
Difference of Receipt of Gratitude: A Comparative Analysis of the Experiences of Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm Veterans

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarship has long understudied the veteran population in the United States in part because civilians generally lack the military exposure to adequately understand the lived experiences of veterans. Few studies analyze how the receipt of gratitude by the U.S. public is internalized by veterans, as well as the ways in which their experiences “returning home” depend on the war in which the veteran served. Namely, Vietnam veterans were ostracized upon returning to the U.S. civilian life they once knew so well. They lacked widespread social acceptance due to negative opinions regarding the Vietnam War. Reintegration into society became challenging and led to internalized schemas among veterans that their military participation was morally wrong. This contrasts with the social support attributed to Operation Desert Storm veterans. Operation Desert Storm (ODS) was a war in which American casualties were at an all-time low for the first time in U.S. war history (Hillen 1993). Civilians’ opinions were less harmful and contributed to the veterans being welcomed back with relatively open arms, though gratitude also is subjective and can be perceived differently by individuals within each cohort.

Gratitude associated with military veterans has become normalized in the U.S. over time. We now have specific rituals and aestheticized scripts celebrating veterans and their services to the country that were not present during the Vietnam War. The political climate surrounding the Vietnam War made the context surrounding the receipt of gratitude different from that of an ODS participant. However, the existing literature does not sufficiently examine how the context of reception affects different cohorts of veterans receiving gratitude differently.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, I seek to describe the subjectiveness of gratitude and how it differs when comparing veterans from two separate wars. Symbolic

interactionism claims that an individual's thought processes modify the interpretation of a symbol. In this case, Vietnam veterans' interpretation of receiving gratitude is unique due to their adverse experiences with stigma following the war. Symbolic interactionism further emphasizes that meaning arises from people's social interactions. The meaning of gratitude is thus perceived differently when comparing Vietnam veterans with ODS veterans. ODS veterans are positively associated with gratitude based on U.S. society's relative appreciation for their military endeavor. Contrarily, Vietnam veterans experienced hostility in society, which led to different interpretations of gratitude by veterans. Vietnam veterans perceive gratitude as a complex process. Therefore, they interlinked gratitude with their negative experiences with the war; thus, they assigned a different meaning of gratitude than ODS veterans who assigned a more positive meaning.

GRATITUDE AS A RITUAL

Gratitude can be interpreted as a state of being thankful or exhibiting appreciation. "Gratitude puts its benefactor into an emotion or state of consciousness resulting from both an awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable, meaningful, and fulfilling" (Bryan, Young, Lucas, and Quist 2018). In contemporary society, there are social mores regarding interacting with veterans, such as expressing our appreciation with "Thank you for your service." Society has emphasized the rhetoric of viewing veterans as "heroes" and/or "victims." For civilians, communicating gratitude is an expected ritual that attests to the "debt" civilians internalize regarding the veterans' service to ensure our safety and freedom (Robillard 2017). This "directed duty" overshines the individual's moral reasoning for introducing gratitude dialogue, perpetuating a lack of understanding of the veteran experience (Robillard 2017).

Robillard (2017) suggests that gratitude is subjective, and its value depends on what meaning is attributed to the population in the question of getting thanked. The two populations being studied clearly differ in how "Thank you for your service" has been conveyed due to varying levels of stigma associated with the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm. Gratitude can also be

perceived differently according to the individual receiving it. As such, when we introduce discourse comparing wars, we also acknowledge nuanced within-group experiences.

INTERNALIZATION OF GRATITUDE

Mcguire, Fogle, Tsai, Southwick, and Pietzak (2021) theorized that dispositional gratitude is directly linked to mental health. The authors felt that military veterans served as an “ideal population” due to their increased likelihood of having experienced various forms of trauma and psychological stress (Mcguire et al. 2021). Their findings support the hypothesis that receipt of gratitude is divergent depending on if the veteran is suffering from “psychiatric morbidities” (Mcguire et al. 2021).

