



The Paradox of Specialization: The Double-Edge Sword of Veterans Studies as a Distinct Academic Field

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically evaluates the emergence of veterans studies as a distinct academic discipline, with a focus on its impact within the field of management research. It explores the dualistic nature of this development, highlighting both the potential benefits and inherent challenges. The discourse delves into how treating veterans studies as a separate field influences academic norms, research practices, and the perception of this area within broader scholarly communities. Recommendations are proposed for both individual researchers and academic institutions, aimed at effectively integrating veterans studies into mainstream academic discourse.

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The emergence of veterans studies as an independent academic field is a significant and exciting development, reflecting a growing recognition of the unique experiences and contributions of military veterans (Palmer, 2024). This emergence as a unique field of study paradoxically comes with both benefits and challenges for researchers and educators focused on military-connected individuals, especially those working in more traditional fields like business management. As such, there is a pressing need to not only acknowledge the distinct contributions of veterans studies but also to integrate this knowledge with broader academic disciplines. This integration not only broadens the scope and impact of research in fields like management but also ensures that the unique experiences of military-connected individuals are adequately understood in academic discourse.

THE BENEFITS OF THE EMERGENCE OF VETERANS STUDIES

As Kathryn Palmer (2024) rightly indicates, veterans studies is gaining momentum in academia, offering insights into the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of veterans. This exciting development is particularly significant as colleges increasingly recruit veterans, enhance academic inquiry about veterans, and enrich both educational and professional environments through understanding veterans' perspectives. However, like many good things, there are also challenges as well.

CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIA, ESPECIALLY MANAGEMENT

Like many other researchers and educators interested in military-connected individuals, my academic field (management) has well established norms for research and journal quality tiers. Additionally, gatekeepers of various seniority are often skeptical of nascent fields, viewing them as too niche or lacking in direct relevance to mainstream management theories and practices. This creates specific challenges for those of us trying to balance our research on military-connected individuals with the established norms of the field, including:

- **Establishing academic legitimacy and career impact:** Researchers struggle to validate academic rigor and legitimacy of their work in veterans studies, particularly if it's viewed by outside referees as lacking theoretical depth or overly specialized. These individuals often encounter obstacles in advancing their academic careers (e.g., through promotion or tenure) within

traditional departments due to the specialized nature of their research. For example, in management, a research intensive department will often require 3–6 “A” management journal publications for tenure, so publishing in veterans studies' outlets will not meet these stringent requirements. Often, as social scientists, we balance our basic research in these journals with the urge to publish in practitioner-facing outlets to get our message out but are less beneficial to our career. Finally, established fields often have more channels for research funding and publication opportunities in high-impact journals.

- **Navigating interdisciplinary nature:** While many institutions espouse a desire for interdisciplinary research, research outside of mainstream outlets often faces skepticism and lacks proper incentive structures. This both limits opportunities for broader academic exchange and discourages publication in outlets outside of recognized journals. Researchers also face the risk of their work being isolated within the veterans studies field, missing out on a wider academic dialogue.
- **Limited exposure in mainstream outlets:** Research published in niche journals focused on veterans studies may risk marginalization, as researchers outside the area are often unfamiliar with the quality of these outlets or even the outlets themselves. While impact factors are often used as a proxy for quality, researchers must still demonstrate the relevance of their research to mainstream disciplines. Often, reviewers who are dubious or unfamiliar with non-mainstream journals will question the legitimacy of its value, leading to a hesitance in accepting findings from these journals as valid contributions to the larger academic discourse (especially in literature reviews).
- **Generalizability of findings:** In a field that highly values international research like management, an overemphasis on United States-centric veterans studies can lead to perceptions of ethnocentrism, raising concerns about the generalizability of findings to global contexts.
- **Academic prestige and recognition of degrees:** Traditional disciplines like management have long-established reputations and are often seen as more prestigious than newer fields like veterans studies that have yet to gain similar levels of recognition and respect within the academic community. This can lead to a lack of interest among educators in teaching within these specialized fields, potentially due to concerns about the impact on their own academic careers and the perceived lower prestige associated with veterans studies programs. Additionally, degrees

conveyed in specialized areas may lead to concerns about marketability of graduates, particularly outside of specific sectors like veteran services.

My personal observations as a researcher highlight the delicate balance of recognizing veterans as a unique area of study, while ensuring I am still contributing to the broader discussion on organizational science. For example, I recently coordinated a military-connected caucus at the major academic conference in my field (which attracts more than 10,000 management faculty), yet nearly all interested participants are themselves military-connected, indicating a potential lack of broader interest in the field. Additionally, I have multiple times encountered skepticism from conference and journal reviewers as well as non-military focused researchers about the distinctiveness of veterans' (as opposed to nonveterans') experiences in organizations as well as the uniqueness of the military as an organization.

Blending Disciplines: The Power of Paradox in Advancing Veterans Studies

Drawing on organizational literature on paradox (i.e., “both, and” thinking) (Putnam, 1986; Smith & Lewis, 2011), it's clear that overcoming such skepticism requires a concerted effort to demonstrate how insights from veterans studies can enrich and be enriched by mainstream theories, fostering a collaborative rather than a competitive academic environment. This process involves embracing a paradoxical mindset (Lewis, 2000), for example, where researchers recognize and leverage the interplay between the unique perspectives provided by veterans studies and the broader theories in organizational science. Researchers can thus navigate the inherent tensions and synergies between specialized and generalist research domains (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). This approach involves a repeating cycle of changes and developments over time, where integration of veterans studies into mainstream fields is seen as an ongoing, evolving process rather than a fixed goal.

