question was not about hiding his identity as a veteran, but how to disguise his veteran mannerisms and mindset. The idea of veteranness goes beyond veteran identity. The term "veteran identity" represents a veteran's self-concept as it relates to their military experience (Harada et al., 2002). This paper explores the characteristics of veteranness as described by combat and non-combat veterans.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Veteran identity, as seen through the lens of social psychological theory, one of the few fields to explore this concept, suggests self-definition and meaning related to military service which, in turn, affects behaviors and a sense of purpose in social situations (Adams et al., 2019). Veteranness, in juxtaposition to identity, takes the concept of veteran identity one step further and aggregates the veteran's identity, behavior, and purpose to make up what it means to be a veteran. Hinton (2020) defined veteranness as the "myriad, actualized personal and sociocultural aspects of veteran identity" that are lived experiences (p. 97).

Veteranness and veteran identity do not sit within a vacuum. They are contextual within the individual as well as in the social environment. Veteran identity involves veteran's self-concept that derives from their military experience within a sociohistorical context. For example, Vietnam-era veterans and Post-9/11 veterans have different military and veteran experiences. Yet, they share the identity of being a veteran. They may also carry similar traits of veteranness. They are similar, but at the same time, different.

Military service or veteran status can be seen as its own cultural identity. Military culture includes the value structure that guides conduct in the military and promotes expressions of collective identity (McCormick et al., 2019). These values combined with shared experiences create the veteran cultural identity. Further, this veteran identity or culture sits with each veteran's own social context. The self-context each veteran has ties in, not only with their race or ethnicity, but also in other social groups like being a mother/father, having a religious affiliation, and various upbringings from different parts of the country or world. Veteran culture may also be influenced by individual military experiences, which vary greatly due to the differences among branches, rank, deployment status,

and military occupational specialties within the military (Harada et al., 2002). The transition from a military to veteran identity and culture involve a reintegration into the civilian world. Veteran reintegration post-military presents individual identity issues that are dependent on military and deployment experiences. This transition may cause inner conflict, and mental distress, as values change between environments causing disrupted identity (Smith & True, 2014). The sociocultural identities that people self-assign or accept influence their interpersonal interactions and decision making (Hack et al., 2017). It is essential that service members are able to transition successfully from their military identities into that of the veteran. Identifying as a veteran has several protective factors that might help shape self-perception and, thereby, responses to stigma, attitudes toward treatment, and hope for the future (Firmin et al., 2016). These responses and attitudes can be understood as the veteran mindset.

This paper builds on concepts of veteran identity, veteran culture, and veteran mindset to examine the composition of veteranness using interpretative phenomenological analysis of a small sample of Post-9/11 veterans. By exploring the concept of veteranness, we look beyond the idea of identifying as a veteran to look at the lived experiences of Post-9/11 veterans. It is within these lived experiences we will see how veteran identity, veteran culture, and veteran mindset converge to make up the construct of veteranness.

METHOD
SAMPLING

A total of eight individuals who identified as Post-9/11 veterans were recruited from a Post-9/11 veteran support group, personal contacts, and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). The support group, facilitated by the first author, was approached by the second author via text messages to solicit interest in participating in the study. All participants were then asked to share contact information of other veterans who may have been interested in being involved in the study. Perspective participants were texted requesting their participation in an interview lasting up to 90 minutes through a video conferencing platform. In total, 13 veterans were contacted via text message, and 8 agreed to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria were that participants identify as Post-9/11 veterans who have been discharged from any of the armed forces in the United States. There were two veterans in the study that were currently serving in the National Guard or Reserves following their discharge from active duty. Of the eight participants in the study, six were Army veterans, one was a Marine Corps veteran, and one was a Navy veteran. Half of

them were deployed to combat areas during their service. They ranged in age from 26–39; three veterans identified as female, four were married or in domestic partnerships. Half of the participants identified as Hispanic, one as Black, and the remaining identified as White. Please review **Table 1** for further demographic data. The table includes the pseudonyms given to the participants for anonymity.

