

# The Challenges of Military Veterans in Their Transition to the Workplace: A Call for Integrating Basic and Applied Psychological Science

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## Abstract

Long-standing structural features of the military have created a culture and society that is dramatically different and disconnected from civilian society. Thus, veterans transitioning to civilian society face a number of challenges related to fulfilling basic psychological needs (e.g., need for structure and order, belonging) and civilians' reliance on stereotypes to understand military veterans. In an attempt to enrich the understanding of these challenges, we integrate social psychological theories and insights with research from sociology, clinical psychology, military psychology, and organizational behavior. Theories of compensatory control, stereotype threat, and stereotyping are drawn on to help explain the psychological challenges that veterans may encounter during their transition to civilian society. We present recent research that leverages these theories to understand issues veterans face. This theoretical integration illustrates the opportunity and potential for psychological researchers to conduct basic and applied research in the context of veterans and for clinicians and managers to draw on basic theory to inform programs and interventions.

## Keywords

veterans, stereotypes, discrimination, unemployment, transitions

There are more than 20 million military veterans in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Most veterans leave military service with the intention of entering civilian life and joining the workforce. However, joining the workforce is challenging for veterans because of multiple factors, which include adjusting to new social environments, coping with emotional and psychological health issues, and transitioning from a military to a civilian culture (Ahern et al., 2015; Cooper, Caddick, Godier, Cooper, & Fossey, 2018; Keeling, Kintzle, & Castro, 2018; Kely, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010; MacLean & Elder, 2007; Stone & Stone, 2015). When veterans do join the workforce, they frequently experience lower levels of employment and earnings relative to nonveterans even though military veterans may have similar job qualifications as nonveterans (Angrist, 1998; Berger & Hirsch, 1983). For example, a recent report by LinkedIn (Boatwright & Roberts, 2020) based on analyses of

veterans and nonveterans who use the platform found that veteran underemployment, which was defined as working an hourly wage while holding a bachelor's degree or higher, has been increasing over recent years, from ~11% in 2010 (when it was comparable with that

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of nonveterans) to ~34% in 2019. By contrast, nonveterans' underemployment has maintained steadily at ~12% over the same interval. Understanding the social and psychological factors that contribute to this phenomenon is the central question of this article.

To attempt to further understand the issues veterans face when transitioning to civilian life in general and the workplace specifically, we ask the following: What is it about the military experience and institutional structure that can create or reinforce certain negative outcomes over time? To understand how veterans adjust to their transition out of the military, it is important to understand the entirety of the military experience (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Rausch, 2014). Being a veteran is likely to affect basic processes of everyday social functioning that are central to veterans' attempts to succeed in and adjust to careers outside the military. The military is a "total institution" that requires the soldier to fully embrace "the values, norms, and practices" of the military and to put aside the norms and values of civilian society (McGarry, Walklate, & Mythen, 2015; E. Moore, 2017). Veterans must adjust from this total institution back into the civilian world. Therefore, our approach was to focus on basic psychological theories and research that are devoted to understanding the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of people within their social contexts. Theories that address topics such as stereotyping/discrimination, belonging and identity, and how people satisfy basic epistemic and existential psychological motives are all relevant to understanding the issues that many veterans face when transitioning to civilian society. Connecting these theories to veterans' issues may also provide broader insights into understanding the challenges of life transitions more generally and transitions out of total institutions more specifically. These may include prison to public life (cf. Visser & Travis, 2003) or leaving extremely insular religious groups (Galanter, 1999).

In this article, we propose five broad overlapping factors that shape veterans' transition experience. Two of these factors have been well studied: (a) trauma experienced during the military and (b) the differential characteristics that led some people to choose to go into the military (and that led the military to select those individuals). The other three factors have been less explored in past research and are most relevant to contemporary theories and research: (c) military socialization, (d) self-stigma and stereotype threat, and (e) discrimination on the basis of veteran status. Across these factors, we integrate relevant psychological theories with research from sociology, clinical psychology, military psychology, and organizational behavior. In doing so, we hope to illustrate how an integration of various psychological

theories and the diverse military research can inform organizational and clinical practice.

We posit that the challenges that veterans face stem, in part, from dramatic institutional and cultural differences between the military and civilian contexts. Although we are not the first to make this observation, it has been noted that there is a general lack of empirical research and theorizing on the transition from military to civilian life (outside of issues related to mental health and disability). For example, Stone and Stone (2015) noted a lack of theory and research understanding hiring decisions affecting veterans (and proposed an elegant model to address it). Numerous scholars who have reviewed the body of research on the military have also highlighted a general lack of controlled, systematic investigations on intervention effectiveness (something that social psychologists have specialized in; for reviews, see Brockner & Sherman, 2020; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Walton & Wilson, 2018). For example, Dickstein, Vogt, Handa, and Litz (2010) pointed out that most work on stigma in the military revolves around "describing its phenomenology" and that little empirical work tests the effectiveness of various interventions. Overall, a report by the Institute of Medicine (2013) into the needs of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq stated that of the many programs designed to assist veterans and their families, "there is little evidence regarding their effectiveness" (p. 2). Thus, few theoretical frameworks are available for navigating the psychological issues that can come with this transition (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018).

Because of the considerable focus on trauma and PTSD (despite the fact that most veterans do not suffer from PTSD; Kang, Natelson, Mahan, Lee, & Murphy, 2003; McNally, 2012; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), other nonpathological factors related to the military experience have been relatively ignored as potential factors that may shape the transition experience, as was pointed out by Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) in a recent review. These authors further proposed several factors that may contribute to challenges veterans face in transition, including loss and grief, loss of sense of self, memory and nostalgia, and moral injury. Several other factors they mentioned are similar to those we focus on, including stereotype threat and socialization, but with a focus on their implications for clinical outcomes related to mental health specifically (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Although their review identified a range of important factors and issues, many relevant basic psychological theories have yet to be leveraged to understand other facets of veterans' transition experiences. In the present review, we focus on theories that may be especially relevant to understanding how social

environmental factors affect employment issues for veterans. First, we briefly review relevant research from military psychology and related fields. This is to both acknowledge this important body of research that may be less well known by psychological scientists who do not work with military issues, and to contextualize our own approach, which draws primarily on theories not traditionally applied to the military.

### **Central Psychological Issues Addressed in the Military Research: Opportunity for New Theoretical Applications and Integrations**

Within the very large body of military research, several issues and topics are frequently covered that share conceptual overlap with organizational behavior and social, clinical, and cognitive psychology theories not focused on the military. The military journals more focused on social science frequently publish research on leadership (e.g., Fallesen, Keller-Glaze, & Curnow, 2011), mental health (e.g., Bergman, Przeworski, & Feeny, 2017; Galovski & Lyons, 2004), gender and race (Armor, 1996; Ben-Shalom, 2012; see special issue on gender in *Armed Forces & Society*, B. L. Moore, 2017), well-being (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006), and the intersection of these topics (e.g., gender, performance, and belonging in the military: Archer, 2013; minority representation and well-being: Perez & Strizhko, 2018). Much of this research was conducted within the context of the military itself, but there is also a large body of research on employment and mental-health issues among veterans (e.g., Dickstein et al., 2010).