The internalization of trauma also affects the veteran's perception of receiving gratitude. Kashdan Uswatte, Steger, and Julian (2006) address a link between self-esteem and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced by military veterans. The instability of an individual's self-esteem can contribute to personal attachments to external environmental events and internally generated experiences (Kashdan et al. 2006). Suppose the interpretation of gratitude corresponds with the veteran's mental state. In that case, it is safe to assume that a Vietnam veteran would struggle immensely with receipt of gratitude compared to an ODS veteran.

Internalized gratitude can have positive impacts on veterans. Kashdan et al. (2006:1611) find that, “upon examining the benefits of gratitude, it becomes apparent that they counter the emotional and social dysfunctions reported by veteran trauma survivors...The experience of gratitude requires a mindful, present-moment awareness of positive things received, and the causal chain to specific benefactors. Gratitude promotes a desire to engage in altruistic behaviors toward others and feeling grateful on a given day has been shown to build positive social interactions and relationships, counter negative emotions, and lead to greater emotional well-being, less social comparisons with others, and greater frequency of healthy behaviors.”

Straus et al. (2019) explain that veterans with higher levels of social connectedness had lower levels of PTSD and alcohol use disorder (AUD). This finding suggests that Vietnam

veterans likely suffer from higher mental health problems due to the prejudice they endured coming home. “Gratitude may be a key factor in buffering the effects of depression, in particular among those high in ambivalence over emotional expression, as gratitude allows one to reappraise burdensome situations in a better light” (Bryan, Young, Lucas, and Quist 2018). Gratitude was an avoided subject when associated with the Vietnam War.

DIFFERENCE OF TREATMENT

There has been an enormous paradigm shift in about how gratitude is delivered and expected to be expressed by civilians to veterans. Anti-war movements promoted throughout the U.S. spread the narrative that the war was morally wrong. Unfortunately, the soldiers became victims of the hostile political climate surrounding the Vietnam war. “Two other symbolic attitudes were more specifically related to the Vietnam War: attitudes toward ‘the military’ and toward ‘anti-war protesters’” (Brown and Sears 1978). The severe lack of support during reintegrating into society led many veterans to internalize their patriotism as shameful or wrong. “Rather, the more important determinants of attitudes toward the war were symbolic attitudes toward various political symbols associated with the war” (Brown and Sears 1978). Struggling with feelings of guilt, veterans began to feel alienated by society. The unwelcoming they endured catered to their already fragile mental state. “These participants spoke of being overwhelmed with societal betrayals, including hostile treatment and marginalization on homecoming...Being scapegoated for unpopular military and political decisions contributed to feelings of alienation and a growing sense of isolation in their social communities” (McCormack and Joseph 2014). The stigma associated with the war still affected civilian perspectives of veterans and justified the mistreatment and marginalization of Vietnam veterans. “In general, veterans suffered from a longstanding experience of social rejection, abandonment, and even betrayal following the war, including pervasive stigmatizations and perceived “weaknesses, and their own preferences for self-reliance over inattentive social and governmental institutions” (Desai, Harpaz-Rotem, and Rosenheck 2015:229).

The trauma the Vietnam veterans endured extended further than the war:

First, much discussion on the effects of war has dealt simply with the tensions and problems produced by returning from the combat theater to a civilian society in which the war was not popular and in which veterans received little moral support for the sacrifices they had made for their country. (Laufer, Gallops, and Frey-Wouters 1984)

The ostracism and moral questioning directly contributed to the veterans' trauma worsening upon arrival home:

It has been widely noted that the Vietnam War was new to the American experience in at least two important ways. First, Vietnam was not primarily a war of confrontation, but a war of infiltration - a guerrilla war. It was not a war of fronts, but one in which the enemy was fluid, mobile, and, it often seemed, ubiquitous. Second, the scope and intensity of guerrilla activity placed the noncombatant status of all civilians in question. (Laufer, Gallops, and Frey-Wouters 1984).

