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WE (MIGHT) WANT YOU: EXPECTATIONS OF VETERANS' GENERAL COMPETENCE AND LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This experimental study tested competency expectations and perceptions of leadership ability for United States military veterans compared to non-veterans. Military veterans in the United States are recruited into MBA and leadership programs but may face additional challenges seeking employment. Individuals may not expect veterans to perform better in work situations than others but may view their military service as linked to leadership ability. Surprisingly, results show significantly lower influence over participants for veterans on a cognitive ability task. As predicted, veterans' influence increased significantly when instructions tied performance to leadership ability.

INTRODUCTION

Under half a percent of the U.S. population serves in the active-duty military and about eight percent of the civilian non-institutionalized population over the age of 18 are veterans (BLS, 2018). Consequently, most Americans have few opportunities to work with or encounter veterans. This often allows media portrayals or anecdotes to shape general expectations of veterans' competencies, potentially influencing hiring decisions.

While historically higher veteran unemployment rates have recently begun to decline and align with non-veteran rates (BLS, 2018), only 2 in 10 companies report having recruiting programs specifically targeting veterans (Maurer, 2015). Those that do, generally seek leadership experience (e.g., Rouen, 2011; Zlomek, 2012). This presents a paradox: While some employers may resist hiring military veterans (Kleykamp, 2009), others target veterans principally for leadership positions or leadership development programs. This study uses an experimental

design to examine the effects of veteran status on perceptions of general competence and leadership competencies.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Recent research demonstrates that expectation states can be a strong indicator of bias in the selection and firing process (Lynn, Simpson, Walker, & Peterson, 2016). Preferences for job candidates in audit studies indicate these expectations affect hiring decisions (Pager, 2007). Veterans face many challenges during their transition from military service to the civilian workforce, but public perceptions of veterans and military service may benefit veterans seeking leadership tracks or responsibilities (Rouen, 2011; Zlomek, 2012). Still, these perceptions may not help veterans seeking positions not typically associated with leadership (e.g., entry-level positions), where expectations may focus more on the veteran's general competence.

Status Characteristics Theory

Status characteristics theory (SCT) explains how expectations of general competence form and can affect the perceived value of job applicants (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). These expectations form based on salient attributes that have at least two states, which differentiate group members when at least one state is more valued in that culture than the other(s). Attributes such as age group, gender, race, occupation, and income act as status characteristics.

Scope conditions of SCT specify group members must be collectively and task oriented—and task success or failure is clearly defined. Group members with more highly valued status characteristics are often advantaged in group interactions, given more opportunities to contribute, receive higher performance appraisals, and have greater influence (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). The extent to which being a military veteran acts as a status characteristic is previously untested in status characteristic theory's standardized experimental setting.

Civilian employers often have difficulty understanding how military service applies to specific civilian job duties, and may question veterans' general competency (Irving, 2015). A myriad of other harmful myths surrounding veterans may also contribute to lower expectations of their intellectual agility, general social abilities, or even emotional stability (Manner, Blazek, Harris, & Kabins, 2017). Thus, we expect veterans to have less influence over group participants than non-veterans when working on a contrast sensitivity task related to general competence.

> *Hypotheses 1: On a standard task not tied to leadership ability, military veterans will be no more influential than non-veterans.*

Still, there are some possible exceptions to the generally negative sentiments surrounding veterans' competence. Businesses and leadership programs are paying attention to the way the military trains leaders by identifying how their strategies can be useful to civilian organizations (Loughlin & Arnold, 2007; Hedlund, Forsythe, Horvath, Williams, Snook, & Sternberg, 2003). CEO's with prior military service perform better than those without during difficult times (Benmelech & Frydman, 2010), suggesting veteran status may act as an indicator of leadership competencies. Based on this perception, people may hold positive performance expectations for veterans when considering their competence, or suitability, for leadership roles.

Hypothesis 2: Tying the group task to leadership will benefit the net influence of veterans relative to non-veterans.

METHOD

Participants were 160 undergraduate students, aged 18-25, recruited from large introductory classrooms in varying fields of study at a large state university. This study followed the standard setting form status research (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). Participants interacted with fictitious partners, whom they believed were real, on a computer-based task allowing participants opportunities to be influenced by, or resist, their partner's decisions. Using a 2 x 2 factorial design, we varied the level of the partner's military service (veteran or non-veteran) and the level of instructions (whether leadership ability was or was not associated with success on the group's task), with about 40 participants per condition. Data from an additional 11 participants were excluded for saying that they did not try to do their best on the group task [1].