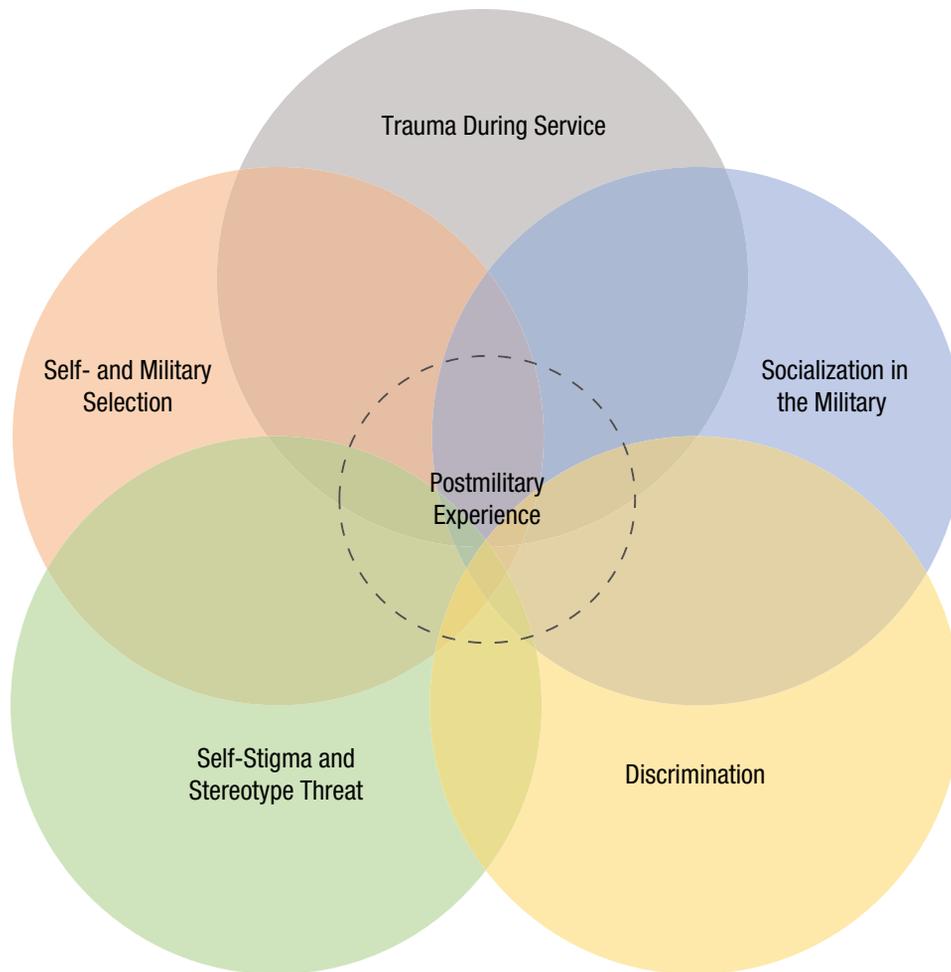
A common theme in the social-science literature on veteran adjustment and transition issues is the focus on population statistics such as age, race-ethnicity, gender, and income. As Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) noted, research on the transition from military to civilian society has largely dealt with “basic demographic and situational factors” with little attention paid to psychological factors. Relatedly, much of this research also takes a “bottom-up” data-driven approach (e.g., using statistical techniques such as multiple regression to see which predictors emerge significant). Numerous studies have quantified labor-market outcomes among different demographics and military experiences (Angrist, 1998; Gade, Lakhani, & Kimmel, 1991; Hirsch & Mehay, 2003; Kleykamp, 2013). For example, the impact of military service on employment options depends in part on educational attainment. The finding among users of LinkedIn (Boatwright & Roberts, 2020) mentioned earlier, in which veterans had greater underemployment relative to nonveterans, holds for those who have a bachelor’s

degree (18.6% of veterans according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics; Rolen, 2017). However, numerous studies have shown that among people without a college degree, veterans have an employment advantage over nonveterans (Kleykamp, 2013), although the advantage is tenuous and dependent on other factors, such as race (Teachman & Tedrow, 2007). Other research has focused on the rates and predictors of physical and mental-health issues (Bergman et al., 2017; Black, Gallaway, Bell, & Ritchie, 2011; Dohrenwend et al., 2006; MacLean & Edwards, 2010; Prokos & Cabage, 2017) as well as their intersection with other issues (e.g., employment, marriage; see MacLean & Elder, 2007).

One issue that emerged in military research is that the exact estimates of various issues (e.g., unemployment, mental illness rates) fluctuate over time. Veterans’ experiences in the labor market vary depending on era, race, and education as well as type of outcome and service. Across periods ranging from World War II to the contemporary era, veterans were less likely to be employed than their peers if they saw combat (MacLean, 2010). Veterans earned more than comparable nonveterans if they served in the World War II era (Teachman & Tedrow, 2004) but less if they served during the Vietnam War (Angrist, 1990). Among those who served in the 1980s and 1990s, veterans earned more than their nonveteran peers if they were African American but less if they were White (Teachman & Tedrow, 2007). Among people eligible to serve during the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they were more likely to be unemployed than comparable nonveterans (Kleykamp, 2013).

The function of the military itself has also changed over time. The armed forces perform different functions depending on whether the nation is at war or peace. Even during wartime, service members perform a variety of functions ranging from the infantry and artillery to electronics repair and medical assistance (MacLean & Parsons, 2010). Military norms have also changed, sometimes explicitly, as when the armed forces integrated with respect to race and gender. By 1954, the forces had abolished formal racial segregation (Segal & Segal, 2004). More recently, in 2016, the military revoked the combat-exclusion rule, which kept women from serving in combat occupations (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018).

Although the employment rate of veterans as well as the functions, norms, and culture of the military have changed over time, the underlying structure of the armed forces has remained relatively consistent. We therefore should and do observe themes appearing over time regarding veterans and their transition to civilian life (e.g., issues related to adjustment, belonging, employment, and mental health).



**Fig. 1.** Factors affecting veterans' postmilitary experience that could influence their outcomes in the labor force.

### Causes of Differential Outcomes for Veterans and the Unique Contribution of Psychological Theories

We propose five categories of reasons why veterans have different outcomes than nonveterans in the labor force (Fig. 1):

1. Trauma during military experience: Veterans experience physical or psychological trauma from either combat or military sexual trauma that hinders their success in the labor force (Institute of Medicine, 2013).
2. Selection: Veterans and nonveterans differ on various demographic and psychological variables going into the military, and this results in differential outcomes when veterans leave the military (MacLean, 2011).
3. Socialization: Veterans are socialized in the military in ways that do not align with the civilian world

to which they return. In particular, there is a large change in the structure and predictability of their environments when veterans transition from the military to civilian life that could affect their psychological experience and occupational success (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009).

4. Self-stigma and stereotype threat: Veterans expect to be treated differently by others in society and therefore behave differently, and this leads to differential career prospects (Stone & Stone, 2015).
5. Discrimination: Civilian society (e.g., employers) treats veterans differently because of stereotypes (both negative and positive) that they hold about the military and veterans (Shepherd, Kay, & Gray, 2019).

We briefly review the first two explanations, which have received considerably more attention, before turning to the latter three and the opportunity for psychological

science to make novel contributions. As represented in Figure 1, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they can intersect with each other to shape veterans' experience upon leaving the military. For example, mental-health issues or physical disability resulting from one's experiences while serving may be a source of discrimination (Stone, Lengnick-Hall, & Muldoon, 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015) in addition to stereotyping and discrimination that veterans may experience simply by virtue of being a veteran. Self-stigma regarding mental health is also compounded by military socialization and culture (Dickstein et al., 2010; McFarling, D'Angelo, Drain, Gibbs, & Olmsted, 2011) and may be an additional source of stereotype threat. Stereotypes about veterans may contribute to employment challenges. Likewise, veteran stereotypes may compound issues of belongingness and stereotype threat within organizations, similar to those experienced by first-generation students in universities (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Numerous other examples of these interactions between factors will appear throughout this article.

### ***Trauma as a risk factor for underemployment among veterans***

Veterans serve in different historical contexts that shape their lives while they serve and when they come back home. In particular, some serve during wars when they are more likely than those who serve in peacetime to be exposed to combat. Unemployment and underemployment, and overall adjustment to civilian life, may be exacerbated by combat experiences and combat-related mental illness, disability, and their associated stigma (Heaton, Loughran, & Miller, 2012; Institute of Medicine, 2013; MacLean, 2010; Stone et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Grief and bereavement, memories, and moral injury can also negatively affect the transition experience (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). According to previous research, combat veterans (compared with nonveterans and noncombat veterans) had lower wages and were more likely to be unemployed than veterans who did not experience combat, in part because of physical and mental trauma (MacLean, 2010; Prigerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 2002; Savoca & Rosenheck, 2000). Many veterans do not receive treatment for issues resulting from their service (Institute of Medicine, 2013).

Yet not all veterans see or suffer from combat. Some veterans experience a high probability that they will be deployed to war zones and see combat, whereas others do not (MacLean, 2011). Veterans are less likely to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder during peacetime,

and among those veterans who saw combat, only a subset suffer posttraumatic stress disorder (Hoge et al., 2004). However, it has also been suggested that veterans often struggle with and experience stress when transitioning to civilian life even without directly experiencing trauma during service, resulting in employment, relational, and legal difficulties (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Morin, 2011).