Laufer et al. (1984) highlight the conspicuous elements of the Vietnam War experience; this improves the development of a reframed perspective of how a veteran is affected by their particular war.

This process has allowed for a new generation of veterans to be celebrated. “After returning to the United States, Vietnam Veterans felt unwelcome joining the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. That is how the Veterans of America got its start” (Anthony 2015). Modern society is still developing a deeper understanding of the wrongs committed against Vietnam veterans, which led to mistreatment and lack of gratitude:

The earlier war/post-war portion of their experience was characterized by feeling unwelcomed when returning home, difficulty connecting with others, thwarted attempts to start a fulfilling post-service life, and finding

themselves having to deal with life on their own in the face of inattentive others or unresponsive social institutions. (Desai et al. 2015)

These veterans came home reflecting on their war experiences and began to internalize the preconceived notions that civilians had associated with them. These actions have ultimately contributed to the already impacting variables experienced by these veterans:

In many cases, Vietnam veterans felt ostracized and stigmatized. Their social world became constricted, and they felt they could not trust or open up to others, profoundly exacerbating the already enormous challenge of being able to build a new life and reintegrate into social relationships. (Desai et al. 2015)

The lack of support for these troops changed how gratitude is received later in life. Rosenthal (1975:89) states, “Furthermore, recent reports indicate that Vietnam-stationed veterans are suffering delayed rage and guilt reactions after their return to civilian life.” Vietnam veterans are starting to unravel many emotions now that frameworks regarding soldiers' participation in war have been reframed. This has affected their internalization of gratitude, seeing as veterans are now “allowed” to feel everything they were once forced to suppress (Rosenthal 1975).

PARADIGM SHIFT OF RECEIVING GRATITUDE

During this new era, perceptions of war in society had been altered. The unfavorable ideas once affiliated with war and soldiers began to subside. Civilians developed a better understanding of the functions and societal benefits of a soldier. The military's positive associations enticed individuals, and being a veteran became a position of admiration and pride. Griffith et al. (1993) suggest, “What needs further examination, however, is (a) how experiencing the military meets the expectations of the enlistee for military service and (b) how experiencing the military should be represented...” That is not to say that this population of veterans endured trauma on multiple fronts. “In addition to individual difference factors, the impact of trauma is influenced by the nature and severity of stressful experiences and the unique

characteristics of adverse circumstances” (Sukter, Uddo, Brailey, and Allain 1993). ODS veterans were met with support and newfound knowledge of veterans’ experiences while at war.

Research efforts to discover the origins of negative sequelae to traumatic events and to identify population subsets who may be at greatest risk for negative impact, or conversely, resilient to adverse psychological residuals, are of crucial significance for increasing stress resistance and stress recovery among military recruits and people more generally. (Sukter, Uddo, Brailey, and Allain 1993)

With the knowledge that positivity contributed to better mental health for veterans, civilians began to understand their responsibility for expressing gratitude. It was easier for civilians to positively associate with the ODS veterans because of the overall outcome of the war versus Vietnam's aftermath:

Once the use of force was initiated, it was used to gain an overwhelming advantage, one so overpowering that it allowed us to sustain the lightest casualty rate in the history of warfare. The architects of Desert Storm had no desire for protracted war. (Hillen 1993)

The historically low casualties and positive outcome of the ODS made the transition to civilian life more manageable. Additional comparisons were made to the outcomes of the Vietnam war. “Like the Korea stalemate before it, the Vietnam War revealed the tragic limitations of a strategy of limited war with no definitive objectives” (Hillen 1993). The blame was put on the soldiers for doing their jobs, while the government that ordered the attack was conveniently left out of the discussion. “A conscious decision was made to fight a war of attrition as opposed to a war of annihilation. The result was a costly and largely wasted effort that left a heavy burden on the professional military” (Hillen 1993). The soldiers were the scapegoats; this influenced the negative perceptions and unwelcoming. ODS veterans thus had organization and support from the people.

