

## More than White, Heterosexual Men: Intersectionality as a Framework for Understanding the Identity of Student Veterans

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As a Black, female veteran who was medically discharged from military service, I advocate for the use of intersectionality within student veteran literature. Through this framework, the cultural complexities amongst student veterans can be recognized and embraced. Additionally, this framework gives power to those who have been silenced in the current body of literature on student veterans. Understanding how intersections at the microlevel (i.e., individual experience) connect to interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro social-structural level will provide a more accurate depiction of the identities and characteristics of student veterans. In this essay, I provide an overview of intersectionality, discuss the connection between intersectionality and identity studies, and conclude with a discussion of the potential benefits of intersectionality for student veteran programming, research, and policy.

### INTRODUCTION

I have followed the resurgence of scholarly interest in student veterans since the Post 9/11 GI Bill was announced in 2008. Many higher education institutions have sponsored symposia, and numerous articles have been published about general characteristics, creating services, transition and engagement, and gendered perspectives. Although these efforts have sometimes focused on differences between active duty and guard/reserve or gender, I have yet to see full consideration given to the complexity of this student population.

The U.S. Armed Forces, like higher education, is a microcosm of American society and thus reflects the diversity of society. People from all states (and sometimes other countries), races, cultures, and religious backgrounds can be found within both organizations. Consequently, the diversity in both organizations is not something that has happened haphazardly; both systems have been intentional in their efforts to increase diversity (Sagalyn, 2011; S. Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). Similarly, both systems have started to achieve greater diversity in the lower-levels of the organizations. However, higher up the administrative chain, there is still a lag in diverse leadership reflective of the lower-levels (Sagalyn, 2011). As such, the experiences of student veterans have been shaped, and continue to be shaped, by organizations that identify the dominant, Eurocentric view as normative.

The continued privileging of this dominant view acts as a catalyst for my advocacy of intersectionality in the academic discourse surrounding the experiences of student veterans. Intersectionality provides scholars with an interpretive and analytical framework for engaging the multiple social identities found within this student population. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of student veterans can be produced by exploring the relationship between microlevels (i.e., personal experience) and macrolevels (i.e., systems of privilege and oppression).

I write this article as a Black, female veteran who has felt silenced by many of the publications describing the experiences of student veterans. After serving on active duty and being medically discharged from service in 2006, I became involved in developing and evaluating programs and services for student veterans, and in researching this student population. Although I consider myself to be a qualitative researcher, I consider intersectionality to be useful in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Additionally, as a student affairs scholar-practitioner, I believe research should be used to promote social change within the academy and society at large. I am writing this article because conversations about veterans have continued long enough without full consideration being given to the cultural complexity of this student population. Following an overview of intersectionality, I discuss the connection between intersectionality and identity studies, and conclude with a discussion of the potential benefits of intersectionality for student veteran programming, research, and policy.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY**

Scholars across multiple disciplines have begun using an intersectionality framework to explore the complexities of lived experiences (e.g., Fotopoulou, 2012; Linder, 2011; Nash, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). With this expansion, there has also been an emergence of different conceptualizations of the framework, “including different terms/phrases [and] interlocking systems” (Brueck & Grant, 2011, p. 25). As a result, intersectionality is evolving and scholars use a wide array of approaches when integrating it into their work (Dhamoon, 2011). However, central to most discussions of intersectionality is its focus on the intersecting identities of people from historically oppressed and marginalized groups. Because people from multiple historically oppressed and marginalized populations are its starting point, intersectionality examines the experiences of these populations in their own context and from their vantage point. For the purposes of this essay, I am defining intersectionality as a framework “to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine to explicate the various inequalities that exist in society” (Knudsen, 2006, p. 61).

Scholars, who seek to examine the interactions between socially and culturally constructed categories (e.g., race, gender), also use intersectionality to better understand how the

interlocking of microlevel social locations and macrolevel sociostructural systems result in inequality (Brueck & Grant, 2011; S. Jones et al., 2012). Social location refers to one's group memberships (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion) because of their place in society and history (Macionis, 2006). This framework asserts that systems of oppression result from the interrelatedness of one's social locations. In the literature reviewed for this article, there were typically three or four characteristics used to describe how intersectionality has been used in researching various groups or systems. I have selected the three most relevant to discussions about the cultural complexity of student veterans: (a) intersecting power relations shape individual and group based social identities; (b) social identities are not independent, but multiple and intersecting; and, (c) social identities at the microlevel may intersect with macrolevel structural factors (e.g., sexism) to produce disparate educational outcomes and experiences (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2012; Ferguson, 2006; Grant & Zwier, 2011).