It should be acknowledged that some researchers and theorists who have examined male combat and non-combat veterans have argued that military service provides a positive turning point in the lives of men, fostering maturity, wisdom, camaraderie, self-confidence, and workplace success (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991; Jennings, Aldwin, Levenson, Spiro, & Mroczek, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2011; Sampson & Laub, 1996). According to this view, veterans do not suffer but instead benefit from their service. Although this is certainly true of many veterans, statistics on veteran unemployment and underemployment suggest that there are many others for whom military service is associated with problems adjusting and thriving in the workplace (Angrist, 1998; Berger & Hirsch, 1983; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

### ***Selection into the military leads to differential employment outcomes***

Veterans may differ from nonveterans on average as a result of two types of selection that are relevant to their differential employment outcomes. The first type has been called *self-selection*: People decide whether they want to join the armed forces. Indeed, researchers have tried to account for this selection using the draft lottery of the early 1970s and have found that long after their Vietnam service had ended, White veterans earned approximately 15% less than comparable nonveterans (Angrist, 1990). Twin data have been used to account for the impact of Vietnam-era combat on educational attainment. Findings showed that combat exposure in Vietnam was associated with fewer years of education among twins than their co-twins (Lyons et al., 2006). Since the draft ended in 1973 (Flynn, 1993), Americans have chosen whether they want to serve in the military, entering what has been labeled the "All-Volunteer Force" (Rostker, 2006). They have made this choice in the context of shifting alternatives, selecting whether to enlist in the military, enroll in college, or enter the workforce (Kleykamp, 2006; Mare & Winship, 1984). People will decide to enlist in the military on the basis of how attractive or possible they judge each of these several options relative to the others. When the unemployment rate is high, for example, people are more

likely to enlist. People may also join the service to obtain funding for higher education. The characteristics of the people who apply to the armed forces have therefore varied depending on the historical context (MacLean, 2011). These characteristics may also vary depending on other ascriptive characteristics, particularly race and ethnicity. Some researchers have argued that the armed forces provide a more meritocratic and thus more attractive option for racial minorities than does the civilian labor market (Lundquist, 2008). With respect to socioeconomic status rather than race, the relationship is more nuanced (Kleykamp, 2006). In the years immediately after high school, people are more likely to enlist than to go to college if they grew up in lower status families. But people with lower status are also less likely to join the armed forces than to immediately enter the labor market (MacLean, 2018).

Thus, certain groups may be overrepresented among veterans, which has both a positive and negative impact on postservice outcomes. In some eras, for example, African Americans were overrepresented in the military. Kleykamp (2013) found that military service benefits African Americans more so than Whites relative to their nonveteran counterparts. African Americans also disproportionately end up in certain careers, which may reflect systemic differences before serving (Schulker, 2017). Personality also may shape enlistment. For example, people who do not desire hierarchy and supervision are less likely to join the military (Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000).

The second type of selection stems from when and how the military chooses which recruits to admit from the pool of potential candidates. The armed forces apply physical, cognitive, and legal standards that shift according to their need for troops and the available pool of volunteers (Sackett & Mavor, 2003). Some scholars have suggested that selection into deployment may further obscure the negative effects of combat because of the "healthy warrior" effect, in which the armed forces choose to deploy people who are more physically and mentally fit (McLaughlin, Nielsen, & Waller, 2008). In general, service members will have more advantaged characteristics than applicants in that they are healthier, have higher test scores, and are less likely to have legal problems.

The combination of these two types of selection leads veterans to differ from nonveterans according to their preservice characteristics. Veterans may appear to have positive outcomes or at least less negative outcomes because of the military screening process. However, despite the potential positive influence of these preservice differences, disparities remain, and thus, we turn to additional psychological explanations that are not typically featured in the analysis of the issue and

that have the potential to frame a research agenda into the military—as well as other—major life transitions.

### ***Addressing the challenges of veterans in their transition: the potential for basic psychological theory and research***

We next focus on the remaining three factors that are less explored in the military research. We propose that a central issue facing veterans that has cascading effects across many domains (employment, relationships, mental health) is the magnitude of the structural and cultural differences between military and civilian life. Concerns have been expressed in research about the gap between military and civilian life (Hines, Gribble, Wessley, Dandeker, & Fear, 2015; Pfaff, 2016) and that this gap may be growing because of the decreased enlistment and increased demographic and geographic homogeneity among recruits (Liebert & Golby, 2017). Struggles with transitioning and acclimating to civilian life are common (Borus, 1975; Cooper et al., 2018; Keeling et al., 2018). These struggles can affect relationships (Ahern et al., 2015; Karney & Crown, 2007; MacLean & Elder, 2007; E. Moore, 2017), employment (Rausch, 2014; Stone & Stone, 2015), mental health (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011), and a person's identity and worldview (Rausch, 2014; T. R. Smith & True, 2014; Walker, 2012). Moreover, coping strategies that are adaptive in a military context can be maladaptive or destructive in civilian life (e.g., not seeking help; McFarling et al., 2011; McGarry et al., 2015).

We attempt to illustrate the ways in which contemporary psychological theories can provide insight into the experiences of military veterans and their transition to civilian life and people making major life transitions in general. These theories provide parsimonious explanations for a range of observations and suggest areas for targeted interventions (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Applying these theories to veterans serves to illustrate the oft-cited quote by the person credited with founding the field of social psychology, Kurt Lewin (1943): "There is nothing as practical as a good theory" (p. 118).

We first focus on the third explanation highlighted in Figure 1, that veterans have experiences in the military that do not line up with the civilian world to which they return, and focus in particular on challenges veterans face in regard to the sudden change in the structure and predictability of their environments when transitioning from the military to civilian life. Transitioning away from the relatively rigid structure of the military is highly relevant to theories regarding existential and epistemic needs, such as the need for structure and predictability (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). These

psychological approaches offer insights into the challenges that veterans often wrestle with as they transition from military to civilian life. An understanding of the ways in which psychological needs for structure and order manifest in daily life may also help explain veterans' occupational preferences and performance.

We then examine the fourth explanation, focusing on how veterans contend with being stereotyped, which may affect how they are viewed by others in the workplace and their ability to feel that they belong. Understanding disadvantage and how processes of stereotyping, stigma, and social circumstance affect individuals is a central topic in psychological science (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Steele, 2011). We draw on these theories to both understand the challenges faced by veterans in their transition to the workplace and also to inform potential interventions.

Finally, we focus on the fifth explanation, that employers are biased in their perceptions of veterans and their capabilities (Shepherd et al., 2019). We examine the nuanced content of stereotypes about veterans. To do so, we draw from theories on mind perception (Schein & Gray, 2017) as well as theories on dehumanization, which involve denying human traits to members of a social category (Haslam, 2006).

### **The Need for Order: Compensatory Control Processes in the Transition to Civilian Life**

The military is a "total institution," requiring the soldier to fully embrace "the values, norms, and practices" of the military (McGarry et al., 2015, p. 361; E. Moore, 2017). These values, norms, and practices tend to be very high in situational strength—that is, they include strict and explicit constraints on behavior (Darr, 2011). Most notably, the military is exceptionally hierarchical, with precise guidelines and norms regarding interpersonal conduct, discipline, and obedience (Borus, 1975; Coll et al., 2011; E. Moore, 2017; Rausch, 2014).

The military strongly contrasts with civilian organizations, which tend to be, and are becoming more, flexible and egalitarian (Trice & Beyer, 1993), rarely matching the structure afforded by the military (Stone & Stone, 2015). Thus, when veterans transition to civilian organizations, they will likely experience a relatively looser, more flexible, and relaxed set of organizational norms.

Compensatory control theory (CCT; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008) may be helpful in understanding, predicting, and addressing the specific challenges this type of cultural shift engenders. Psychological research has converged on the notion that people are deeply motivated to feel they have control over themselves and their environment. These perceptions of

personal control are central for physical and mental well-being and adaptation to life stressors (for reviews, see Kay et al., 2009; Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Kay, Sullivan, & Landau, 2015; Landau et al., 2015; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Taylor, 1983; Thompson, Sobolew-Shubin, Galbraith, Schwankovsky, & Cruzen, 1993). In particular, a sense of personal control is critical to satisfying the higher order goal of perceiving a nonrandom and orderly social world in which outcomes happen according to a predictable system of cause and effect (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Landau et al., 2004; Lerner, 1980).