PROCEDURE AND INTERVIEW

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to inductively gather information about "veteranness." This approach allowed for follow-up questions and prompts that permitted the interviewer to delve further into the participants' experiences and perspectives. The interviews began with a broad question about their perceived benefit from their military service and was followed by questions such as, "What do you miss about the military?" "Are there aspects of your military life that carry over to your civilian life?" "How do you think you, as a veteran, see the world differently than non-veterans?"

The data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Tindall et al., 2009). The method was selected because of the method's focus on examining how people understand and make sense of their own lived experiences. If participants have a shared identity or "common bond," IPA allows for a smaller sample size to carefully examine how the data converge and diverge (Tindall et al., 2009). This process involved a systematic immersion in the data, exploring one transcript several times and making exploratory comments and notes beside the transcript data. The notes were used to help form the emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The nascent themes were then converged with conceptually similar themes resulting in five major themes.

This process was executed by first pasting the interview transcripts into an analysis diary that included columns where reflections and interpretations were added sequentially by the first and second authors. This process was repeated for each of the eight transcripts. The reflections were then pasted into another document allowing for a broader examination of convergent themes. Once the themes were merged into five major themes, a table was formed to paste in the representative quotes from each of the eight diaries. The thoroughness of this process allowed the interviews to delve into the richness of the data through a double hermeneutic. This dual interpretation process allows the participants to make meaning of their world followed by the interpretation of that meaning making by the researchers (Montague et al., 2020). According to Montague and colleagues (2020), this process is made richer through researchers working in tandem, developing themes and auditing researcher interpretation.

RESULTS

After careful analysis, we identified five themes that represented participant responses. The major themes are camaraderie, military "habitus," stranger in a strange land, veteran worldview, and transformation. These themes were identified as factors that contribute to the construct of "veteranness."

CAMARADERIE

Camaraderie is an essential component of military training and culture that results in strong and often lifelong bonds (Hinojosa & Hinojosa, 2011). Camaraderie was reflected in

PARTICIPANT	INDIVIDUAL DEMOGRAPHICS						MILITARY DEMOGRAPHICS	
	AGE	GENDER	HOUSEHOLD STATUS	SEXUAL IDENTITY	ETHNICITY	CURRENT JOB TITLE	BRANCH OF SERVICE	MILITARY STATUS
1 – Jose	31	Male	Single	Heterosexual	Hispanic	Director	Army	Combat Veteran
2 – Shea	25	Female	Single	Bisexual	Black	Student	Army	ARNG
3 – Logan	26	Male	Single	Heterosexual	White	Student	Army/USMC	ARNG
4 – Ben	38	Male	Married/DP	Heterosexual	Hispanic	Therapist	Army	Combat Veteran
5 – Gio	36	Male	Married/DP	Heterosexual	Hispanic	Case Manager	Navy	Veteran
6 – Liam	39	Male	Married/DP	Heterosexual	White	Groundskeeper	Army	Combat Veteran
7 – Patricia	30	Female	Married/DP	Heterosexual	White	Engineer	Army	Veteran
8 – Kim	36	Female	Divorced	Heterosexual	White	Paralegal	Army	Combat Veteran

Table 1 Demographic Table.
Participant names are pseudonyms, DP = Domestic Partnership, USMC = U.S. Marine Corps, ARNG = Army National Guard.

the data by all eight participants. The military engenders interdependence and accountability in service members as a function of training and mission success. This reliance on team members engenders a sense of camaraderie that is unique to the military. Ben, an Operation Enduring Freedom infantry veteran, elucidated this interdependence, "being in the military environment is different … you're always looking out for the guy next to you … because that's your family."