The newfound support for the troops triggered Vietnam veterans. They found it upsetting to witness a new generation of

soldiers be praised for fulfilling their duties when they had experienced only harassment:

Operation Desert Storm brought memories of Vietnam abruptly into the consciousness of the Vietnam veteran. The American people were concerned that the war be definitively won, the objectives be clear, and the troops be taken care of and then welcomed back at the conclusion of the war. These elements were missing in Vietnam. (Vellenga and Christenson 1995)

Vietnam veterans struggle to understand the ostracism they endured due to the opinions of the war and how that has shifted significantly to public demonstrations of gratitude now enacted towards veterans. "This process of making the connection between the war and their life struggles engendered anger and resentment, for instance, at not being given the same support that the veterans returning from current wars are receiving" (Desai et al. 2015). The domestic controversy surrounding the war and the lack of support for soldiers returning home was something only Vietnam veterans experienced. (Vellenga and Christenson 1995).

The shame that the Vietnam veterans internalized was not something that widely occurred for the ODS veterans:

A sense of shame was understood by these veterans in two very different ways... The second type related to being a part of such an unpopular endeavor and the response of the American public to the war. They alienated themselves so as not to be singled out as 'baby killers or one of those Vietnam bums,' as one veteran put it (Vellenga and Christenson 1995:8).

The difference in receipt of gratitude reflects the change of perspective regarding soldiers:

Because the Vietnam War was perceived so negatively by most people, an inevitable result for these veterans was an unavoidable isolation. The experience was too critical to shut out, and too unpopular to share, so a natural consequence for these subjects was to isolate themselves (Vellenga and Christenson 1995)

If Vietnam veterans are affected by higher rates of self-isolation and shame, we can assume their internalization of “Thank you for your service” to be different from that of an ODS veterans.

Existing literature acknowledges that gratitude is beneficial for veterans and their self-esteem. What the literature lacks is a lens comparing two different wars and taking into consideration how society has played a role in the internalized schemas of two separate veteran populations. One population of veterans experienced positivity and support, while the other experienced negativity and a sense of othering. With this in mind, we must address that gratitude is perceived differently due to each unique situation. In this study, I seek to fill the void in the literature and theorize the connections between treatment received and how that has contributed to the difference in their receipt of gratitude.

Through analyzing veterans’ experiences returning home, I answer the question: How do veterans’ experiences of receiving gratitude differ by the type of war in which they served? Through the utilization of symbolic interactionism, I examine how the process of the receipt of gratitude is different depending on the meaning ascribed by the individual receiving it. When veterans have had negative interactions in society due to their military participation in a specific war, their perception of gratitude is altered. Further, when analyzing a separate population who has had positive social interactions and appreciates gratitude, we see that becomes a trigger to the population with uncomfortableness with gratitude. Newly implemented rituals displaying gratitude by civilians to veterans in contemporary society have led to unique perceptions and experiences of gratitude for an older military generation who feels unacknowledged. These new practices marginalize these populations further because gratitude comes after the trauma has been internalized. Thus, gratitude is interpreted differently among Vietnam and ODS veterans.

Through my data collection, I have identified specific trends and recurring themes emerging from the interviews I conducted. I have analyzed previous research and found similarities. Newer generations of veterans have compared themselves and their experiences to veterans from the Vietnam era. They have suggested that their experiences participating in the civilian world were more manageable due to less stigma

associated with their generational cohort. Vietnam veterans were ostracized, and their trauma extended beyond the barriers of combat. Their traumas worsened upon their arrival “home.” This has led me to believe that receiving, “Thank you for your service” is internalized differently. How is receiving gratitude interpreted differently depending on the war in which it was served? Is there a difference? Does the stigma of the war have anything to do with this different interpretation?