How do people maintain consistent beliefs in order and structure when confronted with situations or events that challenge feelings of personal control? CCT posits that there exists a psychological substitutability between the self and external entities that govern and constrain behavior in that both can satisfy the overarching need to see the world as orderly (Kay et al., 2008). When personal control is situationally or chronically low, people can compensate by endorsing or believing in external systems of control. This includes one's place of employment, one's government, and tightly enforced norms and rules (Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014; Kay & Eibach, 2013; Kay et al., 2008; Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). Thus, according to CCT, turning to structure when personal control is low is crucial to maintaining perceptions of predictability and order, thus reducing concerns about randomness and chaos. Doing so allows people to confidently predict and therefore engage with their environment and pursue long-term goals (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014; Landau et al., 2015; Landau, Khenfer, Keefer, Swanson, & Kay, 2018).

As noted above, the military offers an exceptional level of externally imposed order and structure. Many key features of the military—such as hierarchy, strong rules and norms, systematic promotion, and organizational stability—serve as effective and attractive sources of external control when studied using participants from the general population. For example, experimentally lowering people's feelings of personal control led them to report an increased preference for hierarchy in both workplace and social situations (Friesen et al., 2014). Similar findings have been observed cross-nationally and archivally (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017; Sales, 1972). In addition, when personal control is low, people show an increased preference for following social norms (Shepherd et al., 2011) and for jobs advertised as structured and orderly rather than loose and free (Ma & Kay, 2017). Because these particular external sources of control are so well defined in the military, service members may exhibit a marked asymmetry, compared with civilians, in the degree to which they

balance personal and external control. This asymmetry may lead to problematic outcomes when these external sources of control suddenly vanish, such as when veterans exit the military.

When viewed through the lens of compensatory control processes, a number of aspects of the modern workplace stand out as potentially challenging in this regard. Civilian organizations are becoming more flat and decentralized, offering workers autonomy and flexibility in their roles and responsibilities (Silverman, 2012). Employees are rewarded and promoted for showing initiative, carving out uncharted space, and engaging creatively with their work. These behaviors all require a high sense of self-efficacy, independence, and being self-driven. Military culture is also more collectivistic than individualistic (Coll et al., 2011), and individualism in the military actually predicts decreased organizational commitment and skills (Johansen, Laberg, & Martinussen, 2014). In the civilian workforce, reluctance to appear self-driven may disadvantage veterans as their workplace trajectory takes shape. Civilian employers often believe that a veteran's strict adherence to autocracy and organizational policies will be ineffective or a poor fit for the organization (Stone & Stone, 2015). Furthermore, organizational socialization often relies on an employee being proactive in the socialization process and in learning about the organization's informal or unspoken politics, power structures, norms, rules, and social networks (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). This can be contrasted with the more explicit and literal structure and rules of the military. Whereas one's ranking in the military profoundly shapes how one interacts with subordinates and superiors, ranking is much less important in civilian organizations (Cooper et al., 2018).

Finally, whereas the strong sense of group identity in the military is typically thought of as serving a social function, these bonds may also serve a control function. Because large groups that share a common goal are generally more powerful than any one individual, groups and group identification can serve a compensatory control function (Greenaway et al., 2015). This type of group-based control restoration may be especially high in a military context (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, & Swann, 2014). Because most civilian organizations lack the sense of common and shared purpose found in the military (Achor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018; Bulgarella, 2019; Gallup, 2018), this may be another source of upheaval in how one maintains feelings of control upon leaving the military.<sup>1</sup>

Although no research has examined the effects of having a key component of one's compensatory control system abruptly and permanently removed, there is good reason to believe that this sudden upheaval—that

is, this shift from very high structure to little or no structure—could be problematic. Consistent with this, military personnel often experience culture shock and disorientation when exiting the military, and some veterans continue to behave according to military cultural norms when transitioning to civilian life (Coll et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2018; McGarry et al., 2015; E. Moore, 2017; Rausch, 2014). Veterans have been said to struggle with the sudden lack of structure, lack of guidance, and the emphasis on self-driven behavior that is common in civilian life (Ahern et al., 2015; Keeling et al., 2018; T. R. Smith & True, 2014). For example, some veterans explicitly reported that they miss the hierarchy and structure of the military, making civilian institutions (e.g., schools or the workplace) frustrating and challenging (Keeling et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Years of being immersed in this rigid hierarchy and following orders may decrease one's ability to take initiative and rely on personal autonomy (Keeling et al., 2018; E. Moore, 2017). Although other external sources of control such as God can fill this void for many people who need to adjust to new situations that threaten control (Landau et al., 2015), faith in these entities is often shaken among returning veterans (Coll et al., 2011). In short, although there is a general sense in the literature that veterans often face a kind of culture shock when leaving the military, CCT may offer a more precise and parsimonious account for these observed outcomes and the psychological needs that are being left unfulfilled.

Leveraging CCT could therefore prove helpful for informing programs designed to help veterans transition to civilian life. Researchers have cited the need for more theoretically driven research to inform the structure and features of mental health and employment initiatives (Dickstein et al., 2010; Galovski & Lyons, 2004; Stone & Stone, 2015). Veterans may not use these programs or may not be prepared for them because of the aforementioned lack of self-direction (Keeling et al., 2018). Programs could encourage veterans to establish routines and join groups or organizations that are highly structured (e.g., regular, scheduled meetings) or offer a sense of external control (e.g., community, volunteer, or religious groups). Organizations with a stated interest in promoting and hiring veterans could ease the transition by incorporating optional programs that provide more external control for newly hired veterans.

However, it is important to point out that the experience of veterans is heterogeneous, and although some veterans miss the structure of the military, some may crave unstructured environments; this heterogeneity presents an important research opportunity. Moreover, poorly executed attempts to replicate certain features of the military may feel stigmatizing or exacerbate

belongingness issues. Veterans already within an organization may be particularly well positioned to inform training and integration programs and to help new veteran hires learn the subtle and implicit norms, values, and power structure of an organization.

Other sources of heterogeneity stem from the length of time people serve in the military. Although a career of 20 years or more in the military may be relatively rare, the total institution of the military could have a considerable effect on the ability to adjust to civilian life even for people whose time in the military is relatively short. Moreover, service members do not all undergo the same type of training or experience the same type of service, diverging according to a variety of dimensions, including historical context, rank, occupation, and branch. Enlisted soldiers (82% of the military) prepare for life in the armed forces by undergoing basic training, but officers (18% of the military) receive different types of training (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In interviews, officers reported that they learned not to follow orders and obey while in the military but to take initiative and lead (MacLean, 2008). Veterans who served as officers had greater success in the labor market than comparable nonveterans (Dechter & Elder, 2004). Comparing these different populations may prove fruitful in testing CCT in regard to the impact of military socialization on adjustment to civilian life.

In short, CCT may prove useful from an applied perspective, helping to explain why the transition from military life to the civilian workforce can be so challenging both psychologically and professionally. Measuring factors such as need for structure, perceived structure of military and civilian organizations, and reliance on external control will help better isolate these issues. Initial research has found that among a sample of veterans, how much structure people perceive in their military experience and their first work environment predicted their workplace efficacy and feelings of belonging (Gibbs, Sherman, Ortosky, & Kay, 2020). For example, veterans who perceived lower levels of structure in their first civilian organization felt less efficacy and belonging at that civilian organization. Whereas CCT would predict a link between feelings of structure and efficacy for most people at most organizations, the theory would suggest that this relationship may be stronger for military veterans and people with a high need for structure. CCT can help guide researchers and practitioners toward theory-driven research aimed at understanding challenges facing veterans and, potentially, how to make the veteran transition more successful and less stressful. These insights are relevant to understanding transition issues associated with other total institutions or life transitions more generally. From a basic-psychology standpoint, the relatively unique

context of the military experience is also ideal for studying processes related to existential and epistemic psychology, such as the need for order, structure, and certainty.

We turn to an aspect of the psychological experience that emerges from the transition from military to civilian life, the potential for being stereotyped.

### **Confronting Stereotype and Identity Threat in Postmilitary Employment**

For a veteran, one consequence of the dramatic structural, normative, and cultural differences between military and civilian life is the perception that one is primarily seen by others as a veteran as opposed to a complex individual with other identities. Our fourth explanation focuses on the stereotypes about veterans and how they may experience stigma and identity threat in social interactions. Stereotypes about veterans thrive in the absence of individuating information (Stone & Stone, 2015). Therefore, the lack of awareness of military life among civilians and the increasing gap between civilians and the military (Hines et al., 2015; Liebert & Golby, 2017; Pfaff, 2016) may contribute to civilians' reliance on stereotypes to understand veterans. However, the question of how veterans face issues of belongingness and confront stereotypes about themselves in civilian society has received considerably less attention.

