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Vulnerable Vets? How Gatekeeping and Stereotypes Shape Access to Student-Veterans in the Qualitative Interview Process

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Abstract

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Keywords

Student-Veterans, Vulnerable Groups, Qualitative Interviews, Research Ethics

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Vulnerable Vets? How Gatekeeping and Stereotypes Shape Access to Student-Veterans in the Qualitative Interview Process

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Based on in-depth interviews we conducted with more than 30 student-veterans enrolled in higher education institutions, in this paper we examine the methodological challenges of collecting qualitative interview data from this population. Situated within the larger interdisciplinary literature of doing qualitative research with vulnerable groups, we explore the implications of student-veterans being labeled as vulnerable by ethics review boards and institutional agents such as veteran's organizations. Based on our research experience, we argue that framing student-veterans as vulnerable can lead to further stereotyping of this group and to difficulties in accessing an already under-researched population. In addition, our inability to hear the voices and experiences of student veterans can impact the kind of services and support that higher educational institutions can provide them. Keywords: Student-Veterans, Vulnerable Groups, Qualitative Interviews, Research Ethics

Student-veterans have been a part of the demographic at colleges and universities in the United States since the 1940's, where initiatives such as the GI Bill allowed them unprecedented access to higher education (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Yet student-veterans remain a largely understudied population (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In view of that, we sought to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with student-veterans to understand the challenges they encounter on college campuses. However, in the process of executing this research project, we saw how negative perceptions of the vulnerability of student-veterans impacted the ways that the Institutional Review Board and institutional agents such as on-campus veteran's organizations, approached our study. In this paper, we analyze the methodological implications of conducting research with vulnerable populations, utilizing student-veterans as a case study.

There are two long-held competing narratives of veterans: one depicts them as heroes who signify power, strength and patriotism, and the other stereotypes them as substance abusers, homeless, prone to aggression and domestic violence, emotionally unstable, jaded from civilian interactions, and most commonly, suffering from a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Hollywood movies such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *American Sniper* (2014), *Man Down* (2015), and *Thank You for your Service* (2017) all share stories of soldiers coming home with a body and mind shattered by the brutality of war and struggling to reintegrate back into civilian life with their families and society. These powerful ideas not only shape the larger societal view of our veteran population but can also influence the institutional imagination of universities that work with this group.

How do these contradictory tropes play out within institutional contexts? How do these narratives get deployed by people and organizations designated to help veterans? Based on our research experience with an ethics review board and an institutional agent (veteran's organization), we found that deficit perceptions of the vulnerability of student-veterans led to

actions taken by these institutions to protect student-veterans from perceived harm in the research process. We argue that these “protective” actions can contribute to stereotyping student-veterans as weak and deficient and impact the agency of student-veterans to make decisions about their own research participation. This negative framing of student-veterans can contribute to their marginalization and silencing in qualitative research. Furthermore, such notions can make it difficult for researchers to access an already under-researched population. In addition, our ability to hear the voices and experiences of student veterans can inform the kind of services and support that higher educational institutions can provide them. For example, research on other vulnerable groups such as undocumented students and those in the LGBT community yields significant findings that have implications for social policy and allocation of resources (Abrego, 2018; Hughto et al., 2018).

In the first part of this paper, we outline the growing interdisciplinary literature and scholarly debates on vulnerability and research ethics, followed by a brief description of our study on student veterans. The second part of this paper examines the ethical concerns raised by the IRB and a veteran’s organization and its impact on the larger research process. In the final section, we revisit debates on vulnerability to advocate for a broader, positive and more inclusive understanding of vulnerability that considers the diversity within vulnerable groups such as student-veterans, and the benefits that vulnerable groups can gain from research.

Vulnerability: A Contested Terrain

Despite extensive scholarly interest, “vulnerability” continues to remain a contested and debated concept within the field of research ethics. The term “vulnerability” takes numerous meanings with no universally accepted definition. In this section, we reconstruct the historical evolution of the concept of vulnerability, highlighting the major debates and multiple viewpoints on this issue.