METHODS

I approach this research study based on the question: How do war veterans’ experiences of receiving gratitude differ by the type of war in which they served? I examine how gratitude is interpreted differently and how social interactions have contributed to differing interpretations. In the current study, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with four self-identified U.S. veterans who were actively involved in combat either in ODS or the Vietnam War. One participant self-identified as a Vietnam war veteran, two self-identified as ODS veterans, and one participant participated in both wars. I developed an interview guide to steer myself through the interviews and ensure I was collecting all the necessary information for analysis. The interviews were semi-structured and I did not follow the same sequence of questioning for all participants, allowing the interviews to be as organic as possible. The interview guide emphasized the concepts of disclosure, stigma, and gratitude. The questions regarding disclosure were used to measure the differences in experiences with civilians. The questions asked about stigma allowed me, as the researcher, to contextualize whether some veterans are affected by societal stigmas at higher rates than other veterans. These led to questions about gratitude, the focus of my study.

I utilized a convenience sampling methodology by advertising this research project in Los Angeles area Elks Lodges with high populations of veterans. Members tend to be active participants at the Department of Veteran Affairs. I gained access by leveraging my own Elks membership. I used a gatekeeper to increase veterans’ trust and participation, making them more accessible. This ensures my ability to expand my research. If participants

perceive me as an ally and trusted friend, they will be more willing to discuss their experiences. At multiple lodges, I announced that I am looking to recruit participants who identify as either a Vietnam or ODS veteran. I briefly described my project, as the comprehension of my project critical to potential participants. I intend for participants to understand the meaning of the project to develop trust that their stories and perspectives will be heard and acknowledged.

To increase validity, I utilized an audit trail by keeping record of all my data collected. I opted for this method due to the sensitive nature of the topic and to ensure that participant messages were accurately communicated. As a researcher, this takes a lot of trial and error, including revisiting the raw data to make accurate comparisons. The second method I used to increase validity is member checking. I wanted participants to know that my intention is not to speak for them, but with them. Member checking allows participants to actively participate in the research process and provide feedback.

The strengths of my methodology lie in the semi-structured interview process giving veterans the opportunity to narrate attitudes about receiving gratitude and what they experienced to have this perspective. The interview style allows for rich discussions and data. Member checking also validates the participant's depiction of their experiences and allows me to collect more data from their reflection. As I adjust research and analysis as trends organically emerge, the use of audit trails ensures no outstanding details go unnoticed.

FINDINGS

Respondents were asked directly whether they chose to disclose their veteran status to others. This question was followed up with probing questions addressing why they feel inclined or deterred from disclosing their veteran status to others. Sage, an ODS veteran stated:

Normally I don't, unless they ask or unless, ughh, normally no. Between military people who are buddies, they talk and sometimes the story gets a little bigger and bigger especially after a couple of beers, but normally no. You know, the ones

who, who really, you know most people are quiet about it, the ones who brag about it really didn't do anything.

Sage is reflecting on his reluctance to disclose to civilians, expressing that he is more comfortable disclosing to other veterans. He goes on to share that there is a lack of understanding by civilians regarding military exposure and experience.

Participants were then asked to examine if there was a conscious awareness of stigma attributed to those with military status. This was followed by asking the respondents to reflect on the possibility of their ever having felt stigmatized due to their military experience. I probed further and asked participants if specific military populations were more stigmatized than others. Most veterans shared that specific groups of veterans have been more stigmatized than others. Sage stated, "Vietnam war it was the nastiest war, it was the longest war...they called it the first televised war...a lot of [Vietnam veterans] still feel stigmatized from going over there." As an ODS veteran, he was very mindful of how other generations of veterans before him experienced massive social stigmatization. Civilian perception of veterans was a trend that emerged organically. Respondents spoke of how perceptions of specific groups of veterans are vastly different depending on the war served. Perception emphasizes the individual experiences of possible ostracization or acceptance by society. It also highlights the symbolic interactionism framework where individuals ascribe meaning to certain things depending on their social interactions. Marty, a veteran of both wars expressed:

Anybody that came back veterans that were in the late 60's early 70's all experienced the same thing. Everybody's got the same type of atmosphere, organizations like the VFW didn't want Vietnam veterans in as part of their organization because we weren't as good as they were, cuz we weren't in a war, we were in a conflict. So, that's the, the assumption that people make. That we weren't in a war. ...I still won't join the VFW even now. Because they said, we don't need you Vietnam veterans, now they do need Vietnam veterans. We're the Vietnam

veterans are the old guys, it's the same thing with Iraq and Afghanistan, so it kind of goes in a circle. It's a little bit different it took a lot of time, but I'm around it all the time.