Upon arriving for the study, participants were seated alone in a room with a computer terminal, gave informed consent, and then were asked to complete a form that was described by Research Assistants as required by the university for research involving human subjects. The form asked the participant's age, gender, citizenship status, and if she or he had been convicted of a felony, was eligible for legal employment in the United States, and was a veteran of the United States military. After participants completed the form, Research Assistants started the computer instructions and left the room.

Participants were told their partner either was or was not a veteran, and the task they would be working on together was either associated with leadership ability or was associated with no specific abilities. In 20 critical trials, participants made decisions, saw their partner's decision, and then choose whether to stay with their original answer or to change their answer. Influence was operationalized as changing ones decision to match their partner's.
Instructions informed participants that we were interested in determining factors that affect how people perform on tasks, and that as part of the study they would complete two "contrast sensitivity" tasks. The first task they would complete alone, the second with a partner in another room.

The contrast sensitivity task we employed is common in research in status characteristics theory. It involves participants looking at two rectangles shaded black and white and attempting to determine which rectangle has a greater shaded area. In reality, each rectangle is roughly half black and half white. We also used standard instructions for contrast sensitivity ability. All participants read the following:

> "Contrast sensitivity ability is a perceptual ability which is not necessarily related to specialized skills an individual might possess, such as mathematical or artistic ability. That is, it is entirely possible that a person might be a very skilled artist, but not have very much Contrast Sensitivity ability. This means that individuals who do poorly in art or math may in fact be quite accurate in making Contrast Sensitivity judgments. At the present time, social scientists are not sure what the origins of Contrast Sensitivity are. This is one reason why we are conducting

today's study. We are interested in learning more about Contrast Sensitivity Ability."

Additionally, participants in the conditions in which the group task was tied to leadership ability read the following instructions:

> "Although math and verbal abilities are unrelated to Contrast Sensitivity ability, extensive research has found a link between leadership ability and Contrast Sensitivity ability. People who are effective leaders are also high in Contrast Sensitivity ability. We do not understand why this is the case, but it is supported again and again in studies of Contrast Sensitivity. Effective leaders do better on Contrast Sensitivity tasks than do people who are ineffective leaders.
>
> Researchers find this relationship between leadership and Contrast Sensitivity across different types of leadership styles and personalities; there seems to be something that produces good leaders that also predicts performance on Contrast Sensitivity. This finding remains a puzzle to be resolved in future research on Contrast Sensitivity."

Aside from participants in the leadership conditions reading these two paragraphs, instructions to participants across conditions were identical.

After participants read instructions describing Contrast Sensitivity, they then completed a first task working alone. They then moved to instructions for the group task in which they believed they worked with a partner in another room. Instructions informed participants that even when people work remotely in groups over computer networks, they usually know a little bit about each other. For this reason, instructions said, Research Assistants would share with participants and their partners the information forms they completed at the beginning of the study. A Research Assistant then entered the participant's room with a copy of the information form supposedly filled out at the beginning of the study by the partner. Participants learned that the partner was between 18 and 25 years old, a male, a US citizen, and had not been convicted of a felony. Half of participants learned that the partner was not a veteran of the US military, half that the partner was a veteran.

Participants then began the group task. For each of 25 trials, participants first guessed which of two rectangles had a greater shaded area. They then saw what their partners guessed. Then, participants made a final guess. Computers were programmed so that participants and partners disagreed on their initial guesses in 20 of the 25 trials. Thus, in 20 trials, participants had the opportunity to switch to answers provided by the partner (and thus be influenced) or remain with their initial answers (and thus resist the influence of the partner). After the participants completed the task, the computer program asked them a number of questions about their partners and the group task. The participants were then debriefed and paid.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays mean influence scores by condition and results of significance tests. We measured influence over 20 opportunities participants had to change their answers to correspond

to their partner's answers. When participants believed their partner was a non-veteran and the task was not associated with any special abilities, on average, participants switched to match their partners' answers 9.05 (*SD* = 3.12) out of 20 times, staying with their original answers 54.75 percent of the time. When participants believed their partner was a veteran and the task was not associated with any special abilities, on average, participants switched to match their partners' answer only 7.63 (*SD* = 2.61) times, staying with their answers 61.85 percent of the time ($t = 2.22$, two-tailed $p = .030$). Regarding Hypothesis 1, veterans had significantly less influence than non-veterans suggesting they may be at a disadvantage when compared to non-veterans on generalized tasks.

Table 1.

