

The Relationship between Military Veteran Issues and Mental Health Stigma

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Author Note

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### Abstract

Research indicates that the general veteran population historically has higher rates of unemployment and homelessness than the non-veteran population. Homelessness and unemployment are also indicative of stigma with respect to mental illness. Additionally, research shows that stereotypes about groups can interact. This study examined the interaction of veteran status and stigma associated with mental illness. The hypothesis stated the veterans with mental illness receive higher levels of stigma than non-veterans with mental illness. After reading a brief vignette, one hundred and twenty nine participants from a midwestern university rated their perception of a job candidate using the fear and helping scales adapted from Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan and Kubiak (2003). Additionally, participants reported their belief of the candidate's gender and mental illness by answering open ended questions. Results indicate that veterans with mental illness receive significantly higher levels of stigma than non-veterans with mental illness.

*Keywords:* Veterans, Mental Illness, Stigma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

### The Relationship between Military Veteran Issues and Mental Health Stigma

“The Nation that forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten” (Brands, 2012, p. 71).

These poignant words can be credited to Calvin Coolidge, the 30<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. His remarks are significant due to the passage of the World War Adjusted Compensation Act during his tenure as president (Brands, 2012). The Act was created to provide monetary compensation for World War I veterans through a variety of additional pay (Veteran Affairs, 2006). Veterans or their estates (if the veteran was deceased) could receive money from the United States government based on service during World War I (Veteran Affairs, 2006). Despite a pledge of remembering by President Coolidge, the World War Adjusted Compensation Act was actually passed by Congress in 1924. The bill passed a few days after President Coolidge attempted to block it with his veto (Brands, 2012). When money became the issue, President Coolidge felt differently about the nation’s defenders. President Coolidge’s statement concerning the nation’s defenders became hollow words.

Hon Wright Patman, a former United States Representative, drew a comparison between how the private sector had benefited from the war and how the veterans had yet to receive compensation. “The war contractors and railroad owners after the war were paid billions of dollars by the government in adjusted compensation for their war services, and much more than all veterans will receive in adjusted pay if the legislation we propose becomes law” (Patman, 1932, p.270). Representative Patman was part of the Congressional push to pass an amendment to the original World War Adjusted Compensation Act. The Amendment was designed to assist veterans in receiving the compensation that was promised in the original law and was enacted in 1932 (Veteran Affairs, 2006). Eight years had passed since the original law had been signed into existence (Patman, 1932). Veterans had yet to receive the compensation promised to them in

1924. These examples provide a historical reference as to the chronic nature of issues veterans face upon separation from active duty. However, nearly one-hundred years later, veterans are facing high rates of unemployment and homelessness (Jobless Rate, 2012; Key, 2008).

### **Unemployment**

An employment situation report showed that the unemployment rate held steady at 7.6 percent in June of 2013. June was the tenth straight month that joblessness was below eight percent which followed three-and-a-half straight years of greater than 8 percent unemployment (PR, N., 2013). Although these employment numbers are disconcerting for the nation as a whole, veterans encountered higher unemployment rates during the period. Employment challenges Gulf War II veterans face have not been encountered by any American since the Great Depression of the 1930's. A particularly hard hit demographic of veterans is males ages 18 to 24. The Bureau of Labor Statistics asserts non-veterans in this demographic struggle with an unemployment rate of 17 percent; however, male veterans age 18-24 face an unemployment rate of 29.1 percent (Jobless Rate, 2012, p.12). Young veterans integrating back into civilian life experience added stress due to the lack of employment.

Unfortunately, greater than average rates of joblessness is not a new challenge for our nation's defenders. Times of economic stability or prosperity have allowed less disparity to exist between jobless rates of veterans and non-veterans. However, veterans consistently experience higher rates of unemployment. Cohany (1990) concluded that in 1987 approximately three hundred and fifty thousand Vietnam era veterans were actively looking for work. This group had an unemployment rate of 4.8 percent while the national average was 4.3 percent (Cohany, 1990, p. 24). Although these rates are significantly lower than the national average today, veterans who were forced by their country to serve in the armed forces endured higher unemployment rates

than the general population. The increased financial instability may contribute to high levels of homelessness for military veterans.

### **Homelessness**

Key (2008) acknowledges the stark reality of homeless veterans; veterans comprise 25 percent of the total homeless population of the United States. This statistic is most distressing considering veterans constitute only 11 % of the nation's total population (Key, 2008, 5A). According to this data, veterans are more likely to be homeless than any other portion of the general population. This is true of veterans who have recently left active duty and those from different eras.

