

GRIBBLE, R., WESSELY, S., KLEIN, S., ALEXANDER, D.A., DANDEKER, C. and FEAR, N.T. 2019. Who is a 'Veteran'? Understanding definitions of the term among the British public: a research note. *RUSI journal* [online], 164(7), pages 10-17. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2019.1700683>

Who is a veteran? Understanding definitions of the term among the British public: a research note.

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2019

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *RUSI Journal* on 16/12/2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03071847.2019.1700683>.

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Abstract

There are currently an estimated 2.8-3.8 million people in the UK who fulfil the UK Ministry of Defence’s (MOD) definition of a military veteran (minimum of one day's military service). Despite these numbers, there is little research on who the public views as a veteran and how this differs across society. Data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey was used to examine public conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ and identify factors associated with commonly endorsed definitions. British public conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ reflect historical representations of combat and deployment. Less than 2% of the public endorsed the official Ministry of Defence definition of a minimum of one day’s service and evident differences to how ex-serving personnel defined themselves. These divergences may arise from the differing purposes of these definitions in either conceptualising a social identity or outlining eligibility for access to services. Significant differences in definitions were found according to gender, education and connection to the military. Further research should be conducted to explore how the public, ex-serving personnel and the military co-create the social identity of ‘veteran’, how definitions relate to perceived access to support, services and the benefits associated with military service and how this influences transition experiences.

Author(s) biography (no more than 50 words) and affiliations

1. Dr. Rachael Gribble, King’s Centre for Military Health Research, King’s College London

Rachael Gribble is a Lecturer in War & Psychiatry at the King’s Centre for Military Health Research, King’s College London.

2. Prof. Sir Simon Wessely, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London

Simon Wessely is Regius Chair of Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London and Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

3. Prof. Susan Klein, Veterans and Families Institute, School of Education & Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University

Susan Klein is Professor of Health and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University, previously Professor of Trauma Research and Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Institute for Health and Welfare Research, Robert Gordon University.

4. Emeritus Professor David A. Alexander, Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

David A Alexander is Emeritus Professor of Mental Health and was formerly Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Institute for Health and Welfare Research, Robert Gordon University.

5. Emeritus Professor Christopher Dandeker, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London

Christopher Dandeker is Emeritus Professor of Military Sociology, Department of War Studies, and was Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

6. Prof. Nicola T. Fear, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London

Nicola T. Fear is Professor of Epidemiology and Co-Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London.

Grant funding

This research was made possible with funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); RES-062-23-2878

Corresponding author

Dr Rachael Gribble

King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London

Weston Education Centre,

10 Cutcombe Road

London SE5 9RJ

United Kingdom

rachael.gribble@kcl.ac.uk

Ph +44 (0)207 848 5354

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There are currently an estimated 2.8-3.8 million people in the UK who fulfil the UK Ministry of Defence’s (MOD) definition of a military veteran (minimum of one day's military service). Despite these numbers, there is little research on who the public views as a veteran and how this differs across society. Data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey was used to examine public conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ and identify factors associated with commonly endorsed definitions. British public conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ reflect historical representations of combat and deployment. Less than 2% of the public endorsed the official Ministry of Defence definition of a minimum of one day’s service and evident differences to how ex-serving personnel defined themselves. These divergences may arise from the differing purposes of these definitions in either conceptualising a social identity or outlining eligibility for access to services. Significant differences in definitions were found according to gender, education and connection to the military. Further research should be conducted to explore how the public, ex-serving personnel and the military co-create the social identity of ‘veteran’, how definitions relate to perceived access to support, services and the benefits associated with military service and how this influences transition experiences.

Key words

Veterans; Civil Military Relations; Public opinion; United Kingdom

Introduction

Public perceptions of who is a military veteran contribute not only to the legitimacy of the identity associated with this term but also to the social and cultural environment veterans return to. How the public views veterans can have potential implications for the provision of government support, successful reintegration, including job opportunities, and, potentially, disclosure about their veteran status within health care, welfare and education systems [1-5]. A fundamental question in this area, however, is who the public views as being a veteran and therefore eligible to claim the rewards, and burdens, associated with this status.

The UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) definition of a veteran – a minimum of one day's service (including training) in any of the three Services [6] – is one of the most inclusive in the world. Definitions in other Western nations such as Australia, Canada include reference to involvement in military operations, such as deployments overseas (although not necessarily combat-related) [7], while US definitions require a minimum term of service and an honourable discharge [8]. The adoption of this broad definition was due, in part, to political pressure from military and political leaders regarding the treatment of injured personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, Service charities eager to ensure access to benefits and services for all who had served and resistance to creating an 'veteran' identity that excluded the wartime experiences of the British public [7, 9]. According to this definition, there are an estimated 2.8-3.8 million veterans currently living in the UK [10, 11]. While there are difficulties in providing exact estimates due to data limitations, this number is expected to decrease to 1.6 million by 2028, with a change towards a younger and more female veteran population [12].

While previous research has indicated high levels of respect and support for the UK Armed Forces among the British public [13], there has been less research on public attitudes towards UK ex-Service personnel. Those that have been posed have focused on how veterans contribute to society or how skills developed in-service may help them to succeed in civilian employment [14]. Others have described how attributes such as bravery and discipline are often cited in reference to those who have served in the UK Armed Forces but that concerns about poor mental health and a lack of support are also prominent [15]. The current lack of research on public attitudes in this area means it is unclear how the British public conceptualises veterans and how this may compare to definitions within government policy and the ex-serving community. Potential differences in how the public, the military and associated government branches define a veteran may be exacerbated by a widening ‘civil-military gap’ [16, 17]. This theory outlines how a lack of contact and shared experiences between the Armed Forces and civilians may have implications for mutual understanding between the military and civil society, affecting morale amongst personnel, support for ongoing military operations and support for veterans [18]. This paper addresses this question by determining how the British public defines a military veteran compared to definitions within government policy and the ex-serving community. Differences in definitions between socio-demographic groups are examined.

Methods

This study uses data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey [19], a multi-stage representative survey of adults aged 18 years and over living in Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).¹ For the 2011 BSA questionnaire, the King’s Centre for Military Health

¹ Further information on the methodology of the British Social Attitudes survey can be found at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/technical-details.aspx

Research (KCMHR), King's College London, in conjunction with colleagues at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, and NatCen Social Research, developed a module on public attitudes towards the UK Armed Forces and the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Data were collected from June to September 2011 by fieldworkers who conducted face to face computer-assisted interviews and administered self-completion questionnaires. 3,311 adults completed the survey, a response rate of 54%.

Measures

Respondents were presented with a list of brief definitions of 'veteran' and asked to select the one that corresponded mostly closely to their own understanding of this term. Information on socio-demographics (age, gender, education) and personal connection to the military through family, friends or work colleagues were collected. Such variables have been found to be influential in public opinion of military issues in previous research [20-24]. Education categories were comprised of: Left school with no qualifications, O level/CSE qualification or equivalent (left school at 16 years), Higher education or A level qualification or equivalent (left school at 18 or obtained post-secondary school qualification e.g. diploma), Graduate (first/Bachelor's degree or post-graduate qualification). Military connectedness was ascertained by asking whether participants had any form of personal relationship with members or ex-members of the Services (family member, friend, neighbour, colleague or other).

Analysis

Data were weighted to account for non-response and sampling strategies during the BSA survey. Predictors of non-response largely concerned the ability to contact potential respondents [19]. All analyses were conducted using STATA[®] version 11.2 [25].

Public endorsement of pre-defined conceptualisations of veteran was examined using weighted percentages. Logistic regression analyses were used to examine differences in responses according to socio-demographics and connection to the Armed Forces for the three most common responses, with all remaining options used as the reference category. This was due to low numbers in some response categories. Univariable regression results were found to be confounded by socio-demographic factors, therefore only significant adjusted odds ratios are reported; non-significant relationships and unadjusted results are available from the authors. ‘Don’t Know’/‘Refusal’ were excluded from analyses but comprised less than 5% of responses.