The term family was used by many veterans in the study, not only to describe the connection to one another while in service, but also for years after their time in the military. Patricia described her relationships with fellow soldiers as "lifelong friendships that are definitely, like, [*sic*] have turned into family." This family feeling was supported by her comment, "knowing that if I ever had an issue or, like, if I've ever went into a dark place, like, I know who I can talk to." Some participants found this camaraderie with civilian friends lacking, Jose reported this of his fellow soldiers, "you could disagree with this person 100% about everything. But at the very least, you know, that if push comes to shove, they have your back … in the civilian world, that's not necessarily the case."

MILITARY "HABITUS"

Cooper and colleagues (2018) described military "habitus" as unconscious thoughts and behaviors acquired through military training and service. Through military training, civilians transform into service members. This training includes an indoctrination to imbue the warrior ethos into the service member. All branches of the US Military espouse a value system or an ethos creating the foundation for military life and culture. For example, the Army's warrior ethos partially consists of the seven Army values of Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage (US Department of the Army, 2006). It is values such as these that are the foundation of a military way of thinking and behaviors that continue beyond military discharge. The foundation of these values provides "scaffolding" for many military members as they transition to civilian life. Liam, an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veteran, described his post-military self as "the man I am [now] to be better than the man I was before I started." Logan, a Marine Corps veteran, described a mission-driven civilian life, even for small tasks like grocery shopping. He explained how the military provided him with a "blueprint" to plan his work and work his plan which set him up for "more successful outcomes." An Army intelligence Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) said she, "definitely learned kind of how to go with the flow with the military. Just because you never know what each day is going to bring and, you know, everything's hurry up and wait, everything

changes constantly." The challenges of military service seem to provide life lessons that help veterans negotiate the civilian world. Participants described these life lessons as "interpersonal skills," "being comfortable with discomfort," and portraying calm assertiveness. Shea, an Army veteran, described her military training as helping her become more disciplined and learning how to, "be submissive as well as when to be a leader." Military service provides leadership training and practice that sets veterans apart from their civilian counterparts. Jose, a combat veteran stated,

> One thing that I really appreciate from the military is having to make, like these quick decisions, and learning how to take charge of a situation that others might not have the confidence to or might not know that they should.

The ability to have confidence in your leadership ability was described in this maxim passed down to Liam from a commanding officer, "Rule #1: look cool; Rule #2: know what you are doing; and Rule #3: if you can't follow Rule #2, follow Rule #1." This rule system was described by an OIF veteran who indicated his military experience taught him to "sort of learn how to bullshit," which he further detailed as, "you sort of learn to, you know, think on your feet…even though you might not know exactly what you're talking about, you could still be calm, you still can portray calm." The ability to portray calm in challenging or dangerous situations is essential in combat, but also translates successfully into the civilian world. Similarly, attention to detail is also part of the military "habitus." Army veteran Kim described how in her civilian job she still demonstrates attention to detail.

> Like with my writing, because I was in intel, if you wrote the wrong information down, the wrong person could die. So it's when it comes to writing, I take it very serious, and I proofread it six, seven, eight times, and I make sure it's perfect before I submit anything, because, like, I know nobody's life is on the line right now, but at the same time, that was kind of, like, engraved in me to always make sure you've got the right data, the right information, the right names, you know, the right places.

Another habitus that is essential to every branch of service is situational awareness. The training for situational or tactical awareness as it persists in the civilian world was described by Gio as:

> just trying to be aware of, you know, your whole surroundings when you go anywhere, when you do

things, trying to see like all these different scenarios that could play out. And kind of, like, I guess that helps you prepare for different outcomes and circumstances.

All participants shared stories about their own situational awareness, like Liam, who stated, "I kind of scope the exits and entrances, and I, I pay attention to what's going on around me." Situational awareness has been described as an unconscious process that is the result of military experiences and training (Messinger, 2013). Kim noted while "driving and going underneath bridges. I don't know how many times I've done it, but I've noticed quite a few times that I will change lanes." Habits developed to avoid an ambush or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq serve no real purpose in civilian life but continue unconsciously for years following deployment.