Veterans of the Vietnam War era historically experience high levels of homelessness. One study examined a Veterans Administration program that assessed over ten thousand homeless veterans. Of those assessed, 50 % of the veterans served during the Vietnam War (Rosenheck, 1991, p.645). Many American citizens, who did not volunteer, were obligated by law to perform military service. Yet, many of those individuals found themselves without a place to live. The vast majority of Vietnam Era veterans are male, however the changing demographics of the United States military reflect the consistent nature of the issue of veteran homelessness.

A report from the Government Accountability Office found the number of homeless women veterans doubled from one thousand eighty in 2006 to three thousand and twenty eight in 2010 (Bertoni, 2012). The shifting demographics of the military demonstrate the persistent nature of the issues veterans encounter. As more women enter military service, they are experiencing rates of homelessness that are consistent with rates historically encountered by male veterans. Elevated rates of unemployment and homelessness that veterans face are also present in other populations, specifically, in individuals with mental illness.

**Veteran stigma and mental health stigma**

The aforementioned issues are also indicative of stigmatizing behavior associated with mental illness. Drazzen (2012, p.12) reports the case of an individual veteran. Moses Maddox deployed to Iraq in 2006. Maddox's service resulted in a traumatic brain injury and a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. After being honorably discharged from active duty, Maddox attended college and received his bachelor's degree. Despite receiving his degree, Maddox was unemployed several months after graduation due to not having experience in the private sector. Employers often have the misconception veterans are unstable due to military service. Maddox is one of many veterans facing the same dilemma, and his predicament could possibly be exacerbated by the high levels of stigmatization attributed to mental illness.

Stigma associated with mental illness is well established as a limiting factor for individuals with a mental illness; stigma is highlighted as a major barrier to receiving treatment and to obtaining quality employment (Satcher, 2000). Individuals with mental illness are limited in ways that the general population is not. The public sentiment regarding mental illness often creates restrictions on the opportunities available to those individuals who may have a mental disorder. People with mental illness are denigrated in media portrayals, considered less valuable in society, and are often assumed to be less capable (Rüsch, Angermeye, & Corrigan 2005; Hinshaw & Stier, 2008). Researchers have explored many influences on stigma toward mental illness. However, preferred social distance is one of the most important indicators of stigmatizing behavior.

The concept of preferred social distance is the regularity of interactions between two groups. Primarily, the concept is that the more often the members of two groups interact, the closer they are socially. With respect to preferred social distance, fear and perceptions of

dangerousness are key predictors of stigma (Jorm & Oh, 2009). A person's willingness to provide assistance also predicts discriminatory behaviors (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, & Kubiak, 2003). Additionally, research has shown that people are less willing to employ, offer employment, or offer housing to those individuals who have a mental illness (Webber & Orcutt, 1984). Unemployment rates for people with mental illness have previously been cited between 75 and 89 percent (Mechanic et al., 2002). Studies have demonstrated that veterans have experienced similar stigmatizing behavior as non-veterans with mental illness.

Cohen, Suri, Amick, and Yan (2013) extracted from the VA Computerized Patient Record System for all consecutive veterans seen at the Boston VA Polytrauma Network Site during the six month period from December 1, 2009 to May 31, 2010. During the period, 169 veterans were seen in the network. The results indicated that 45% of patients were unemployed and 55% were employed. The only clinical characteristic that differed significantly between the two groups was self-reported global depression severity. Seventy four percent of individuals in the unemployed group reported current symptoms of at least moderate depression, as compared to 47% of individuals in the employed group. The results presented in multiple studies may suggest that a possible interaction exists with regard to veteran status, mental illness, and levels of stigmatization.

### **Intersection of veteran status, mental illness, and levels of stigmatization**

The current research explored the intersection of stigmatizing behavior toward veterans in general, and stigmatizing behavior with respect to mental illness. Previous research has examined interaction of race and gender stereotypes. Individuals have less difficulty in recognizing people's faces when their perception of race and gender stereotypes match (Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008). Additionally, research demonstrates that people have stereotypes