Several large companies (e.g., Prudential, Starbucks, Amazon) have extensive programs to hire military veterans, in part because they see veterans as having many desirable qualities. These qualities include experience as a member of a highly functioning team, leadership skills, loyalty, the ability to multitask and to perform under stress, and emotional resilience (Dillon, 2017; Stone et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Yet many employers hold beliefs about veterans that may give them pause when it comes to recruiting or promotion (Dillon, 2017; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Keeling et al., 2018). A survey conducted with employers found that a minority of them (26%) believe that veterans are "strategic assets" and that only 32% believe that it is important to think of veterans as strategic assets (Dillon, 2017).

Stone and Stone (2015) proposed a model in which potential employers use social-cognitive processes of assigning prospective employees to a category (i.e., veteran) and use that categorization to generate stereotypes about the individual. These stereotypes include beliefs that veterans may have PTSD, are prone to violence, or are less educated, which may lead employers to not hire a veteran applicant (Stone & Stone, 2015). If a veteran is hired, these stereotypes may still create

concerns about his or her ability to succeed within the organization. This could occur because of a lack of knowledge about veterans' skills and training, concerns about violence, as well as a concern that veterans will not fit within the organizational culture.

In the minds of veterans, knowledge of the beliefs about their group may affect them when they are being interviewed or potentially hired for a civilian position. The veteran is aware that the potential employer knows his or her veteran status, and the veteran knows that he or she may be viewed through a stereotypical lens. The idea that individuals' behavior is shaped not only by their own beliefs but also by what they perceive others may believe about them has been central to theories of stigma and stereotype threat (Crocker et al., 1998; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Viewing a situation from the perspective of an individual with a stigmatized identity has fostered an understanding of how stereotypes affect performance in a wide range of activities, from academics to sports (Steele, 2011). When people believe that they are judged as a member of a negatively stereotyped group, they experience stereotype threat, which can be a persistent burden, consume significant cognitive resources (Schmader & Johns, 2003), and lead people to disidentify with a threatened domain (Steele, 1997). The concern about being viewed as a member of a stereotyped group, such as a veteran with PTSD, may lead to or exacerbate the challenging issues veterans face.

Veterans are acutely aware of the aforementioned concerns and beliefs about them, which may contribute to them experiencing a lack of fit or belonging. Only 34% of veterans believe they are viewed as strategic assets to an organization, and 62% believe that recruiters do not understand the benefits of hiring veterans (Dillon, 2017). One large study ( $N > 175,000$ ) found that veterans score lower than matched nonveterans on 47 out of 49 indices of work satisfaction (Teclaw, Osatuke, & Ramsel, 2016). Veterans also frequently cite concerns about unfairness and favoritism (Yanchus, Osatuke, Carameli, Barnes, & Ramsel, 2018), possibly because of the aforementioned differences between the military and civilian organizations regarding transparency in promotion and hierarchy. Veterans are also aware of and internalize mental-health stigma (Dickstein et al., 2010). They believe that mental-health issues will affect other people's judgment of them and thus often do not seek help or treatment (Britt, Greene-Shortridge, Britt, & Castro, 2007; Dickstein et al., 2010; McFarling et al., 2011; Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, & Southwick, 2009; Stecker, Fortney, Hamilton, & Ajzen, 2007).

The research on stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; for review, see Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016) focuses on

how an individual's performance could be negatively affected by the awareness that one could be viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype within a particular context. More recent research has examined the process of stereotype threat in organizations (for reviews, see Kray & Shirako, 2011; Walton, Murphy, & Ryan, 2015). People who are under the potential threat of a negative stereotype become vigilant for cues that their actions or abilities are being evaluated as a member of their group (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007). This vigilance resulting from the threat of a negative stereotype has implications for how well they perform in that organizational context. Stereotype threat is also magnified when individuals are in a numeric minority (Sekaquaptewqa & Thompson, 2003). Thus, when a veteran is the sole employee with military experience in the workplace, he or she might be highly vigilant about whether his or her social category would influence the opinion of others when performance is evaluated. This extra vigilance can cause heightened anxiety and arousal that can impede performance, creating a negative feedback loop. Concern about negative evaluation and the anxiety it provokes can prompt underperformance and greater concern about further negative evaluations (Steele, 2011).

Research is consistent with these notions. Veterans reported experiencing social exclusion and a lack of belonging in civilian society and organizations (Dandeker, Wessely, Iversen, & Ross, 2006; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This may be due, in part, to the contrast with military life, in which soldiers form strong bonds (Rosen, Knudson, & Fancher, 2003) and fuse their identities together (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010) in what has been described as a "visceral sense of interconnectedness between oneself and the members of a group" (Hart & Lancaster, 2019, p. 45).

One major consequence of stereotype threat is that an individual feels that he or she does not belong in the threatened context. Veterans reported decreased job satisfaction and supervisory support relative to nonveterans (Teclaw et al., 2016), which suggests that they may have concerns about their fit within the organization. Belonging is a key predictor of success in both academic settings (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and the workplace (Knapp, Smith, & Sprinkle, 2014). Belonging has been studied in a military context in relation to military retention, job satisfaction, and coping (Overdale & Gardner, 2012; Rosen et al., 2003) and as a predictor of suicide (Wolfe-Clark & Bryan, 2017). Researchers have also investigated a lack of felt belongingness among female soldiers (Archer, 2013). Thus, stereotype threat may compound feelings of insecurity that veterans already experience when entering the workforce

(Keeling et al., 2018) and higher education (Elliott et al., 2011; E. Moore, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Organizations with strong cultures can lead new employees to question how they fit in, and socialization can be difficult for the individual and the organization (Cable & Parsons, 2001).

Veterans may experience belongingness issues in the workplace in part because of a cultural mismatch between values central to military success, such as prioritizing the collective over the individual, and values central to workplace success, such as individual achievement (Keeling et al., 2018; Rausch, 2014; T. R. Smith & True, 2014; Stephens & Townsend, 2015). To this end, we surveyed veterans and nonveterans ( $N = 397$ ) about their motivations for work and found that the desire to give back to others or be a role model for their communities was a stronger motivation for work for veterans than for nonveterans (Ortosky, Sherman, & Kay, 2018). This discrepancy between veterans' goals of being part of the community and the organizational culture that focuses on individual achievement may exacerbate concerns regarding belonging. It also presents an opportunity to facilitate greater sense of purpose and well-being among veterans by creating opportunities within the workplace for them to volunteer given that volunteer work is associated with such benefits (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

There are several lessons from social psychological analyses of educational and organizational systems that could be applied to help understand the issue of veteran belongingness. For example, whereas veterans may link their perceived lack of belonging in the workplace to their veteran status, a felt lack of belonging is actually common to many employees new to an organization regardless of veteran status (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). Questions of belonging, described as *belonging uncertainty*, can affect one's ability to make social connections and can also affect performance. Assuring people that questions about belonging are common and temporary and not pervasive or associated with one group, and in particular, *their* group, are key components of belonging interventions (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Veterans in the workforce, like other people making a transition, may feel as if they do not belong when entering a new organization or group, but over time, relationships develop, and people begin to feel more closely connected to their institutions. Knowledge of the transitory nature of feeling a lack of belonging can change the attributions people make for their social difficulty, potentially boosting motivation within that context; this could be useful information to communicate to veterans within organizations (Brockner & Sherman, 2020). Interventions based on these ideas have reduced belonging uncertainty and improved

performance among underrepresented minorities in academic settings (Yeager et al., 2016).

Other research has found that first-generation college students are often more interdependent in their motivations and goals for college than continuing-generation students, creating a cultural mismatch between themselves and their academic institutions (Stephens et al., 2012). This is akin to the aforementioned differences between nonveterans and veterans in regard to civilian workplaces valuing independence and people with military experience being more motivated by collectivistic goals (Ortosky et al., 2018), which would suggest avenues for fostering greater person-organization fit (see Kristof, 1996). Positive outcomes have been achieved using panel discussions in which university students share their stories; the different perspectives first-generation students bring to college are seen as strengths (Stephens et al., 2014). This strategy could be employed with a mixed panel discussion of veterans and nonveterans. Descriptions of how each group's experiences have shaped their ability to work within an organization and served as assets in new contexts may attenuate concerns about belonging and identity threat and indicate that an organization is a place in which veterans can feel psychological safety in regard to their identities (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008). Indeed, a social-clinical intervention termed *battlemind training* sought to have military personnel who were returning from combat reframe their difficulties as adaptive skills and to emphasize how strengths they developed in the military can help them adjust emotionally to life outside of the military (Adler, Bliese, McGurk, Hoge, & Castro, 2009). This intervention led to reduced levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms among those with high levels of combat exposure and suggests the potential for interventions with veterans that reframe their experience and attributions.