Results

Leaving Service to retire was the most commonly endorsed definition of ‘veteran’ (37.4%) among respondents, followed by deployment on operations (20.7%) or combat missions (17.5%) (Table 1). The UK Ministry of Defence’s designation of a veteran as someone with a minimum of one day’s service was selected by less than 2% of respondents.

TABLE 1 HERE

Further analysis of the three most commonly endorsed definitions indicated that, compared to men and those with no qualifications, women ($p=0.003$) and respondents with O level or equivalent qualifications ($p=0.010$) were significantly more likely to endorse leaving Service to retire as a definition of veteran (Table 2); graduates were significantly less likely to do so ($p=0.019$) than those with no qualifications. Deployment on operations was significantly

more likely to be endorsed as a definition among those with military connections ($p=0.016$) and some level of education than those without connections or qualifications (p for trend <0.001). Deployment overseas in combat operations was significantly less likely to be endorsed by women ($p<0.001$) and people aged under 34 years ($p=0.011$) than men and those aged 65 years and over.

TABLE 2 HERE

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that the British public have a widely shared definition of the term ‘veteran’ which adheres to historical representations of combat and deployment or retirement with the implication of such experiences. Previous research has shown similar conceptualisations of this term among the British public, with support for definitions that reflected history of service or serving in either World War I or II [7]. These findings suggest that the traditional ‘hero’ veteran identity that arose from the experiences of the British military during the 20th century, perpetuated through popular culture and reinforced by imagery of personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, remains a persistent and dominant image in the public’s mind [26]. The narrow portrayal of veterans within traditional and social media can also be a source of such stereotypes [27, 28]. As in previous studies of public attitudes to the military [22, 23, 29], differences between socio-demographic groups were found. While retirement was by far the most commonly endorsed public definition of a veteran, women, younger respondents and those who held some level of education were more likely to favour broader rather than narrower definitions that focused on combat deployments. Respondents reporting a connection to the military were more likely to endorse definitions of ‘veteran’ that focused on deployment rather than solely on combat, suggesting greater appreciation of the

different roles of the military. This reflects more recent findings that suggest lower support for the contribution of veterans to society in general among those who do not know someone who has served [15].

Fewer than 2% of the public endorsed the official MoD definition of a veteran, suggesting that definitions which require deployment overseas, such as in Australia, may be more aligned to public understandings of the term ‘veteran’ than the wider definition used in the UK. However, the divergence between public and government definitions is likely to relate to their differing purposes. Public conceptualisations of veterans arise from culturally determined understandings of social categories and identities that determine whether someone is seen as belonging to a social group [30] and therefore eligible to claim the status and rewards associated with it, while official definitions within policy largely aim to address access to these rewards in the form of benefits and services. In the case of the UK, the introduction of the wider definition within policy was a response to pressure from the public and the charitable sector to ensure support was readily available to all Service leavers in the UK [7]. This differs from other countries where more proscribed definitions of veteran is used to restrict access to government-funded services such as Veteran Affairs (VA). Any restriction to the UK definition would therefore have consequences on access to veteran services and eligibility for support through the Armed Forces Covenant. While not clear from this study, the divergence between the public’s view of what constitutes a “veteran” and that of the MOD may have implications for public support for veteran services for those whom might not be considered as “deserving”. While there is little evidence of this to date in either the media or public opinion, misrepresentation of combat experience does occur [31] and historical evidence has shown that public support for compensation and pensions for injured personnel fluctuates according to times of government austerity such as during the Great

Depression [32], with some relevance to ongoing conditions of social austerity within the UK. Support during transition may also be affected, especially among employers opting into schemes encouraging employment of those within the ex-service community if they do not feel candidates meet their own definition of a veteran.