Most participants shared valuable skills and habits gained from the military. These skills from military training and experience allow veterans to respond calmly in stressful situations, be prepared for emergencies, manage projects, and work successfully in teams. Also, part of the military "habitus" are thoughts and behaviors that can impair a veteran's ability to be successful in civilian life. Ben recognized how his military experience impacted him with this statement, "war changes people, no matter what, you know, see or don't see, it'll change you. So, it has impacted a large, large part of my life." For some of the veterans in the study, situational awareness has turned into hypervigilance which leads to anxiety when going to public spaces such as stores or concerts. Liam indicated, "stores still freaked me out. It's been like 10 years and I still get hyped up with crowds, the mall, forget about it!"

Most of our veterans discussed mental and physical injuries from their military experiences and this was true for combat and non-combat veterans alike. Patricia described "crippling anxiety, I've got PTSD from a rape. I've got really bad anxiety and depression; my entire right side of my body has been destroyed. I've had another surgery on my knee since I've been out." Two of the three women in the study addressed the challenges of being women in what they described as a misogynist or "good ol' boy" work environment when they were in the military. Despite these challenges, Patricia indicated, "I feel like I'm pretty strong when it comes to my anxiety, PTSD and everything like I feel like I'm still pretty strong mentally, to be able to deal with a lot of things." Other veterans shared challenges of managing emotions after their military experience, Ben shared he struggled with "lack of patience. That's a big factor and with lack of patience comes anger and it just kind of gets me rowdy and angry." Ben and others also shared about the role alcohol plays in dealing with the emotions

of military service, "in the service, especially in the infantry, you find yourself drinking a lot, a lot, and it, it went on to civilian life." Patricia hyperbolically stated, "like 90% of the people in the military have some type of like drinking problem." Gio, a Navy veteran, talked about drinking when he left the service, "you go out and for example, drink, you go out and party, you just do different things to try to, I guess, drown those feelings away." Like Gio's comment of drowning feelings, many veterans shared how challenging it was to manage and share their feelings with others. Jose stated,

It's almost easier just to sit in your own, you know, sit in your own pile, then to have to get others involved. And yes, and that could lead to a lot of things that could lead to self-isolation that can lead to different set of coping mechanisms.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Veterans in this study all reported a feeling of disconnect after leaving the military. Their military experiences and veteran identity set them apart from civilians. When asked about his identity as a veteran, Liam responded, "I keep my opinions close to the vest, you know, I love the red, white, and blue, but I try not to parade that around too much. If anything, I feel like a stranger in a strange land." Logan describes the Marine Corps as "a different world than most people are used to" and finds civilians to be curious about his time in the military. While Logan enjoys sharing his experiences about his service, Liam, an OIF veteran, indicated it is "like an alien feeling" when at a social event, "you talk to people and you're nice and everything's fine and dandy, but they're not the same; they're not...not me." Gio echoed this sentiment, expressing, "you just feel out of place, it's hard to describe that feeling that you just want to forget and you want to feel normal and you want to be OK." Kim indicated that the civilians in her life just don't understand what military service entails. She stated,

I tell them about, like, the sexual harassment and being deployed and what it's like to constantly have to be carrying around a weapon and body armor and stuff like that and doing convoys; it just, you know, it's just, it's like right over their head, and you know you miss that connection of having somebody that just, like, gets it.

The civilian workplace was reported to be markedly different from the military. Patricia indicated that she uses a "customer service voice" when working with civilian co-workers compared to her interactions with fellow