Belongingness interventions have not been tested with veterans in the workplace directly. This is important because some research has shown no significant effect of these interventions within specific contexts (e.g., female engineers; Mobasseri, Srivastava, & Kray, 2019). However, as this research progresses (perhaps alongside with testing the effectiveness of belongingness interventions with veterans), it may provide a fruitful foundation for future programs designed to benefit veterans in the workplace. The "wise intervention" approach of targeting how people think about key transitions in their lives on the basis of psychological theories has been used across a wide range of domains (Brockner & Sherman, 2020; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Walton & Wilson, 2018) but requires careful pilot testing and implementation (for a discussion, see Wilson & Juarez, 2015).

Research on the military has proposed and evaluated interventions and strategies aimed at helping veterans with regard to specific issues, such as developing desirable job market skills (e.g., programming; Dillon, 2017) and providing financial incentives (i.e., the GI Bill, which offered education benefits to post-9/11 veterans; Bailey, Drury, & Grandy, 2019). However, our discussion suggests that any specific intervention would benefit from addressing concerns about belongingness and stereotype threat. For example, although financial incentives may positively affect veteran college enrollment, such programs may not achieve their goals if veterans struggle with alienation and belongingness on campus (as has been found; Elliott et al., 2011; E. Moore, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Although past military research has investigated stereotype threat, this research has examined gender stereotype threat in a military context (D. G. Smith & Rosenstein, 2017) as opposed to the threat of being a veteran in and of itself outside the military.

Examining veterans within the context of stereotype threat offers potential to advance psychological research on stereotype threat because of the relative unique qualities that veterans possess. Whereas most research on stereotype threat deals with largely fixed and visible aspects of status that can be essentialized (e.g., race-ethnicity, sex), veteran status can be to varying degrees invisible and may have a temporal quality in the eyes of observers. In other words, a potential employer may view a veteran differently who is 6 years removed from military service as opposed to 6 weeks or 6 months. In the eyes of others, one's military experience may become less central or become less a basis for impression formation as time from service increases. To what extent does military service change the "essence" (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Prentice & Miller, 2007) of a person in an enduring way in the eyes of others? Such considerations could offer unique insights into processes of stereotype threat. Future research might also consider the impact that group salience has on veterans and their experience in an organization. For example, one's status as a veteran may be more salient upon exiting the military but could decrease over time. There are likely also individual differences in the level of identification with the military and whether it decays over time. As identification decreases, concerns about belonging and stereotype threat may also decrease. However, even if military service is not particularly salient for a veteran or a veteran is not identified with the military, military service may be highly salient for an employer who is looking at a resume or interacting with a veteran for the first time.

Thus far we have focused on the intergroup, cultural, and structural differences between military and civilian

life that pose challenges to veterans. The research on stereotype and identity threat suggests that how veterans are perceived by others can potentially affect veterans' employment decisions and experience. However, this raises the question of how veterans are perceived and stereotyped in the first place. In the next section of the article, we draw from recent research and theorizing on mind perception to understand how people conceive of and stereotype veterans and the implications this holds for their transitions in the workplace.

## How Veterans Are Perceived and Stereotyped

We turn now to the fifth explanation for the difficulty veterans experience in the transition to the workplace, which focuses on how veterans are perceived and how employers may be biased in their perceptions of veterans and their capabilities (Shepherd et al., 2019). The military psychology research has a tradition of exploring how stereotypes function within military contexts. Most of this research has focused on stereotypes about gender (B. L. Moore, 2017), race-ethnicity (Ben-Shalom, 2012), and mental-health status (Dickstein et al., 2010; Rausch, 2014; Vogt, 2011) within a military context. For example, sexist attitudes and gender stereotypes serve as barriers to women's participation and success in the military (Archer, 2013; Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018; Young & Nauta, 2013).

With respect to popular support, veterans have received different messages, which are, in general, more positive today than they were in the past. They reported returning to a hostile environment after the Vietnam War (Lembcke, 1998). But since the Vietnam War, peace activists have increasingly embraced a "support the troops" narrative, in which they express support for the people who are fighting even while condemning the fight (Coy, Woehrle, & Maney, 2008). Thus, veterans appear to be seen positively for their service while also being stereotyped (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014). Stereotypes may be particularly salient when employers have more choices of who to hire. People's work lives are also shaped by the labor market that they enter immediately after they graduate from college (Kahn, 2010). Veterans over time have also encountered different work environments when they have left the military. Former service members return to different labor markets, with some leaving the armed forces during times when the unemployment rate is high and others when it is low.

Although less research attention has been devoted to stereotypes about veterans themselves, numerous traits have been suggested. These include traits often seen as inherently necessary given the functions of the

military: toughness, machoism, stoicism, rigidity, bravery, discipline, being goal-oriented, and acting with precision and efficiency (Cooper et al., 2018; Darr, 2011; Pfaff, 2016; Rausch, 2014). Many veterans possess these traits because of the power of the military situation as well as self-selection into the military among people who possess or desire these qualities. Research also emphasizes, however, how military veterans exhibit counterstereotypic qualities, such as being more accepting of other cultures (Stone & Stone, 2015), more adaptable (Oprins, van den Bosch, & Venrooij, 2018), and more emotionally resilient than civilians (Dillon, 2017). Veterans also face negative stereotypes about their behavior (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014). They are seen as more likely than nonveterans to be violent, have problems with drugs and alcohol, and suffer mental illness. They particularly face these stereotypes when they have been deployed to war zones.

A thorough and nuanced understanding of veteran stereotypes is important because stereotypes can influence veterans' adjustment to civilian life and their prospects for employment (Dillon, 2017; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Keeling et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2018). However, little theory or research has been conducted to understand and model the factors that shape hiring decisions for veterans (Stone et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015) or how perceptions of veterans along different dimensions affect their perceived suitability for specific careers. From the perspective of recent social psychological theory and research, the traits associated with veterans (e.g., tough, rigid, brave, stoic) form a coherent constellation of stereotypes that is consistent with the core dimensions that people use to understand and stereotype others. Theories of social judgment, stereotyping, and dehumanization (see Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Haslam, 2006) could all be drawn on to understand veteran stereotypes.

One recent theory is particularly well suited to tackle these issues: the theory of dyadic morality (TDM), which examines moral character and how people ascribe mental states to different targets (for a review, see Schein & Gray, 2017). Armed with this approach, in our research, we have sought to make sense of some of the seemingly inconsistent stereotypes about veterans, such as being heroic leaders but also withdrawn and lacking emotional or interpersonal skills (Shepherd et al., 2019).

TDM posits that people understand the minds of others on two dimensions: the ability to plan and act (a capacity for "agency") and the ability to feel sensations and emotions (a capacity for "experience"; Schein & Gray, 2017; for our purposes, this dimension is referred to as *feeling* to avoid confusion with using *experience* to refer to job and military experience).

These dimensions prove critical to perceptions of morality in that "thinking doers" (i.e., moral agents) are heroes and villains, whereas "vulnerable feelers" (i.e., moral patients) are victims. Moreover, people often "morally typecast" others (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2017). That is, they have difficulty imagining moral agents as being sensitive to a range of positive and negative emotions, and they have difficulty imagining moral patients as agentic actors. In a hypothetical pain/pleasure-administration task, participants opted to give more pain to moral agents (because they could "take it") and more pleasure to the moral patients (because they would get maximum pleasure from it; Gray & Wegner, 2009). Focusing on people's nude or nearly nude bodies increased ratings of the target's ability to feel (experience sensations and emotions) while simultaneously decreasing perceptions of agency (Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, & Feldman Barrett, 2011). Thus, according to TDM, the flip side of being seen as an exceptional and heroic moral agent is simultaneously being seen as lacking emotionality.

In our own research (Shepherd et al., 2019), we provided evidence for a TDM account of veteran stereotypes in which veterans are seen as strong heroes who take action and get things done but who are relatively insensitive to feelings and sensations, thus making them quintessential moral agents. We found that laypeople, supervisors, and recruiters see veterans as more agentic, more moral, less capable of feeling, and more mechanistic than matched, nonveteran targets (Shepherd et al., 2019). This depiction of veterans maps well onto mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006), which depicts people as robot-like by denying them the core human traits of emotionality and sociability.

