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Veteran Stereotypes: The Crux of the Civilian-Military Divide

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ALLAN ALMARAZ

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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes about veterans serve as the crux of the civilian-military divide because they binarily imprison veterans into one of two identities during a unique phase of vulnerability. This hinders the ability of veteran resources, ultimately establishing a psychosocial challenge that can only be solved through social connectivity and identity development during a veteran's readjustment to the civilian world.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Allan Almaraz
University of California, Irvine, US
almaraz1@uci.edu

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Given its status as a military juggernaut, it is interesting to see the United States's grand militaristic identity fade amongst its civilian population. Also known as the civilian-military divide, this phenomenon refers to the gradual distancing between civilians and the military and the interaction between the two. The US Department of Defense's Anthony M. Kurta argued the divide is due to "a shrinking military footprint in the United States, a declining veteran population, and uninformed and often misguided messages from organizations or media on the risks of military service" (Garamone, 2019, p. 1). While the first two reasons seem reasonable, due to the transition to a volunteer-only military and the passage of time decreasing the number of living veterans, the last reason is striking because it solidifies the power of misguided information.

As such, misinformation like stereotypes skew a civilian's perception of those who serve their country, resulting in a surface-layer understanding of veterans' experiences that exacerbates the civilian-military divide. That being said, the widening of the divide is both a psychological and social phenomenon, culminating in a psychosocial dilemma faced by veterans that facilitates psychological and social isolation, disrupts identity readjustment and development, and poses as another unexpected battle upon their arrival home. Therefore, stereotypes serve as the crux of the civilian-military divide because they binarily imprison veterans into incorrect identities during a unique phase of vulnerability and hinder the ability of veteran resources, ultimately establishing a psychosocial challenge that can only be solved through social connectivity and identity development during a veteran's readjustment to the civilian world.

Beginning with the prevalence and types of stereotypes, the civilian world forces veterans into one of two veteran identities, outright heroes or broken humans. To illustrate, on an NPR podcast titled *Home/Front*, Afghanistan veteran Dan Price reclaimed the anxiety in answering the "Were you ever shot at" question (Warner, 2021). In truth, Price was never shot at, making him question whether he did anything worthwhile on duty (Warner, 2021). This feeling of a veteran not doing and/or enduring enough can be explained by civilians' expectations of the combat-heavy, heroic soldier that they see in the media. When a veteran cannot live up to these heroic expectations, they are confused, anxious, or in Price's case, ready to make a joke to avoid the question (Warner, 2021).

On the flip side, civilians also view veterans as broken-down individuals riddled with posttraumatic stress disorder and other emotional and mental issues (Thompson, 2018, para. 6). In actuality, the majority of veterans are neither broken nor heroes and are left dealing with a society that forces two extreme, incorrect identities upon them. These two dominant stereotypes not only spark an identity struggle upon veterans' arrival home, but they also help civilians establish "a false sense of the soldier's experience without having to actually invest in them" (Bankhead, 2016, p. 46), ultimately laying the groundwork for a psychosocial divide between civilians and veterans (Bankhead, 2016).

In addition to the prevalence of veteran stereotypes, they also resonate during a veteran's transition period to the civilian world, resulting in an uphill, psychosocial challenge during a unique phase of their life. Take the story of Navy and Army veteran Cody Ayon for example, where upon his arrival home, he went out and reconnected with his kids and friends, but by the end of the day, he could no longer recognize who he was because of his military experience (Williams, 2021). This identity crisis serves as a unique period of vulnerability for veterans, entrenching them in a psychosocial challenge that many are unequipped to tackle (Mobbs, 2021). Moreover, the prevalence of stereotypes is of no help during this period of vulnerability, further isolating veterans away from the larger civilian population because of the identity struggles that civilians exacerbate.

The negative effects of stereotypes have also bled into federal and organizational support programs for veterans. Not only does the cultural popularity of these programs to civilians add to the broken human stereotype, but the programs also fail to ask whether "their benefits and services provide for veterans directly, or instead help veterans integrate to society and provide for themselves" (Gade, 2013, p. 68). While both have good intentions, the former may hinder a veteran's search for independence, a crucial component to the individualistic civilian world; make note that independence in this case is more akin to self-autonomy rather than the physical act of being independent (Gade, 2013). By hindering independence, veterans will continue to find assimilating difficult, resulting in the typical denouncement of civilian activities in relation to their extreme experiences in the military. As such, more programs should assist with the development of self-autonomy to help veterans realize their potential in contributing to a civilian society.