Treatment was another key finding that surfaced organically. While analyzing the "stigma" section, I decided to differentiate treatment in hopes of highlighting that every generation of military men are treated differently. Respondents spoke of their experiences of how they are perceived and how it is different depending on the war in which they served. Even resources made available to them after their service are different Sage conveys:

I believe yes, I would say so. You know right now the thing to do is when you see them, you know say, 'Welcome home', that's the main thing that most of them never got to hear was 'Welcome home', they never, I mean never got that. They got everything but that. All they wanted to hear was, 'Hey, welcome home', that and 'Thank you for your service'. And they're content with that, that's what they never got, a formal welcome home. They brought them back and kicked them off the bus and so you know, whenever I see them, I say, 'welcome home.'

Formal recognition of service was not allocated equally. I was interested in this particular response and wondered if the participant who served more than one war felt similarly or had corresponding experiences. Mick was asked to reflect upon his experiences arriving home. Mick shared:

It sucked. Flew out of a[n]Airspace base out of the Phillipines...the terminal at LAX was blocked, and it was blocked by people. My girlfriend, this is back when your girlfriend was allowed to pick you up at the airport. I saw her, and I had to physically push people out of my way to get to her.

Gratitude is the center of the research study. Within the context of the interviews, I highlight that gratitude is subjective. I ask participants to discuss why that is. Their experiences with

arriving home are different when compared. These positive or negative experiences gratitude look and feel different depending on the individual. With gratitude being reframed from generation to generation, scripts have been composed about implementing gratitude and making veterans feel appreciated. For Vietnam veterans, they say it is too little, too late. Marty shares:

All the veterans appreciate each other. Like the 29th of March is Vietnam day, you know Vietnam war day. So, it's a recognition of you get kind of recognized but not, cuz, it's over now. So, they were trying to do a drive by at the VA hospital, to be a drive by is like going to the hamburger stand, getting a hamburger, and going home. So, I told them thank you, but no thank you type of situation. I live three miles away from the VA hospital and I wouldn't even go.

Marty implies that gratitude was not given equally to each generation of veterans. Stigmas surrounding the Vietnam conflict overrode the need for gratitude to be given.

DISCUSSION

Gratitude is a subjective emotion that can be interpreted differently depending on who receives it. When comparing the experiences of veterans from the Vietnam conflict and Operation Desert Storm, we must realize that they are qualitatively different. The present literature does not examine how veterans' individual experiences of being welcomed or not welcomed have influenced how they receive recognition. Utilizing a symbolic interactionist framework, I describe the subjectiveness of appreciation and how it differs when comparing soldiers from different conflicts. I highlight personal narratives and experiences to display their altered perceptions of gratitude.

When comparing both populations of veterans, I find that their interactions with civilians were different. ODS veterans' interactions were positive while Vietnam veterans still face echoes of stigmatization due to their participation in an unfavorable war. Through the symbolic interactionist framework, I reflect on these differences and how the meaning of gratitude has become subjective. ODS veterans appreciate gratitude, while Vietnam

veterans face a complex relationship with gratitude. Further, the rituals of gratitude expressed by civilians has unintentionally contributed to the marginalization of one group of veterans in comparison to the other. Having only two comparison groups produces ungeneralizable data.

In future research, I could conduct a survey of veterans from a randomized or representative sample, which would permit me to make generalizations. I could also analyze additional wars, including Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan to expand the sample.

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