This understanding of veteran stereotypes is consistent with past observations that veterans are seen as having strong disciplined work ethic and as able to follow procedures (Stone et al., 2018). Members of the Special Forces are seen and depicted as exceptionally agentic, detail-oriented, and goal-oriented (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Holm, 2019). However, veterans are also perceived as unfeeling, lacking social skills (Stone et al., 2018), and lacking the ability to connect with others. Framing all veterans as heroes can create social distance between civilians and veterans, making it more difficult for civilians to connect with veterans or to see them as potential colleagues (Dillon, 2017). These observations are consistent with a TDM account of veteran stereotypes.

Although perceiving veterans as almost superhuman heroic agents may appear to be a largely positive judgment, positive stereotypes can still have adverse effects (Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015). The idea that negative outcomes may stem from seeing veterans as exceptionally

**Table 1.** Careers Ranked as Most and Least Suitable for a Military Veteran and Ratings of Each Career's Demand for Agency Relative to Feeling

Top 10 careers for veteran fit	Difference score: Agency – Feeling	Bottom 10 careers for veteran Fit	Difference score: Agency – Feeling
Patrol officer	1.79	Massage therapist	-2.12
Security guard	0.78	Financial advisor	2.39
Paramedic	0.03	Receptionist	-0.24
Construction manager	3.25	Dental hygienist	-0.68
Information security analyst	3.30	Esthetician (skin care specialist)	0.10
Compliance officer	1.45	Art director	-0.16
Auto mechanic	2.33	Preschool teacher	-0.27
Physical therapist assistant	-0.52	Marriage and family therapist	-1.34
Sheet metal worker	1.90	Hairdresser	-1.28
Civil engineer	3.47	Nail technician	-0.87

Note: One sample of participants rated careers on agency and feeling on a scale from 1 (*much less than the average career*) to 9 (*much more than the average career*). A separate sample of participants ranked a random subset of 10 careers on veteran fit. Data from Shepherd, Kay, and Gray (2019), Study 3.

agentic heroes may not be intuitive but is consistent with TDM and this model's unique understanding of person perception, including stereotyping and dehumanization (Schein & Gray, 2017). Specifically, this account of veteran stereotypes can offer some concrete predictions regarding the employment issues that veterans may face.

To what careers will veterans be seen as less or more suited? Holland's (1973) model of career typology organizes careers into several different types requiring different skills. If veterans are seen as unfeeling agents, then it follows that they will be seen as well suited to careers that require the ability to act but not feel (e.g., "realistic" careers that require working with things, "conventional" careers that involve practical and logical tasks) and relatively ill suited to careers that require an ability to feel and connect with others (e.g., "social" careers and "artistic" careers, which involve working with people and expressing emotion, respectively).

Evidence supports these predictions. Veterans are seen as best suited for realistic and conventional careers and ill suited for social and artistic careers relative to comparably qualified nonveteran applicants (Shepherd et al., 2019). In this research, participants (both laypeople and people in human resources/recruitment/management) viewed applicant information (e.g., portions of a resume or cover letter) that either mentioned an applicant's military experience or did not. Military experience decreased perceived fit for careers that require expressing or understanding emotion. For example, veteran applicants were seen as less suited to mental-health careers, for service positions within a restaurant (e.g., host), and for activities within an event-planning business that required understanding and interacting with others. Veterans were also rated lower on empathy, emotional intelligence, and soft skills in

general. This occurred despite the facts that the veteran applicant had the necessary interest and education and that their military experience was phrased according to how veterans are advised to list their military experience for a civilian employer. Note that various sociodemographic variables, such as the applicant's education or the skill level required for the job, were held constant.

In another study (Shepherd et al., 2019) using online samples, we found that when considering veteran fit for 100 desirable careers (U.S. News and World Report, 2018), those careers that required more ability to feel were ranked as less suitable for veterans, whereas those that required agency were ranked as more suitable. As seen in Table 1, of the top 10 careers in perceived veteran suitability, nearly every single one favors agency over feeling, whereas for the bottom 10 careers in perceived veteran fit, the majority favor feeling over agency.

These results are consistent with existing demographic data on veterans and unemployment and provide a parsimonious theory to account for a range of findings. Employers worry that it is difficult to make interpersonal connections with veterans because they lack social skills (Dillon, 2017; Stone et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Postmilitary careers often include policing/security and computer coding because of the direct transferability of skills and military experience (Dillon, 2017; Stone & Stone, 2015). Veterans also appear to be overrepresented in maintenance, manufacturing, and other high-agency/low-emotion careers while being underrepresented in services (personal care, health, food, education), arts and entertainment, and other careers that require emotion and interpersonal connection (Schulker, 2017; White, 2018). Going back to our original conceptual framework (Fig. 1), these differences

between veterans and nonveterans regarding field of employment are likely multiply determined and potentially due to self-selection, skill translation from military service, and a number of other factors. However, these observations are also consistent with the theory of dyadic morality as a framework for understanding veteran stereotypes. Self-selection also does not account for the observation that veteran targets were deemed less qualified for a particular position than an equally qualified nonveteran because of stereotypes people have about veterans (Shepherd et al., 2019). This serves as just one example of how a theory-based stereotyping perspective can contribute to the understanding of veteran issues.

The stereotype of veterans as cold, mechanistic, and robotic poses important challenges to veterans and people who interact with and make hiring decisions for veterans, such as people in career services, management, and human resources. In looking at the aforementioned U.S. News and World Report (2018) list of the best 100 jobs of 2018, more than half of the jobs are in education, mental health, and health care (i.e., careers that require emotion and interpersonal connection). Only six are in the domains of engineering, trade, and construction/repairs. The rote and hands-on careers that are seen as most suitable for veterans (e.g., manufacturing) are increasingly being outsourced to overseas labor and automation. However, there are still desirable careers that are seen as well suited to veterans. For example, we found that veterans were seen as equally suited for technology careers (i.e., high-agency, low-emotion careers) as an equivalent nonveteran applicant (Shepherd et al., 2019). Overall, 18 careers in the domains of computers and mathematics populated the aforementioned list of growing and desirable careers. However, even careers that traditionally do not have a strong socio-emotional component are increasingly requiring employees to have interpersonal skills, empathy, and “emotional intelligence” (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Ovans, 2015).

Issues of stereotyping may also remain after being hired. In a hypothetical forced-choice paradigm, veterans were more likely to be funneled into jobs that require less socioemotional skills (a dishwasher as opposed to a restaurant host, which in this particular case also happened to be a lower status position; Shepherd et al., 2019). Organizations often use metrics to score and rank employees according to skills such as emotional intelligence. These scores may be posted publicly, and employees may be encouraged to share these scores with other people in the organization as a basis for team and task assignment (Asplund & Blacksmith, 2012; Strengthwise, 2017). Although these practices may be well intentioned and veterans may be

especially used to decisions based on assessment tools, these practices combined with stereotype-relevant content may also further exacerbate issues of belongingness and stereotype threat. An understanding of veteran stereotypes and stereotype threat could inform future research on how veterans, compared with nonveterans, are affected by the use of these assessment tools.

There are additional important implications for these stereotypes about veterans. For example, typecasting veterans as moral agents makes it more difficult to see them as capable of suffering or needing assistance (i.e., as moral patients). MacLean and Kleykamp (2014) found that although veterans are stereotyped, they are not stigmatized; their service is lauded and has symbolic capital, which helps to offset the negative impact of stereotyping. However, it is possible that positive views of veterans may obscure either conscious or unconscious biases. Using a clever research design, Kleykamp, Hipes, and MacLean (2018) showed a social desirability bias in people’s willingness to socially engage with veterans and offer tangible support. Although people overwhelmingly stated that they would want to have a veteran as a neighbor and that tax dollars should help pay for veterans’ health care costs, their “actual” support was measurably lower. In addition, whereas 92% of employers believed it is necessary for mental-health programs to support veterans in their communities, only 16% believed that veterans have good access to this support (Dillon, 2017). An overwhelming majority of people see veterans as “heroes,” and yet a majority do not see them as assets to the community (Dillon, 2017). Other researchers have pointed out the issue of civilians paying “lip service” to veterans while not helping in concrete ways (Pfaff, 2016). Although these observations appear contradictory, they are consistent with the idea that veterans are seen as noble moral agents who are also less capable of suffering compared with the average person.