The foundation of an ethical framework for research with human subjects in the United States goes back to the Belmont report published in 1978. Written within the context of numerous research malpractices that were uncovered in the 1960s and 70s, the report highlighted that all research participants are vulnerable and are in need of protection to some degree. The report describes three central principles for protecting research participants namely, respect for persons (through the inclusion of informed consent), beneficence (research should have a favorable risk/benefit ratio, and justice (all participants should be recruited and enrolled fairly).

The Belmont report led to the establishment of the Common Rule in 1991 also known as the U.S-Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects. Under the Common Rule, informed consent or voluntary agreement is required before recruiting research participants. Second, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) a committee that has formally been established to review research with human subjects, must approve all studies.. Third, special protections should be provided for particularly vulnerable research populations, namely pregnant women, prisoners and children. Since its first appearance in the Belmont report, the concept of vulnerability and vulnerable populations has received widespread attention in the academic literature on research ethics. While there is consensus within the literature that it is important to protect vulnerable research populations, there is considerable disagreement with regard to the interpretation of the concept of vulnerability as well as the practical implications of designating groups as vulnerable.

First, the concept of vulnerability has been criticized for being overly broad (Hurst, 2008; Levine et al., 2004; Luna, 2009; Schroeder & Gefenas, 2009). Scholars note that the current criteria for a group to be recognized as vulnerable are based on the risk of harm and the inability to give informed consent, which they worry can be applied to almost all human

subjects who participate in research. Many argue this expansive and vague application of vulnerability dilutes its meaning and makes it difficult to identify groups that are actually vulnerable and need special consideration. As Schroeder and Gefenas (2009, p. 118) note,

It is difficult to determine exactly when a degree of vulnerability is part of the fragility of the human condition or when it is so pronounced that special protection mechanisms are required. In other words, when are our relative risks or our inability to protect ourselves significant enough to warrant protection?

Another concern raised by scholars that stems from the broad application of vulnerability is it leads to decontextualized stereotyping and labeling of entire groups. Luna (2009) argues that it is too simplistic to assume that all vulnerable groups are the same and advocates for a more dynamic concept of vulnerability. She contends there are “layers of vulnerability,” which implies that not all vulnerable groups are alike and it is problematic to rely on labeling practices to define vulnerable populations. Similarly, Hurst (2008) contends current definitions assume vulnerability is group trait without taking into consideration individual contexts and characteristics. Hurst (2008) argues the focus should shift from group characteristics to specific aspects of the research design and context that can make participants vulnerable. Lahman (2017, p. 21) echoes similar concerns in the context of research with groups identified as vulnerable. She states,

It may be we are again paternalizing, essentializing, stereotyping, or racializing someone by putting them in a vulnerable category perhaps even unknown to them. A question to consider is should a potentially vulnerable person need a federally mandated designated label to receive the respectful treatment they deserve?

Vulnerability is also criticized by scholars who claim the concept often connotes weakness. (Gilson, 2016; Roulstone, Thomas, & Balderston, 2011; Wishart, 2003). Luna (2009, p. 5) argues “Vulnerability is typically associated with victimhood, deprivation, dependency or pathology.” Similarly, Gilson (2013, p. 34) states that “vulnerability is conceived as a negative state, a weakness, and a hindrance; moreover, it is defined in a simplistic and oppositional way that opposes ‘vulnerable’ people to ‘normal people.’” Many contend this interpretation of vulnerability has several unintended consequences. First, it tends to position vulnerability as an individual problem rather than a structural or systemic issue (Luna 2009). Second, it sometimes views vulnerability as a permanent and fixed state people are unable to come out of. (Gilson, 2013; Luna, 2009). Third, it may discourage researchers from including groups who are considered vulnerable from participating in their studies.

In addition, many argue the paternalistic undertones of the concept of vulnerability in research ethics jeopardizes individual autonomy and agency. Have (2016) notes, external groups take on the responsibility of representing and protecting vulnerable groups leading to silencing of their voices and stories in the public sphere. Equally, Luna (2009) maintains the lack of shared power impedes the ability of vulnerable groups to exercise agency and make their own decisions about participating in research. Bradley (2007, p. 341) states,

By controlling the models of research, who gets to speak and how subjects get to represent themselves, IRBs are in a powerful position as part of the institutional structure. In this position they can, and often do, silence the voices of the marginalized and perpetuate an academic political economy and

a traditional top- down research and professional model that quantify and objectify human lives by keeping them nameless, faceless and voiceless.