veterans. She recognizes she has to "tone it down a little bit" because she has "a dark sense of humor because of the military." Ben stated, "you tend to be careful what you say, or the way you say it… in the military, you know, you tell somebody to stop fucking up and just move on." The military work environment, perhaps due to the emphasis on hierarchy, warrior ethos, and mission focus, was portrayed by the participants as very different from their civilian workplaces. Veterans also reflected upon how their civilian coworkers perceived them. Jose stated his coworkers "sort of walk a little bit on eggshells" around him, and he wondered if he might be "a little scary to them" because he is a combat veteran. Shea also reported civilians may be "kind of scared of you because they think that you're, you know, you're trained to kill." All the veterans in our study shared negative perceptions they believe civilians hold about them. Many talked about how civilians assume veterans "probably got PTSD" and "probably killed people" and most civilians don't understand that "not everybody deploys" and some service members, like Patricia, "literally sat at a computer the whole time." Participants talked about civilian stereotypes of veterans as all "hardcore Republicans, you know Second Amendment, don't take my guns, don't tread on me, you know wearing camo all the time" men. Jose noted that civilians have told him that veterans exhibit "toxic masculinity" and are part of a "bro" culture. These misperceptions, misunderstandings, and stereotypes can widen the chasm between veterans and civilians. Veterans in the study were keenly aware of how civilians might be interpreting their military experiences and making assumptions about them as people. Gio encapsulated a belief shared by all the participants when he said veterans "are not a monolith, we're all different, some veterans are conservative, and some are very liberal, some are very, you know, war-like minded, and some veterans are very pacifist, so we're all different." It was also noted by participants that over time, these stereotypes and misconceptions are fading, making it easier for Post-9/11 veterans to interact within civilian culture. Gio, after many years as a veteran, finds now he has, "two different backgrounds where I can relate to civilian life and also can relate to veterans; sometimes veterans feel like they can't relate to other people, just veterans."

VETERAN WORLDVIEW

One theme that surfaced from the data was the unique perspective veterans have of the world around them. Almost all the veterans in this study described how their military experience allowed them to see the privilege that most Americans have when compared to people living in other parts of the globe. Kim, an OIF veteran stated, "Americans are so self-absorbed, and they just really don't

understand, like what's going on in the world, and they, they only think about what's directly in front of them and directly in front of them at that time." Jose, also an OIF veteran, shared this view,

> People just don't really understand how lucky they are, and how, I don't want to say privileged, but how fortunate that they are that they won a lottery of life, basically. And they're not very appreciative of it. And I find that irritating.

Many in this study emphasized that as veterans, "you're able to see how quickly things can go wrong" and "some folks just don't realize how miserable their life would be."

Veterans in this study were more tuned in to the inherent dangers of life, and how slim the margin is between safety and danger. Liam described how one's perspective changes after deployment, which "clues us in to how this world's working, and it's…it's big, and it's a little dirty." Compared to her non-veteran counterparts, Shea stated, "some civilians don't really think about how stuff could be bad, they are not as vigilant … 9/11 came out of nowhere, so I always have the mindset that anything, any unfortunate situation, could happen anytime." Liam reflected his time in Iraq having,

> driven through the cities that have been completely bombed out, and bullet holes up against huge buildings that at one point were, I'm sure, stores and offices and, you know, people's living rooms and [after] whatever craziness, and the whole side of the building is gone, and, you know, there's divots in the ground where mortars went off … so now, you know, I'll be at Stop and Shop and I'll be [thinking] like this place can be looted and blown out, you know, in a matter of minutes, and people are just conducting themselves like la-dee-da, everything's great. They don't realize what a thin line we all live on and, like, how fortunate we are to not be starving… I just find that the line between death and destruction in the world we live in is a lot thinner than people realize.

The stories told by veterans in this study showed a great deal of empathy for global citizens and a greater understanding of the fragility of life. One Navy veteran said, "we like to paint pictures of how great war is, and we have all these video games … that make you [think] it was amazing." He then reflected that war is not about the "glory and excitement," that "negative things" happen to people in war, and not just the service members, but the civilians caught in the crossfire. He reflected, "civilians that are

getting bombed, you know have nothing to do with what's going on and they're being brought into these situations." Bearing witness to war and war-torn nations had a strong impact on the view the veterans hold about themselves as Americans. Part of that is how fortunate those living in the US are, but also how appreciative they are to be able to enjoy their lives now in the civilian world.