Engaging with paradox scholarship also points to the importance of fostering environments that encourage research that cuts across traditional academic boundaries, thus making veterans studies more accessible and applicable to a broader academic community. This requires a shift in the academic culture (Carmine & Smith, 2021), where researchers and institutions alike value and support interdisciplinary and paradoxical approaches to study and teaching. This shift relieves the pressure to publish in specific outlets that often silences researchers from exploring interesting problems not desired by other stakeholders. The following recommendations aim to enhance the integration of veterans studies into the broader academic

discourse, ensuring that the field is not only recognized for its unique contributions but also seen as a valuable part of the larger conversation in fields like management.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHERS

Developing recognized standards and methodologies to ensure rigor: The most critical task for researchers is to ensure that their work in veterans studies adheres to high standards of academic rigor and methodological soundness. This involves following recognized research protocols, employing robust and valid methodologies, and ensuring the reliability and validity of findings (Sober, 2020) to effectively counteract skepticism regarding the field's legitimacy. This also means actively engaging with and contributing to the development of methodological standards that are specific to veterans studies, yet compatible with broader academic norms. Additionally, researchers should strive for transparency in their research processes, making their methodologies, data, and analysis accessible for peer review and replication both inside and outside of veterans studies. Embracing a rigorous approach not only enhances the credibility of veterans studies within the academic community but also ensures that the findings are robust and generalizable.

Balancing field-specific and general research: Researchers need to integrate insights from both veterans studies and their respective traditional fields to create a synergistic understanding that enriches both areas. For example, organizational theories on leadership, teamwork, resilience, and culture can critically inform research on veterans studies, such as when Kirchner and Akdere (2019) used leadership attributes and human capital theories to identify critical knowledge, skills, and abilities developed through military service. At the same time the unique aspects of military-connected individuals' experiences can also inform management research, such as when Peat and Perrmann-Graham (2023) built new organizational theory on stigma and social aggrandizement based on veteran students and professionals experiences. Advocating for special issues and collaborations: Individual researchers must actively seek roles such as editorships or coordinators for special issues, particularly in journals that can reasonably bridge the gap between veterans studies and more established fields. Simultaneously, special issues in veterans studies journals can also highlight theories and methods from mainstream academic fields. For example, the *International Journal of Human Resource Management and Research in Human Resource Management* book series both recently focused on military veterans in special issues. By seeking out these roles, military and veteran focused researchers can ensure that interdisciplinary dialogue continues.

Educating academic gatekeepers: Finally, veteran and military focused researchers must continuously engage in dialogue with department heads, journal editors, and tenure committees, highlighting the value and relevance of veterans studies in contributing to a richer understanding of other fields. For example, in organizational research active military and veterans are often studied as a context for identity (Lievens et al., 2007), leadership (Wong et al., 2003), and teams (Ellemers et al., 2013), all of which have provided critical findings for theoretical development in these areas.

Institutional Recommendations

- Diversifying participation in veterans studies outlets:** It is essential for institutions to champion the diverse perspectives within veterans studies by motivating faculty and students to engage actively in journals (and conferences) dedicated to this field. Encouraging faculty participation in specialized veterans studies publications and events, alongside involvement in mainstream academic platforms, can foster a rich exchange of ideas and promote the integration of veterans studies into wider academic dialogues. Similarly, students should be encouraged to explore courses and research opportunities in veterans studies, while also connecting these learnings to their broader academic pursuits. The Military Research and Networking Community (MRANC) within the Academy of Management serves as a prime example of this effort. It not only provides a space for scholars interested in military and veteran research but also contributes to enriching the broader field of management with unique insights from military and veteran-focused research. This model of inclusive academic engagement can be replicated across various disciplines, facilitating a multidimensional and inclusive approach to scholarship.
- Reward interdisciplinary research:** It is time for institutions to proverbially “put their money where their mouth is” and incentivize interdisciplinary research (i.e., counting it towards promotion, tenure, etc.). This involves aligning institutional policies and incentives with the espoused value of interdisciplinary research by recognizing contributions in fields like veterans studies as equally significant as those in the field’s mainline outlets.

CONCLUSION

The burgeoning field of veterans studies presents both an opportunity and a challenge within the academic

community, particularly in traditional fields like management. While it enriches our understanding of a unique demographic, it also confronts established academic norms and requires a reevaluation of what constitutes valuable and legitimate research. Embracing a paradoxical approach, where both specialized and mainstream academic interests are integrated, leads to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the military-connected experience and its relevance in broader societal and organizational contexts. It is through this integration that veterans studies can become a significant and recognized contributor to the academic landscape. This transformation requires not only a shift in individual researcher approaches but also institutional support and recognition of the value of interdisciplinary research. Ultimately, the goal is to foster an academic environment where veterans studies is not only seen as a separate field but as an integral part of the larger academic dialogue.


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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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