Mean Influence Differences and Results of t-tests.

Condition	*(N)*	Partner	Task	Influence	***(SD)***	***p(s)***	***t***	***p-value***
1	(40)	Non-veteran	General	9.05	(3.12)	.5475		
2	(40)	Veteran	General	7.63	(2.61)	.6185		
Influence in Condition 1 > than Influence in Condition 2							2.22	.030*
3	(42)	Non-veteran	Leadership	8.90	(2.96)	.5550		
Influence in Condition 1 > Influence in Condition 3							0.216	.829
4	(38)	Veteran	Leadership	9.11	(2.60)	.5445		
Influence in Condition 4 > Influence in Condition 3							.320	.749
Influence in Condition 4 > Influence in Condition 2							2.510	.014*

We made no predictions about directions of influence differences between conditions, and so all *p*-values are two-tailed.

*= significant at *p* greater than .05

We predicted veterans would be more influential, relative to non-veterans, when participants believed the group task was related to leadership ability (Hypothesis 2). When instructions characterized it as a leadership-related task, on average, participants switched to match non-veteran partners 8.90 (*SD* = 2.96) times, not significantly different than non-veterans' 9.05 mean influence with general instructions ($t = .216$, two-tailed $p = .829$). When instructions described it as a leadership-related task, on average, participants switched to match veterans 9.11 (*SD* = 2.60)

times, significantly higher than the 7.63 times participants switched to match veterans when instructions described it as a general task ($t = 2.510$, two-tailed $p = .014$).

In part one of the study we learned veteran status operated as a disadvantaging status characteristic when working on a generalized task, not associated with special ability. In the second part, we found associating this task with leadership removed the status disadvantage of veterans, partially supporting our second hypothesis. Veterans did increase in perceived competence on tasks tied to leadership, but only so much that their veteran status was no longer a disadvantage. Participants' gender, age, and race did not significantly affect their partners' influence in this study (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Analysis of Variance for Effects of Participant Gender, Participant Age, Participant Race, Veteran Status of Partner, and Type of Instructions on Partner Influence.

Source of variation	df	MS	F	P alpha
Participant gender	1	16.05	2.12	.147
Participant age	1	.492	.065	.799
Participant race	1	.400	.053	.818
Partner veteran status	1	33.65	4.45	.037*
Task instructions	1	13.43	1.78	.185
Partner vet status x task instructions	1	27.51	3.64	.029*

The interaction between partner status and type of instructions represents a test of Hypotheses 2, and we thus report a one-tailed probably value for the interaction. All other *p*-values are two-tailed.

*= significant at *p* greater than .05

CONCLUSION

Military veterans were disadvantaged, with less influence than their non-veteran peers, in group tasks focused on general ability. Conversely, veterans had relatively more influence in task groups focused on a generalized task tied to leadership ability. In our sample, veterans appeared to be viewed as less generally competent than non-veterans. At the same time, veterans benefitted significantly from tying the group task to leadership, helping explain why veterans are sought after for leadership positions. Taken together, these results provide insight into underlying

mechanisms affecting employment decisions and could suggest employers linking veteran status with leadership ability compensate for generally lower expectations of competence. These results, however, should be interpreted with caution. Our sample was comprised of 18- to 25-year-old students at one university, and the result may be restricted to college students, young adults, or the campus at which we collected data. Clearly more research is necessary before concluding veterans are generally accorded lower expectations for performance.

Further research that builds on these results would be valuable on several fronts. Efforts to replicate our finding on general competency attached to military veterans would give increased confidence in the result. Additionally, research using other methods might examine factors that exacerbate or mitigate against the finding that individuals appear to attach leadership ability to veterans. Further investigation into this area would also be valuable in disentangling the complex relationship between status and leadership as applied to veterans. In society, we put high status people in leadership positions. In the case of veterans, however, it appears we may have relatively low status persons accorded high leadership expectations.

Finally, from a practical standpoint, our results show veterans would likely do well in highlighting leadership ability when seeking employment. Not only might they activate expectations that advantage veterans on leadership-related tasks, but it might help overcome general expectations that disadvantage veterans in expectations for general competence.

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ENDNOTES

1. We randomly assigned each participant to one of the four experimental conditions. When a condition reached 40 participants, we began assigning participants to remaining conditions, continuing this process until the study was complete. When beginning analyses, we realized that two participants had been classified in our count as being in a different condition than they in fact were, and we thus did not have precisely 40 participants in each condition.
2. We do not include analyses of these questionnaire items. Analyses are available from the authors.

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