### **SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS OF MILITARY SERVICE**

Before fully discussing how intersectionality can be used with the student veteran population, I first need to provide a description of the military's cultural context. The military does not differ from the civilian world in its marginalization of particular groups (e.g., women), but it does institutionalize and amplify the socially prevalent attitudes and stereotypes (Smith, 2012). The promise of manhood through military service and combat remains a critical symbolic incentive. Consequently, servicemembers who do not pursue this incentive symbolically embody a contradiction for the military as an institution, as well as for how people think about soldiering (i.e., service). Although the military is composed of diverse cultural groups, the dominant culture is the product of masculine, Eurocentric philosophies and values. Consequently, individuals from non-dominant groups who enter the military are more visible as *the other* due to their uniqueness, and more likely to be stereotyped within the military if they choose not to conform (Kovitz, 2003).

An illustration of this *otherness* is the perception of soldiering as opposite to female and femininity (Cohn, 2000). The stereotypes of femininity are associated with mothering, weakness, passivity, and submission. In contrast, the stereotypes of masculinity are associated with physical strength, assertiveness, and agency (Baechtold & DeSewal, 2009; Kovitz, 2003). Femininity within the military is highly feared because neither individual servicemembers, nor the military can afford to be perceived as weak by their enemies (Cohn, 2000; Kovitz, 2003). Females that exhibit too many feminine characteristics are treated differently (e.g., shown lower levels of respect) and considered inferior (e.g., incompetent) servicemembers by their subordinates and superiors (Baechtold & DeSewal, 2009; Smith, 2012). Consequently, men displaying effeminate characteristics may be harassed and considered inferior by both male and female servicemembers (Cohn, 2000). In the following paragraphs, I discuss some of the other military-specific contexts influencing the self-perception and experiences of student veterans. I start with an overview of cultural schemas and then move into discussions of identity.

#### **Cultural Schemas**

According to Ferguson (2006), "cultural meaning systems are structured in cultural schemas, which define how the world works, the status of people in it, as well as the status of the individual relative to others" (p. 11). These systems influence how group members will treat

others in the group and individuals perceived to be outside of the group. Depending on the level of salience and the perception of others within similar social groups, the individual may perceive someone as an *insider* or *outsider*. For example, the military consists of five branches of service: Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy and Coast Guard. However, each branch has its own cultural schema. Someone from the Air Force may perceive a member of the Coast Guard as being too different and therefore outside the military group identity.

Another possibility especially relevant for discussions in higher education is the insider or outsider status of servicemembers being labeled as veteran. Someone who served three deployments may not recognize the veteran status of someone with no deployments; the individual with no deployments may also not consider themselves as a veteran. Although the term veteran has been defined as an individual who previously served in the military during a time of war and received an honorable discharge from active duty service (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2007), all separated servicemembers may not be so inclusive of who they place in this category. This does not mean the individual with no combat experience is outside of the military group identity, just that they may be considered an outsider regarding the veteran group identity.

Despite the many debates about who is considered under the framework of intersectionality, I do not contend that interlocking social identities are limited to racial minorities and women's discourse (Nash, 2008). Consequently, there are many characteristics, such as religion, socioeconomic status, mental health, disability, or sexual orientation historically linked to exclusion or discrimination. Any of these social constructs may influence one's experience of the military. Additionally, one's experience as a veteran may have an adverse or positive influence on the transition from military to college. However, I have reviewed no articles describing how an intersection of social identities (e.g., Black bisexual male veteran) might influence the experience of transition to college and subsequent educational outcome. Acknowledging the existence of multiple intersecting identities is an initial step to understanding the complexities of identity and understanding how the enculturation experiences of historically oppressed groups within the military may affect the educational outcomes of student veterans.

### **Marginalized Veteran Identities**

Belonging and togetherness are important considerations when understanding one's place in society (Choo & Ferree, 2010; S. Jones et al., 2012). Therefore, social categories can help create common language around discussions of identity. These social categories often interlock in multiple ways to contribute to the individual's social identities. Membership in privileged *and* marginalized groups (e.g., White female veteran) requires a negotiation of privilege and oppression simultaneously. Membership in multiple marginalized groups (e.g., Black lesbian veteran) requires awareness and acceptance of membership. With both groups, privileged and marginalized, and multiple marginalized, movement toward self-defined healthy social identity status involves exploring and resolving complex psychological and sociocultural tasks (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Researchers have often explored social constructs separately, rather than considering how individuals and groups identify with multiple social identities (Bowleg, 2012; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dhamoon, 2011; Fotopoulou, 2012). As previously stated, there have been very few studies exploring the sociocultural factors making up the student veteran. Additionally, even fewer studies explore the sociocultural factors that are more exclusive to this particular group, such as officer verses enlisted or combat veteran verses noncombat veteran (Radford, 2011;

Vacchi, 2012). These considerations are especially important to those wanting to better understand this population.