Overall, scholars (DuBois et al., 2012; Juritzen, Grimen, & Heggen, 2011; Rhodes, 2010) claim that undermining individual autonomy in the name of representing and protecting vulnerable groups is disempowering and cannot be justified.

Others worry (Aberdeen, 2015; Murphy & Dingwall, 2007; Perry, 2011) about the imposition of biomedical definitions of vulnerability on social science research. Scholars claim that current regulations draw on clinical and biomedical research that define vulnerability primarily based on the inability of groups to give informed consent. However, unlike clinical research where consent is obtained in the initial stage of the research process, in qualitative research especially ethnography, obtaining consent is an ongoing process. Murphy and Dingwall (2007, p. 9) state,

Ethnographic consent is a relational and sequential process rather than a contractual agreement and lasts throughout the period of research (Katz and Fox 2004). It is based on trust between researcher and researched and is a matter over which research hosts exercise ongoing judgement.

In addition, scholars like Aberdeen (2015) are concerned that ethics boards across the US maintain a limited understanding of the foundational, ethical principles of qualitative research. Unlike the biomedical model, which primarily attempts to reduce risks to research participants, qualitative researchers focus on benefits of research to vulnerable and marginalized groups such as agency, advocacy, personal growth, community engagement, accessibility and ownership of data, etc.

Finally, scholars (Gombert, Flora, & Carlisle, 2016; Resnik, 2014; Tauri, 2014) are critical about the universal application of western ethical principles on societies, communities and groups with their own ethical and cultural norms. They argue the ethics regarding vulnerable groups are based on western ideas of individualism and autonomy. However, in cross cultural research contexts it is important to recognize that apart from individuals, entire communities are subject to various forms of vulnerabilities (Whiteford & Trotter, 2008).

Reclaiming Vulnerability

More recently, scholars are reconfiguring the concept of vulnerability to underscore the more positive dimensions of vulnerability. According to Martha Fineman (2012, p. 126), vulnerability, “presents opportunities for innovation and growth, creativity, and fulfillment. It makes us reach out to others, form relationships, and build institutions.” Similarly, Butler (2016) argues vulnerability is a powerful tool for resistance and activism that should be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness. By the same token Kelly Oliver (2001) calls for an alternative conceptualization of ethics to emphasize the ways in which we are all vulnerable as human beings. Gilson (2011, 2013) too, challenges the negative definitions that associates vulnerability with weakness and pathology and asserts that vulnerability can lead to mutual responsibility and collectivism. She states vulnerability is not only “a condition that limits us, but also one that can enable us” (2011, p. 310) and acknowledging our own vulnerability can generate empathy for the vulnerability of others. Overall, there is an emerging scholarship critical of theorizing vulnerability from the perspective of victimization. They are reformulating the discourse on vulnerability by embracing its potential to build solidarity, resilience and agency.

Veterans and Vulnerability

The Common Rule designates pregnant women, prisoners and children as categorically vulnerable. Although veterans are not considered a vulnerable group, veterans are classified as a potentially vulnerable population by Veterans Affairs (VA). This is because many VA staffers and managers believe the hierarchical nature of the military—i.e., deferment to superiors and the command to obey orders—as well as the risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) put student veterans at risk. A report by the National Center for Ethics in Health Care of the Veterans Health Administration on behalf of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (2008, p. 9) states,

Under current Federal regulations and VA policy, Institutional Review Boards (IRB) are directed to scrutinize individual protocols to determine whether potential participants may have impaired decision-making capacity, an increased susceptibility to undue influence or coercion, or an increased susceptibility to the risks associated with a particular research study.

However, the report very categorically states there is no evidence to indicate that veterans, particularly those with PTSD “are inherently at higher risk from research participation.” In addition, the report clearly highlights the numerous benefits to research participants, including psychological, and explains why denying veterans with PTSD the opportunity to participate in research is unfair.