TDM can also provide insights into the issue of veterans’ mental health and self-stigma. People in the military often internalize the role of being unemotional moral agents, and denial and emotional detachment are common strategies for managing mental-health struggles during deployment (Rausch, 2014). Military culture is characterized by traditional masculinity, toughness, and stoicism (Archer, 2013; Cooper et al., 2018; Lorber & Garcia, 2010). This can lead to the belief that seeking help is a sign of weakness and inconsistent with military values (Dickstein et al., 2010; McFarling et al., 2011; Nash, Silva, & Litz, 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2009; Stecker et al., 2007). There have been efforts to foster more emotional resilience among the military, such as the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program, which emphasizes emotional fitness as one of five critical points to

soldiers' fitness, along with social, family, spiritual, and physical fitness (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). This program was designed to prevent PTSD with efforts from clinicians and research psychologists (for a discussion of this and other U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs efforts to combat PTSD, see McNally, 2012; for commentary, see S. L. Smith, 2013; for critiques of the program, see Steenkamp, Nash, & Litz, 2013; for a discussion of the efforts made by the American Psychological Association, see Clay, 2017). Employers' concerns regarding PTSD in veterans largely revolve around both agentic traits (e.g., the potential for violence) and the absence of emotionality and sociability (e.g., withdrawal, emotional numbness; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Keeling et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2018), outcomes these programs are designed to address.

The importance of dispelling inaccurate portrayals of veterans is clear. For example, researchers have expressed concern about how TV and film can reinforce stereotypic and unrealistic views of veterans as heroes that also have PTSD or lack human emotion (Chapin, Mendoza-Burcham, & Pierce, 2017; Parrott, Albright, Dyche, & Steele, 2019). Dillon (2017) and Rausch (2014) called attention to the need to "change the narrative." They suggested moving away from seeing veterans as one-dimensional superheroes and toward an attempt to gain a more thorough understanding of how military service affects a veteran's life. Clinicians who work with military personnel and veterans are uniquely qualified to advance more nuanced views of them given their access and experience with veterans as emotional beings. The military would also be advised to consider these findings when designing and market testing their advertising.

Veterans and human resource agencies that help veterans may also consider the above findings when preparing for job searches. For example, veterans' resume content could perhaps highlight their ability to empathize, share, and understand emotion to complement perceptions of agency. When participants were presented with an identical resume of a veteran as opposed to a nonveteran, the inclusion of volunteer experience at a humane society—including looking after the emotional and psychological well-being of animals—essentially eliminated the bias toward veterans when considering their social-emotional skills and suitability for social-emotional tasks (Shepherd et al., 2019).

Although not tested by Shepherd et al. (2019), these results also point to veterans perhaps being seen as more suited for heroic/moral careers, that is, those that involve helping or contributing to a collective. This would certainly be consistent with observations cited earlier regarding veterans having a more collectivistic orientation toward work and speaks to the importance

of organizations being able to clearly communicate their sense of purpose to potential hires. However, many such careers may also involve working with others. Future research may tease apart these factors and how they contribute to perceptions of job suitability.

In short, social psychological theories that focus on the content of stereotypes can account for a range of issues faced by veterans that result from systemic differences between military and civilian culture. Researchers (e.g., Dillon, 2017; Stone & Stone, 2015) have suggested that programs and interventions should better educate the public and employers regarding veterans' skills and veteran stereotypes and inform veterans how to better communicate their skills and experience effectively. A concise theoretical framework for understanding veteran stereotypes can serve as a powerful tool for informing the core of these interventions and programs regardless of their specific implementation.

### **Bridging Basic Psychological Theory and Veterans' Issues**

Military veterans belong to a social category that has often been ignored by psychological scientists outside of military psychology. This matters because basic psychological theories can provide novel insights and solutions to the issues that veterans face. To this end, we have outlined several psychological approaches that can help explain how the structural features of the military can present challenges for veterans and can be integrated with research from other disciplines such as sociology, clinical psychology, and organizational behavior.

As veterans transition out of the military, they may face the question of how to find order and structure in their lives via external and internal control because of military structure and socialization. They often have to reconfigure their social networks and address a need for belonging that was met in the military but changed as they left a cohesive group with which they may have fused their identity (Hart & Lancaster, 2019). These challenges are made more difficult by people's lack of understanding of the military and a reliance on stereotypes about the military and veterans. In addition, internalization of these stereotypes or carrying the military culture with them to the civilian world may contribute to other issues veterans confront (e.g., not seeking help for mental-health issues; Britt et al., 2007; Dickstein et al., 2010; McFarling et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2009; Stecker et al., 2007). In short, employment, mental health, and relationship issues may result from or be exacerbated by the challenges that veterans face, and we hope that the insights offered here demonstrate the potential value of integrating

psychological research and theory into ongoing efforts by military psychologists, clinicians, human resource managers, and policymakers to understand veterans' transition experiences.

There are many other basic theories in social, personality, and other branches of psychology that touch on similar ideas as those discussed here and could be helpful in understanding the veteran experience from a different lens. Our detailed theoretical application of a select few theories serves to illustrate the potential benefits of considering the veteran experience from a wide range of theoretical perspectives within psychological science. We hope the current discussion will encourage researchers across fields to apply these and other psychological theories to this pressing issue.

Social psychology and its focus on people's subjective construal of social situations is also well positioned to understand the intersectionality of veterans' issues. Past research on veterans has explored the differential effects of military service on stigma and labor market outcomes among men and women and people of various ethnicities and education levels. Gender, race-ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic status are frequent focal topics of social psychology, and thus it can contribute to understanding these issues as well within the military context (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Doing so may also lead to new insights about how these identities intersect, providing an exciting opportunity for growing research on intersectional identities (Cole, 2009). For example, are stereotypes about veterans particularly problematic for women compared with men because of their contrast with competing stereotypes about women (e.g., as warm and emotional but less agentic)? Indeed, one audit study of employers found that they were less likely to call back job applicants who were veterans if they were African American women who served in combat roles (Kleykamp, 2009). How does being a veteran affect perceptions of fit among veterans who are also members of groups who routinely face difficulties regarding fit and belonging in academic and work settings (e.g., African Americans, LGBTQ)? These are just a few topics that could benefit from further bridging basic psychological theory and research with veterans' issues.

We have discussed military culture as relatively stable over time, as a total institution (McGarry et al., 2015), and as being perhaps necessarily different from civilian society given the functions of the military. However, that does not preclude structural changes within the military organization. For example, in some contexts, a flattening and decentralizing of the military structure may be beneficial (Bjørnstad, 2011). Although the argument for this structural change is one of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, it could also have the

by-product of better preparing veterans for civilian life. That is, one's experience in the military could be more similar to that of civilian life regarding one's allocation of internal as opposed to external control and the emphasis on self-efficacy and self-direction. Beginning with basic training, some aspects of the military culture could be changed. For example, seeking mental-health treatment could be redefined as an act of bravery and not weakness (McFarling et al., 2011). The issue of how people may resist change in the military is another area in which psychological theory can be informative. Given the stability of and tradition associated with the military institution and culture, it follows that change may to be difficult to implement. There is a rich body of work on system justification and status quo bias that highlights how people are motivated to resist change and defend the status quo and existing social institutions (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014; Kay & Friesen, 2011). These theories too may provide insights into how change might be made easier to implement.

## Conclusion

Media coverage has highlighted the widespread agreement in the United States that it is shameful how the country has treated military veterans. In today's politically polarized times, this is a sentiment that is held by people on both the political left (e.g., Stuart, 2015) and the right (e.g., Hillyer, 2014). Care for veterans truly appears to span the political divide. Just as this issue has the potential to bridge partisan divides, we also think it has potential to create new research opportunities and applications across disciplinary divides within psychological science, for example, among social psychologists, military psychologists, sociologists, and practitioners within clinical psychology who work with veterans. Research that bridges these divides has great potential for broad impact both scientifically and in terms of understanding the experiences of those who put their lives at risk and have served their country in the military.

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## Note

1. Although we focus on the structure that military life provides, it is also worth noting that combat serves as an example of how people serving in the military can be exposed to chaos and randomness. Consistent with CCT, the rigid structure of the military is due in part to the need to create some kind of order and control in situations (e.g., war) that are chaotic. From a CCT perspective, this too represents an interesting contrast between military and civilian life. The looming threat of a random and chaotic event faced during combat situations is a stark contrast to the relative safety and predictability of civilian life. However, many people who serve do not see combat during their service (MacLean, 2011).

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