regarding symptoms of mental illness. Participants across multiple studies have reported that gay men commonly display symptoms of anxiety, mood, eating, and personality disorders with regard to mental illness (Boysen, Fisher, DeJesus, Vogel, & Madon, 2011; Boysen, Vogel, Madon, & Wester, 2006). Due to higher than average rates of unemployment and homelessness for the general veteran population, one may assume that perceptions of veterans by the non-veteran population affects preferred social distance. Furthermore, stigma toward mental illness increases preferred social distance with regard to helping behaviors and perception of dangerousness. It follows that an interaction between both circumstances increases the preferred social distance with respect to veterans with mental illness. This study aims to show that veterans with mental illness are subject to higher levels of stigmatization than non-veterans with mental illness.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred twenty-nine students from a midwestern university participated in the study; participants did not receive any compensation for participating in the study. Participants participated in one of four conditions. Condition A (non-veteran with no mental illness) ( $N = 34$ ); Condition B (non-veteran with mental illness) ( $N = 33$ ); Condition C (veteran with no mental illness) ( $N = 31$ ); Condition D (veteran with mental illness) ( $N = 31$ ). They were predominantly female (65%) and the average age was 21 ( $SD = 5$ ).

### **Materials**

The survey materials consisted of a four separate vignettes that described a potential job candidate followed by a short survey. The vignette for condition A (non-veteran with no mental illness) read as follows: "Job Candidate A is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher's



aide. The candidate's resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate A has filled a similar position at a previous school." The vignette for condition B (non-veteran with mental illness) read as follows: "Job Candidate B is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher's aide. The candidate's resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate B has filled a similar position at a previous school. During the interview process, the candidate stated that they have had a diagnosable mental illness in the past five years." The vignette for condition C (veteran with no mental illness) was identical to condition A (non-veteran with no mental illness), with the exception of including the candidate's veteran status. The vignette for condition D (veteran with mental illness) was identical to condition B (non-veteran with mental illness), with the exception of including the candidate's veteran status.

For each vignette, participants rated their perception of the job candidate using the fear and helping scales adapted from Corrigan et al. (2003). The rating scale the items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Fear items measured perceptions of individuals as dangerous with items such as "I feel that Candidate x poses a risk to the children in the school." Helping items measured willingness to assist individuals and included items such as "If I were an employer, I would consider hiring Candidate x." As shown by coefficient alpha, reliability for the scales is fear = .96; helping = .84. All conditions included a final open ended question, "What do you believe is Candidate x's gender?" Condition B and D also included the open ended question, "What do you believe is Candidate x's mental illness?"

## Procedure

Participants were asked to read the vignette and answer the nine item survey during class time. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and if they encountered any question that caused them discomfort, they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were informed verbally and in written instruction that all responses were anonymous. After signing an informed consent, participants took no longer than 15 minutes for to complete the survey. After completion of the surveys, the experimenter debriefed the participants and answered any questions regarding the research study.

## Results

In order to test the hypothesis that there was a significant difference in levels of stigma between the groups, a one-way ANOVA was performed. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in stigma (non-veteran/no mental illness,  $M = 22.62$ ,  $SD = 3.60$ ; non-veteran/with mental illness,  $M = 26.82$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ; veteran/no mental illness,  $M = 23.61$ ,  $SD = 4.20$ ; veteran/with mental illness,  $M = 29.19$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ),  $F(3, 125) = 16.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . After establishing that there is a significant difference between groups with regard to stigma, an independent samples t-test was performed to test the hypothesis that veterans with mental illness receive higher levels of stigma than non-veterans with mental illness. The results indicated that veterans with mental illness ( $M = 29.19$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ) received significantly higher levels of stigma than non-veterans with mental illness ( $M = 26.82$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ),  $t(62) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .018$ .

Next, a Pearson's chi-square test examined the frequency of the participant's reported belief with regard to the candidate's gender. A significant difference existed between conditions,  $\chi^2(6, N = 129) = 32.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , such that a higher proportion of participants than expected by chance reported the candidate who was a veteran with mental illness was male. On average, the

belief in gender reported as male for the veteran with mental illness was 94%, the veteran with no mental illness was 71%, the non-veteran with mental illness was 48%, and the non-veteran with no mental illness was 29%.

Additionally, a Pearson's chi-square test examined the frequency of participant's reported belief with regard to the candidate's mental illness. A significant difference existed between conditions,  $\chi^2(5, N = 64) = 47.68, p < 0.001$ , such that a higher proportion of participants than expected by chance reported the candidate who was a veteran with mental illness had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. On average, the belief in mental disorder as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for the veteran with mental illness was 77%, and the number of participants reporting that the non-veteran with mental illness had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was zero.