Comparisons of conceptualisations of ‘veteran’ between members of the British the public and veterans themselves showed some similarity in how the term is interpreted between these two groups, with only half of ex-serving personnel self-identifying as a veteran under the official MOD definition [33]. This suggests that while public definitions deviate considerably from those used in government policy, ex-serving personnel utilise similar cultural understandings to the public to construct their own identity as veterans rather than official definitions. Future research should explore the similarities in conceptualisation between civilians and the ex-serving community given the potential of improving shared understanding of this social identity in aiding successful transition and ongoing support [1, 5], including how this term is created and maintained.

The positive connotations of the dominant ‘hero’ stereotype may be helpful for veterans, with the majority of UK employers viewing hiring veterans as beneficial for their organisation due to the skills and resilience associated with Service [34]. However, negative connotations regarding poor mental health such as post-traumatic stress disorder are also evident that may affect not only employment opportunities but wider transition [1, 15] that may be underpinned by public misunderstandings of the impacts of military service [35]. It is unclear from this current study which of the definitions presented in the BSA was the most acceptable to the public or how definitions may relate to perceptions around eligibility for services or public support. Research conducted at a similar time to the BSA suggested nearly

70% of the general public did not feel veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were receiving appropriate support [36] but such support may be prioritised differently for different groups of veterans. Further research should be conducted to explore the role of the public, ex-serving personnel and the military in creating the identity of 'veteran', how definitions relate to perceived access to support, services and the benefits associated with military service and how this influences transition experiences.

Strengths and limitations

This is the first UK study to examine how the British public defines who is a veteran and how definitions may differ by socio-demographic group. These findings give an initial overview of public understanding of this term. While data collection occurred in 2011 when the UK Armed Forces were involved in prominent combat operations, recent polling of public support for the UK Armed Forces indicates similar levels of support for the military as reported in the 2012 BSA [5], suggesting public opinions regarding the military and veterans may not have altered greatly over time.

These results are subject to limitations. The BSA is a cross-sectional study, reflecting public opinion at one moment in time. While the response rate may seem low, this is typical for the BSA [37]. Although the BSA strives to ensure a representative sample and account for non-response, some sections of society may not have been included and caution should be applied to some findings due to low numbers. The BSA does not survey members of the public in Northern Ireland. Research on public attitudes to the UK Armed Forces suggest less positive opinions in this region, with 33% holding a high or very high opinion [38]. Given the political and social context of this area, definitions of veterans may vary from other parts of the UK and should be explored in future research. Respondents were able to select only one

definition that aligned most closely to how they would define a veteran. As such, these findings relate to the most common veteran identity within public consciousness, rather than which veteran identity is the most accepted and which has meaning in relation to accessing services and support. However, there may be differences in how the public relates to, and conceptualises, the terms ‘veteran’ and ‘ex-serving’. Perceptions were examined according to factors shown in prior research to be associated with public attitudes towards the military, although there may be additional covariates that have not been included. Given recent changes in the social and political climate in the UK, the results may be affected by emerging factors relevant to this area that were not present at the time of data collection, such as voting record in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Future research could address these limitations by the use of vignettes to elucidate a greater sense of meaning around the veteran identity and link this explicitly to access to support as used in research in Northern Ireland [38] should be employed in quantitative studies. Where possible, such studies should examine differences according to common socio-demographics and include factors increasingly relevant within the current social and political climate.

Qualitative methods should also be employed to elucidate public understanding and meanings around the term ‘veteran’ and explore whether ex-serving is a more appropriate term given an increasingly younger and more female veteran population.

Conclusions

Definitions of a military ‘veteran’ among the British public continue to reflect historical representations of combat and deployment but differ from governmental definitions and self-definition among ex-serving personnel. The divergence between official government definitions and those of the public may arise from differences in the purpose of these

definitions in either conceptualising a social identity or outlining eligibility for access to services. Significant differences in definitions were found according to gender, education and connection to the military.

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