TRANSFORMATION

Although there were no specific prompts in the interviews about the transition from military to civilian life, all but one participant, who is still in the Reserves, discussed their transition. The most challenging time of transition is at the very beginning. Ben described his return to the States, "I went crazy, crazy, I let my hair grow, I over drank … I was pretty crazy." Upon returning from the military, Liam said he had to "learn a lot of new mental health coping mechanisms." He saw himself "like being a 200-pound baby in the sense that I have a lot of emotions and anger and frustration and sadness that I didn't know what to do." Kim stated, "It really is such a different world and, you know, it's very, it's very, very, very hard to adjust to the actual, like, real world." This initial phase of adjustment was best described as follows, "do I belong here, do I not? I was kind of lost. [I] definitely overcame all that but definitely the beginning. It's difficult."

There are many obstacles for veterans upon entering the civilian world. Jose indicated he, "didn't know what to do, you know, so I kind of had to reinvent myself." This was also described by a fellow OIF veteran who stated, "there was definitely a distinct difference between soldier me and veteran me." One veteran stated, "in the military, especially in the infantry, we're kind of amped up to be like as machismo as possible." After many years in the infantry, he was not accustomed to workplaces with women or managing anger in a manner appropriate to a civilian workplace. Other veterans struggle with not feeling comfortable being around civilians at work. Kim stated when she first got out, she couldn't identify with or get along with people who didn't serve. Over time, it got easier for her to interact with civilians, "the further I get from that point of leaving the military and the more just life experience I have outside of it, it's made it significantly easier to, like, make friend [who] have never served."

After that initial adjustment, some of the veterans discussed reintegrating their military habits back into their new veteran self. Gio also indicated he was initially feeling glad to be done with the structured lifestyle of the Navy, but "after a week or two, you know, you kind of, like, know this regimented lifestyle is part of your life." This was also described by another participant as,

I almost had to like relearn my military skills in the sense when I first got back, I [I was] being a mess, not being on time, you know, all that stuff, but I kind of redeveloped punctuality, the way I tried to dress and present myself, and my ability to do paperwork.

After the transition, the initial rejection of military habits and lifestyle was followed by a reintegration of military habits. Gio described this process as a fight within himself, where his mind would reject the habits while his body would be returning to them. With reflection, he sees, "now as you get older, you come back, you come back to all those different things that you learn in the military." The integration of your military self into your civilian self could be what makes a veteran. One participant described his veteran identity as "a piece of me; it's like a hat I would wear; I'm a Marine Corps vet, but now I'm a National Guard Soldier. I'm also a student … so sometimes I wear that hat." As veterans move further away from their military separation date, the more experience veterans have in the civilian world, developing civilian friendships, the more comfortable they become wearing many "hats."

DISCUSSION

This study explored the concept of veteranness through the lens of interpretive phenomenological analysis. The findings identified five themes that point to the experience of being a Post-9/11 veteran that we have defined as veteranness. Veteranness was defined by Hinton (2020) as actualized aspects of the veteran identity. Actualization of identity speaks to lived experiences—how veterans think, feel, and act that separates them from their civilian counterparts. The major themes of this study were camaraderie, military "habitus," stranger in a strange land, veteran worldview, and transformation. These themes were identified as factors that contribute to the construct of "veteranness."

CAMARADERIE

As service members transition from the military to civilian life, they may experience difficulties associated with the loss of camaraderie experienced while serving (Brunger et al. 2013). During deployment, camaraderie or unit cohesion, has been demonstrated to be a protective factor against depression, suicide, and PTSD (Nevarez et al., 2017; Rugo et al., 2020). Veterans in our study were nostalgic about the camaraderie they experienced during their time in the military. The relationships built during service were perceived as family-like by most of our participants. One of our participants described this "family atmosphere"

beginning when she was a young recruit. She experienced her drill instructors and NCOs as parental figures who instilled in her goals, discipline, morals, assigned chores that all helped to establish her self-worth and identity. Many of our veterans maintain the family ties they established with their fellow service members many years after receiving their DD-214. The interdependence of the military unit can create a sense of trust and structure that is difficult to replicate in the civilian world (Ahern et al., 2015). The loss of that connection was expressed through wistfulness of those past relationships and a sense of value in those that still remain.