Awareness and acceptance of group membership varies; some groups are more easily recognizable to the individual and have stronger sociopolitical histories. Higher salience may be accounted for because of the recognizability. Awareness and acceptance of group membership may also be affected by interactions between groups. “Membership in two mutually stigmatizing groups may cause the individual to be more socially isolated than by identifying with either group alone” (Ferguson, 2006, p. 10). Choosing between the groups may be the only way for the individual to cope with the isolation or stigmatization. Sociopolitical factors may also influence group membership salience and the way individuals interpret the experience of being affiliated with a particular group. Membership in one group may buffer the experience of prejudice or discrimination faced by being a member of a non-dominant social group (Hancock, 2007). Therefore, individuals may elect to focus on the social identity offering the fewest negative experiences. For example, a White non-heterosexual male in the military may refuse or distance himself from his sexual orientation because of perceived or actual forms of harassment and prejudice from his peers and/or superiors. He may instead choose to focus on his membership in the military group or his membership in his racial group.

Because of the complexity associated with the individual experience and experiences related to the convergence of identities have been omitted from the literature on military and student veterans, it is appropriate to consider this population through an intersectional lens. For example, a non-heterosexual female’s experience of the military will likely be quite distinct from an African American male’s experience; likewise, an officer’s experience of the military is likely to be distinct from the experience of an enlisted servicemember. Because individuals do identify with multiple groups, while still identifying with the military system, there will be overlap and distinction among experiences. Consequently, all of these experiences are relevant for improved descriptions, increased understanding, and improved programming for this student population. Also, it is especially important to consider how identification with one group over another places individuals in positions of dominant and non-dominant status.

In considering the evolving nature of intersectionality discussions, it is clear there are multiple solutions for incorporating an intersectionality framework. However, Shields (2008) describes a both/and strategy that may provide the best vantage point for connecting this framework to research on student veterans. This strategy involves a comparison of individual identities to one another, while also considering the patterns emerging from the intersection of these identities. Although an intersectionality perspective emphasizes the relationship or connections between identity categories, it is also important to remember the historical placement and cultural context from which the identity categories arise (Shields, 2008).

## **IDENTITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

To increase diversity efforts and create more inclusive learning environments, higher education researchers have often turned to the study of student identity (S. Jones et al., 2012; Grant & Zwier, 2011). One of the first empirical efforts to investigate intersecting social identities in higher education research is found in a study of female college students. The findings from this study highlighted the dynamic process of identity development and resulted in the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (S. Jones et al., 2012). Although this work on multiple social identities began to explore the intersecting nature of identities, the emphasis was

primarily on self-perceived identities through individual narratives rather than on the connection between social identities and larger social structures.

Ironically, the research on student veterans has not taken this cue and falls short in illustrating how difference and social identities exist among the student veteran population. In looking for veteran studies framed by an intersectional perspective, I was able to find one book chapter and one article discussing a multidimensional approach to understanding student veteran identity (see Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2011; K. Jones, 2013). The chapter presents a model called moving out, moving in, and moving through that identifies four typologies for student veterans: *the ambivalent*, *the skeptic*, *the emerging*, and *the fulfilled civilian* (ASHE, 2011). These typologies are organized as a hierarchy and positions *the fulfilled civilian* as the ideal typology to which *all* student veterans should strive to achieve. Although the chapter does emphasize the importance of various social dimensions, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, no depth of consideration is given to how the intersection of these dimensions inform the higher education experiences of student veterans or how the individual experiences of student veterans intersect with the sociocultural privileges of the higher education system. In the article I found, Kevin Jones (2013) describes the use of phenomenology to explore the transition of three veterans from the military into college. He focuses on the interlocking nature of the participants' servicemember, veteran, and civilian identities. However, he does not discuss these aspects of the participants' identities in relation to their other social locations.

### Identity Salience

When identity is considered from an enculturation perspective (etic/emic), consideration is given to how the person internalizes and makes meaning of the various experiences of their life. Therefore, social identity salience may be influenced by historical and sociocultural context, as well as power and privilege. Salience is also influenced by the individual's awareness of their membership in a particular social group (Bowleg, 2012; Cole, 2009). Members of the same group may have similar experiences but interpret those experiences in different ways leading to different outcomes, depending on their background.

