

Stereotyping veterans as heroes may limit their future careers

January 30 2023



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While much of the American public venerates people who enlist in the military, constantly referring to all veterans as "heroes" may direct them into lower-paying careers associated with selflessness, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"We know that [veterans](#) face issues with unemployment and underemployment, but we also know that the public holds overwhelmingly positive views of veterans as a group. The public's views of veterans are so positive that the entire group is often given the hero label," said lead author Matthew Stanley, Ph.D., a post-doctoral research associate at Duke University. "We were motivated to better understand how it could be that veterans face these serious problems concerning unemployment and underemployment in spite of the public's overwhelmingly positive perceptions."

The study was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Across 11 experiments comprising 6,500 participants, researchers examined why veterans experience lower rates of employment and earnings than their non-[veteran](#) counterparts despite the persistent positive stereotype that veterans are heroes.

In one experiment, researchers had 149 participants rank common careers in the U.S. based on how selfish they believed the typical employee in that career to be, in order to create a list of the five careers perceived to be the most and least selfish. A second set of 311 participants was asked to rate each of those careers by how well they would suit a U.S. military veteran transitioning into the civilian workforce.

The researchers found that participants were more likely to say that careers ranked low in selfishness, such as firefighter or public school teacher, would be more appealing, a better cultural fit and better suited to a veteran's skills than careers ranked high in selfishness, such as real estate agent or private banker.

Another experiment examined whether people would still think veterans were better suited for selfless careers if they thought that someone enlisted in the military for a reason other than serving others (e.g., to acquire technical skills). The researchers introduced 407 online participants to a fictional U.S. military veteran named Peter Miller, who received formal training in information technology while serving in the military and was transitioning to a career in the civilian workforce. The participants were told Miller was applying for IT jobs with similar starting salaries at an organization designated as self-focused by participants in a pre-trial (Goldman Sachs) and an organization designated as selfless (Habitat for Humanity).

The participants who were told that Miller joined the military specifically to receive training in IT were less likely to consider Miller a hero and were more likely to believe that Miller would be a better fit for the job at Goldman Sachs than Habitat for Humanity compared with participants who were not given a reason why Miller enlisted.

"We typically don't think that describing groups in such extremely positive terms (as heroes) could actually have negative effects on [group members](#)," Stanley said. "But in the case of veterans, people see them as a better fit at jobs, roles and organizations that they associate with selflessness, which tend to be lower paying."

According to Stanley, the more "heroic" the participants believe veterans to be, the more likely they are to think that veterans would be willing to make a career out of serving others at the expense of other needs or

desires such as financial security or providing for their family.

A follow-up experiment found that the positive stereotypes about veterans and heroism could also be applied to other careers people perceive to be heroic, including firefighters and nurses. The researchers randomly assigned 1,245 participants to one of six groups often stylized as heroes by the American public: firefighters, paramedics, [elementary school teachers](#), nurses, physicians or [social workers](#). The participants were told that some members of the group were to receive a \$5,000 bonus that could be split into a personal vacation fund and a fund for a local charity. The participants were also told that the employer would match any donations made to charity, then asked to determine how much the group member would want to give to charity and how much they would keep for their vacation.

For firefighters, elementary school teachers, nurses, physicians and social workers, the researchers found a significant positive relationship between how heroic participants believed a group member to be and how much money they believed that group member would choose to give to charity out of their bonus. This suggests that people who are perceived as heroic are expected to sacrifice more for others than those who are not.

This persistent belief that heroes should be self-sacrificing may funnel veterans into lower-paying, service-oriented careers rather than careers that fit their own needs and experiences, Stanley said.

"There are lots of reasons why Americans enlist in the military, and we should not assume that veterans want to make a [career](#) out of serving others, especially at the expense of other needs and desires," he said. "By funneling veterans into specific jobs, organizations, and careers associated with selflessness, we may be unfairly limiting their agency and limiting their options."

More information: Matthew Stanley et al, Heroization and Ironic Funneling Effects, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023).
[DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000336](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000336)

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Stereotyping veterans as heroes may limit their future careers (2023, January 30)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2023-01-stereotyping-veterans-heroes-limit-future.html>

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