Many of our participants felt a greater sense of comfort and safety with other veterans, especially when they first transitioned out of the military. Creating and maintaining that sense of comradeship after military service is helpful for veterans. Developing camaraderie is more challenging for Post-9/11 veterans when compared to veterans from conscripted wars because they represent such a small percentage of the population. Many veterans have found connections through formal and informal veterans' groups and organizations such as Team Red, White, and Blue (Angel et al., 2018; Luchsinger, 2016). Experiencing, then losing and longing for, military camaraderie is a component of veteranness.

MILITARY "HABITUS"

Military habitus is manifested from the unconscious thoughts and mannerisms derived from military training and combat experiences. The participants in this study expressed examples of universally shared habiti, which included, being structured and mission driven, exhibiting leadership and decision-making skills, having attention to detail, and situational awareness. The veterans acknowledged that their military training and experience sets them apart from most civilians. These military instilled habiti have created "scaffolding" for success for our veterans, making them more resilient and confident when negotiating civilian environments.

Situational awareness was identified by all the participants in the study. We have purposely used the term situational awareness and not hypervigilance because situational awareness is a component of military training (US Department of Army, 2021). Hypervigilance is marked by cognitive, physiological, and behavioral manifestations that are dysfunctional in the civilian world (Kimble et al., 2013). All participants reported demonstrating situational awareness in their civilian lives, only a few reported hypervigilance where they experienced psychological discomfort, which resulted in physiological and behavioral disruption.

For some of our participants, their military experiences resulted in emotional and behavioral difficulties as well as alcohol use and misuse. There were no items that prompted participants to talk about their mental health or substance use. Despite this, many participants shared their struggles with mental health issues and affect regulation. For example, women participants discussed the remaining emotional effects of overt sexism and sexual harassment during their time in service.

Drinking was perceived by participants as an integral part of military and veteran life. In a study of veterans by Pederson and colleagues (2016), the participants believed that veterans drank more than civilians do and they also overestimated the amount that veterans as a whole drink. Participants in our study clearly indicated that drinking was often used to manage their emotional and mental health. Gio described drinking after his military discharge to "forget what you don't even know what it is that you are forgetting." Drinking by Post-9/11 veterans as a coping mechanism has also been documented in the literature (McDevitt-Murphy et al., 2014). There is much in the literature regarding Post-9/11 veteran alcohol use or misuse being associated with PTSD, depression, suicide, and other mental health disorders (Norman et al., 2018; Petrakis et al., 2011). Veterans in this study offered up their stories of emotional and mental health struggles and its prickly relationship with alcohol use. These struggles are also part of the veteran experience.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

This theme's moniker was derived from a study participant's quote describing his social experiences in the civilian realm. We do not know if he was referring to the biblical reference in Exodus 2:22 where the son of Moses is characterized as a sojourner in a foreign land (King James Bible, 2017). This is an apt description of how many veterans feel returning to the civilian world. Ahern and colleagues (2015) reported a comparable theme, "normal is alien" in their study of Post-9/11 veterans. Similarly, veterans in this study described how they felt out of place in civilian spaces particularly when civilians fail to understand the nature of their military service or view them through the lens of veteran stereotypes.

Civilians with negative veteran stereotypes alienate veterans through implicit and explicit bias, which makes it challenging for veterans to successfully integrate into civilian society (Schreger & Kimble, 2017). This raises the question of whether veterans have a radar they employ to determine how *veteran friendly* a civilian might be, always alert to the fact they could be subjected to hostility or bias from a civilian. Veterans tend to gravitate to other

veterans where they are not subjected to negative civilian bias or ignorant questions about their service. For this and other reasons, many veterans feel comfortable receiving case management, therapy, or other services from fellow veterans (Gade & Wilkins, 2012).