### **Discussion**

The original hypothesis stated: Veterans with mental illness receive higher levels of stigma than non-veterans with mental illness. Due to the significant result from the independent samples t test, it appears that the hypothesis was supported. Additionally, the results suggest that college students at a midwestern institution associate veterans with mental illness with concepts of fear, and are less likely to engage in helping behaviors with regard to veterans with mental illness.

### **Limitations**

Due to the simplistic nature of this study, a more robust application of all the subscales (Corrigan et al., 2003) would yield a broader picture of the stigma associated with veteran status in relation to mental illness. This study concentrated on the scales of fear and helping. For future research, the inclusion of the personal responsibility belief, pity, segregation, and anger subscale presented by Corrigan (2003) and his colleagues could possibly provide new dimensions

regarding the intersection of veteran status and mental illness. Further research is needed on the intersection of veteran status, mental illness, and stigma. Additional studies, with a more robust application, are necessary to replicate these findings in order to determine how far the effect generalizes.

### **Implications**

Similar to research regarding how groups stereotypically show symptoms of mental illness (Boysen et al., 2011), perhaps, people have a subjective interpretation of symptoms from the cultural context of military service. Individuals may reflexively attribute dangerous behavior to veterans with mental illness. Perhaps, there is an overgeneralization (e.g., PTSD) with regard to mental health issues for veterans (e.g., Rambo). For instance, a common cultural belief of how veterans show symptoms of trauma is “flashbacks” (McNally, 2004). Additionally, the media often depicts veterans as “ticking time bombs or as dangerous” (Hoit, 2012). The results of this study strongly suggests that an individual's veteran status increases stigmatizing behavior associated with mental illness. Veterans may experience a detrimental impact regarding a person’s willingness to offer employment, and veterans may be less likely to seek help for mental health issues due to an increased perception of dangerousness.

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**Appendix A**

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please read the following statement concerning Job Candidate A, and answer the following questions.**

Job Candidate A is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher’s aide. The candidate’s resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate A has filled a similar position at a previous school.

**Please rate how you feel about Job Candidate A.**

If I were an employer, I would consider hiring Candidate A.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel concerned about Candidate A working with children.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would recommend Candidate A for employment.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7



I feel it would be best for the school if they hired a different candidate.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel that Candidate A poses a risk to the children in the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I think it would be best if Candidate A did not get the job.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel worried about Candidate A working at the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What do you believe is Candidate A's gender?

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please read the following statement concerning Job Candidate B, and answer the following questions.**

Job Candidate B is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher’s aide. The candidate’s resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate B has filled a similar position at a previous school. During the interview process, the candidate stated that they have had a diagnosable mental illness in the past five years.

**Please rate how you feel about Job Candidate B.**

If I were an employer, I would consider hiring Candidate B.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel concerned about Candidate B working with children.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would recommend Candidate B for employment.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel it would be best for the school if they hired a different candidate.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel that Candidate B poses a risk to the children in the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I think it would be best if Candidate B did not get the job.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel worried about Candidate B working at the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What do you believe is Candidate B's gender?

What do you believe is Candidate B's mental illness?

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please read the following statement concerning Job Candidate C, and answer the following questions.**

Job Candidate C is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher’s aide. The candidate’s resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate C has filled a similar position at a previous school. During the interview process, the candidate stated that they are a military veteran.

**Please rate how you feel about Job Candidate C.**

If I were an employer, I would consider hiring Candidate C.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel concerned about Candidate C working with children.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would recommend Candidate C for employment.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel it would be best for the school if they hired a different candidate.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel that Candidate C poses a risk to the children in the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I think it would be best if Candidate C did not get the job.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel worried about Candidate C working at the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What do you believe is Candidate C's gender?

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please read the following statement concerning Job Candidate D, and answer the following questions.**

Job Candidate D is seeking employment at a local school as a teacher’s aide. The candidate’s resume demonstrates the basic skills necessary to fill the position. This candidate received their degree from a state university, and has a recommendation for employment from a previous employer. Job Candidate D has filled a similar position at a previous school. During the interview process, the candidate stated that they are a military veteran who has had a diagnosable mental illness in the past five years.

**Please rate how you feel about Job Candidate D.**

If I were an employer, I would consider hiring Candidate D.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel concerned about Candidate D working with children.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would recommend Candidate D for employment.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel it would be best for the school if they hired a different candidate.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I feel that Candidate D poses a risk to the children in the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I think it would be best if Candidate D did not get the job.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I would feel worried about Candidate D working at the school.

strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What do you believe is Candidate D's gender?

What do you believe is Candidate D's mental illness?