For example, my friend and I separated from the military within two years of each other. We both experienced difficulty with the transition to higher education. However, I acknowledged the difficulty of the transition, but chose to focus on my studies and cope with the transition by researching the transition process of the student veteran population. She, on the other hand, internalized the difficulty of the transition by identifying it as a perceived weakness on her part, thereby further compounding the stress of the transition. Although we are members of the same *group* (Black female officers), our interpretation of separating from the military is different. I was able to complete my graduate work and she is still working to overcome the adjustment of being a student. To fully understand the different responses to a similar situation, there has to be a deeper exploration of our backgrounds and self-identified social identities.

Unfortunately, there is no simple model or single identity category that completely accounts for how individuals respond to their environment. Therefore, it is especially important to begin the research process by acknowledging the complexity of the participants and moving to capture the complexity through intentional methodological and analytical approaches. Because identities are fluid, our approach, as researchers, to understanding identity has to also be less rigidly constructed. The use of an intersectionality framework creates room for this suggested flexibility.

## CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Equally important to the discussion of intersectionality is a clear identification of potential challenges and benefits to incorporating this framework in current research practices. In particular, engaging multiple social categories and methodological considerations are challenges and common language and inclusiveness are benefits.

### Multiple Social Categories

In determining which social categories to include in a study, the concept of intersectionality in this essay has been presented as transcendental to women of color and is broad enough to include any student veteran who inhabits dimensions of social privilege and oppression simultaneously (e.g., Black heterosexual men). Because social categories are often conflated, there may be risks associated with focusing on intersecting identities. One such risk is the forced placement of individuals into identity categories. Important to this discussion is how some identities are legally imposed rather than selected by the individual (e.g., veteran, race). Therefore, focusing on intersecting identities can erroneously position an individual in a multiply marginalized or privileged and marginalized group, in which the researcher wrongly attributes interlocking patterns to a social category. By attending to the potential pitfalls of identity studies, scholars can begin to place identity discourse within appropriate sociocultural contexts instead of reducing identity to just recognizable categories (Dhamoon, 2011).

In her 2008 work, Nash describes the work of Robert Chang and Jerome McCristal Culp Jr., who question the process of engaging multiple points of intersection. In their work, Chang and Culp describe three approaches to understanding the complexity of identity and the interrelatedness of microlevel experiences and macrolevel structures of privilege and oppression: *anti-categorical complexity*, *intra-categorical complexity*, and *inter-categorical complexity* (as cited in Nash, 2008). Anti-categorical complexity deconstructs social categories and emphasizes how the process of categorizing lived experience is exclusionary. Intra-categorical complexity considers the vantage point of multiply marginalized individuals to emphasize the problems with categorization. Inter-categorical complexity starts with the “relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups...and takes those relationships as the center of the analysis” (Chang & Culp, as cited in Nash, 2008, p. 8).

### Methodological Considerations

From the existing research using intersectionality, qualitative and mixed methods seem especially appropriate and well suited for delving into the complexity of this approach. However, the incorporation of intersectionality as a framework for interpretations in quantitative research is viable. This would involve situating student veterans within historical and sociocultural circumstances, regardless of the sociocultural factors of the participants in the study (Bowleg, 2012; Hancock, 2007). By contextualizing the data within multiple intersectionalities at microlevels and macrolevels, the resulting studies would more accurately reflect the social realities of the student veteran, while also reflecting the social inequality and structural disparities affecting the higher education experiences.

## SUMMARY OF BENEFITS

Intersectionality stands to increase the understandings of the student veteran population in three noteworthy ways. First, intersectionality provides a unifying language and theoretical framework for scholars already engaged in investigating sociocultural factors to improve the experiences of veterans in higher education. The framework also goes one step further by considering how the interlocking patterns of a veteran's social identities connect with the sociostructural level of higher education institutions. Privileging a focus on structural-level factors rather than an exclusive focus on the individual is likely to facilitate the development of institutional interventions more likely to affect the educational outcomes of this student population. Second, intersectionality prompts scholars to conceptualize disparities and consider the presence of social inequalities in the experiences of the student veteran population at microlevels and macrolevels. Finally, by situating the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups as its vantage point, intersectionality can be used to inform the development of educational messages, interventions, and policies directed at student veterans.

## CONCLUSION

Similar to increases seen with student veteran enrollment after the Montgomery GI Bill was first introduced, higher education institutions will continue to see increases in enrollment as a result of the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Vacchi, 2012). It is evident institutions are making efforts to accommodate this student population by developing programs and services, hosting symposia, and increasing research efforts centered around this student population. However, a more comprehensive stance must be taken to ensure all social identities found among student veterans are visible and well represented in the literature. Intersectionality is critical at this juncture because of the framework's ability to embrace the cultural complexities essential to understanding social inequalities and silenced voices, which in turn, may manifest as educational inequalities. If faculty and administrators are sincere in their efforts to assist this student population in achieving their academic goals, they must begin to reconsider the approaches that have been used to study this student population.



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