VETERAN WORLDVIEW

Sparsely found in veteran research, the concept of veteran worldview was found in the literature only as it relates to existential questioning and moral injury in veterans (Coll et al., 2011; Williams & Berenbaum, 2019). There was a specific item in the interview that asked the participants: "How do you, as a veteran, see the world differently than non-veterans?" This item was proposed by the Marine Corps veteran member of the research team and uncovered interesting data. Most of the veterans shared the perspective that American civilians don't understand how fortunate they are to live in the United States. They also universally endorsed the idea that there is a thin line between safety and danger or between order and chaos. Those deployed to combat areas were sympathetic to the impact of war on the warrior as well as the civilians impacted by combat.

One Iraq war veteran described his time overseas as "holy shit, like, I just received a crash course of the world." Being witness to the destruction and hypocrisies of a global war changed the veterans' perspective of how tenuous and fragile life is and how grateful they are to be living in the US. Their time in the military made them more dialed into danger and more appreciative of living their lives in relative safety. One can see how this worldview would contribute to situational awareness and feeling like a stranger in a strange land. Veteran worldview is an underexamined aspect of the veteran experience and deserves more attention in the literature.

TRANSFORMATION

The transition or adjustment of service members to the civilian world is comprehensively addressed in the literature. Ahern and colleagues (2015) described the initial time of transition as being marred by alcohol abuse and interpersonal conflict, which subsides over time. Our study participants universally reported that the beginning stages of adjustment are the most challenging. Over time, our study participants became more comfortable interacting with civilians in civilian workplaces and universities. Upon reflection, they see the value of their military training and begin to integrate it into their veteran selves.

One of the participants discussed wearing a "veteran hat" and a "civilian hat." This relates to the concept of dual identity where multiple identities are categorized

and integrated into a sense of self (Cárdenas et al., 2021). The integration of the military self and their former civilian self culminates into a veteran self. The lingering remnants of military training and experience get folded into their newly formed veteran self. The civilian self may grow more dominant over time and is reinforced through spending time in civilian spaces and having civilian friends and partners.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This study used interpretive phenomenological analysis to examine data gathered from a small sample of Post-9/11 veterans. As a methodology, IPA allows for a small sample size in order to deeply understand the sensemaking of the participants (Alase, 2017). However, the small sample size will limit the ability of the reader to generalize these findings. The participants in the study were diverse and included combat deployed and non-deployed service members. The concept of veteranness may vary between these two populations, but in this study, they are collapsed into one participant pool. When compared to earlier studies of Post-9/11 veterans, this study involved veterans who were separated from the military for many years. This allowed us to see the transformation of veteranness over time from the veteran perspective. New work should extend this research by considering the ways non-veterans may experience something akin to veteranness and the way that multiple identities may shape how a veteran understands, navigates, and expresses veteranness.

CONCLUSION

As reflected in this study, the concept of veteranness takes a much broader perspective on veteran identity. Veteran identity is a static term generally referring to the self-identification of a former service member. Veteranness embodies the lived experience of veterans as it changes over time. The transformation of a veteran involves longing for and replication of military camaraderie and feeling like a stranger in the civilian landscape. These feelings and experiences will vary over the lifespan of a veteran. The military habitus and worldview are essential elements of what makes a veteran a veteran. Being a veteran is not just a notation of something one is but is instead an ongoing and ever-changing experience. Understanding the concept of veteranness will be helpful for veterans who may be in search of a non-pathologizing exploration of their veteran experience.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Sharon Young *orcid.org/0000-0001-5771-5558*
Western Connecticut State University, US

George Ondek *orcid.org/0000-0001-8155-8628*
University of Connecticut, US

Glenn Allen Phillips *orcid.org/0000-0002-2530-0363*
Howard University, US

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