Take the Combat Paper Project and the Warrior Writers Project for example; the former gives veterans the opportunity to turn their uniforms into paper or a canvas for writing and/or art and the latter uses literature and poetry to demilitarize veterans (Schrader, 2019, p. 138). Both projects provide a comfortable and welcoming environment that allows veterans to socialize and work independently or collaboratively on their respective art piece, poem, and/or literature. In doing so, not only do veterans rid themselves of their strict military identity, but they also begin to find a place for themselves in the

civilian world. This development of a civilian identity and self-autonomy can also be found in other areas, such as in public service, a volunteer position, the act of being a good mother or father, or even in academia. The point is that veterans must first find the corner pieces of their puzzle in an independent, but comfortable setting before assembling its center. Therefore, while subsidized education, unemployment resources, and military health care are all wonderful resources, veteran programs must focus more on the social disconnect veterans face in the civilian world and address civilian stereotypes to help them find an appropriate identity before any direct support is given.

OPPOSING VIEWS

Although the civilian-military divide's psychosocial nature has pointed to practicing social connectivity and identity development to reduce the prevalence of stereotypes, how does one expect veterans to be understood when they themselves do not want to talk about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Castro et al., 2015, p. 304)? In most instances, veterans are annoyed when asked about their violent experiences and even if they do share, combat veterans might face the anxiety of being shunned by other veterans because the more one shares about their combat experiences, the less likely other veterans will believe them (Castro et al., 2015, p. 304). According to Carl A. Castro and coauthors (2015), this phenomenon of wanting to be heard and yet not wanting to talk is called the silence paradox, and it challenges the assumption that the veterans would want to be more socially connected with civilians. In essence, how can the civilian-military divide begin to shrink through collaborative and social practices if the veterans themselves do not want to socially participate?

Despite being a valid critique in reducing the civilian-military divide, the previously mentioned Carl A. Castro and colleagues (2015) and the late Paula J. Caplan (2011) provide insight into overcoming the silence paradox. Castro et al. (2015) asserted that "having someone to share combat experiences with, [and] who will not judge the combat veteran, can alleviate much of the unnecessary suffering [associated with the silence paradox]" (p. 304). The late Paula J. Caplan, who was a clinical and research psychologist, built on Castro et al.'s emphasis of a nonjudgmental partner and insisted civilians shut up, not judge, and listen to a veteran's story (Caplan, 2011). In her *Washington Post* op-ed, Caplan even shared the conversation starter that she found effective in her research with veterans:

> As an American whose government sent you to war, I take some responsibility for what you experienced at war and then trying to come home. So if you want to talk, I will listen for as long as you want to speak, and I will not judge. (p. 1)

Given Castro et al.'s and Caplan's emphasis on a nonjudgmental partner to share to, perhaps the silence paradox is not the true issue, but rather a civilian's inability to be a nonjudgmental listener. Civilians' inability to give a veteran an opportunity to comfortably share has allowed for the uncomfortable environment that facilitates the silence paradox to begin with. As such, regardless of the silence paradox, establishing a social connection with veterans remains as the focal point of dissolving stereotypes and reducing the civilian-military divide.

CONCLUSION

Overall, stereotypes serve as the facilitator to much of the transitional identity issues that veterans face once home. They are ambushed by a civilian world that views them as a superhero or denounces them as broken people, resulting in a confusing unwelcoming that stunts their assimilation into the larger civilian society. For one, stereotypes resonate during a unique period of vulnerability and have even presented problems in the resources and support veterans may receive. Given these issues, it is best to utilize an identity development approach to build a veteran's self-autonomy and initiative to contribute to a civilian society. In short, stereotypes are hindering the shrinking of the civilian-military divide as they perpetuate misconceptions of a veteran population that civilians know nothing about. By slowly fading away stereotypes through increased veteran involvement in the civilian society and increased civilian interaction with the veteran population, more veterans will welcome the civilian world's transitional period instead of being ambushed by it.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Allan Almaraz is a third-year student at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) where he is pursuing a degree in Economics with a minor in Urban and Regional Planning. He is a conscientious, community-driven student involved in organizations and programs such as UCI's SAGE Scholars program, Orange County's Hispanic 100 program, and works as a Student Assistant for UCI's Basic Needs Center. Upon completion of his undergraduate studies, he plans to pursue a Master's degree in Economics to spearhead his career in Economic Development.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Allan Almaraz orcid.org/0009-0008-3857-5885
University of California, Irvine, US

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