Yet, there are scholars like Efthimios Parasidis (2014) who are particularly critical of the omission of military personnel from the list of vulnerable groups and call for the amendment of the Common Rule to categorically include them as a vulnerable population. Parasidis (2014, p. 6) argues,

Given the dynamics of military hierarchy and the legal requirements set forth by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (10 USC 47), there can be no question that military personnel are a class of individuals that is vulnerable to coercion and undue influence. Military command structure, mandatory use of investigational medical products, informed consent waivers, and the problem of mixed agency (i.e., circumstances where a military physician has an obligation to someone other than the patient, such as a commanding officer) are factors that support this characterization.

Overall, Parasidis makes a case for classification of military personnel as a vulnerable group and the provision of added precautions to protect them from unethical research practices.

The Case

Our study focused on how student-veterans navigate higher education. Much of the literature on student-veterans has focused on academic and mental health outcomes and transitions to college (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Other studies have examined institutional policies and their effect on student-veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Vacchi, 2012). Few studies have explored the types of relationships that student-veterans have with faculty and peers on campus. Relationships with faculty and fellow students can either aid or impede how student-veterans navigate the university.

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with student-veterans, in this study we sought to address the following questions: What is the nature of relationships between student-veterans, faculty and non-veteran students? How do student-veterans negotiate these relationships in their everyday lives? In what ways do these relationships support or create challenges for student-veterans in seeking opportunities and resources? In what ways do race, gender and sexuality shape student-veteran experiences on campus? We saw that the findings of this study had larger implications for how universities provide services for student-veterans. First, the findings could assist administrators in developing programs that will help student-veterans adjust and integrate into college campuses. Second, it could help faculty develop best practices for teaching and mentoring student-veterans. Third, it could help educate the general student population about the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of student-veterans.

As we developed this project, we observed that perceptions of the vulnerability of student-veterans shaped how IRB and institutional agents engaged with our study. The IRB thought the research process quite risky for student-veterans, who they seemingly perceived as too weak or emotionally fragile to participate in qualitative interviews. These notions resulted in additional oversight and scrutiny of our project from IRB and institutional agents that worked with student-veterans. These approaches disempower student-veterans as well as other vulnerable groups by limiting their agency to make decisions in the research process and denying them the potential benefits they stand to gain from participating in qualitative interviews. In the following sections, we draw on our own experiences in the field to illustrate how assumptions about this potentially vulnerable group are enacted; and we outline the effects these ideas may have on student-veterans to fully participate in qualitative research.

Framing Vulnerability as Risk

When reviewing our qualitative study on the higher educational experiences of student-veterans, the IRB tended to perceive student-veterans as a vulnerable group and as a result, they focused almost exclusively on the potential risks that veterans might encounter in the research process. IRB has often emphasized risk factors such as emotional harm when assessing the ethics of research projects (Carter, Jordens, McGrath, & Little, 2008). Though our study intended to examine the higher educational experiences of student-veterans, we encountered repeated concerns that respondents could become emotionally upset during the interview process. As scholars have noted, the amount of risk that respondents are exposed to is dependent upon the topic of the interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Our interview questions did not ask about student lives in the military and mainly focused on interactions with faculty and peers, how they perceive their identity as a student-veteran currently and how they experience classroom dialogues if the military arises as a topic of conversation.

Yet, we still continued to encounter questions about the risks for student-veteran participants in this study despite providing a listing of procedures to minimize risk. The focus on risk may speak to an underlying assumption that any study involving student-veterans has an even greater potential for risk, even if the research is not focused on military service. This assumption stereotypes an entire group as being vulnerable without considering the diversity of member's experiences (Hurst, 2008; Levine et al., 2004; Luna, 2009).

Further, we put procedures in place to minimize risk, which included checking in with the respondent numerous times throughout the interview to ensure that they felt able to continue with the process, informing them of their right to discontinue the interview, and/or not answer particular questions both before and during the interview. In qualitative research involving unstructured in-depth interviews, respondents have the power to shape the type of

information that is shared, how it is expressed and if particular subjects are even discussed at all (Corbin & Morse, 2003). While not completely unstructured, our interviews were semi-structured with several broad, open-ended questions which allowed respondents some autonomy in how they answered and the ability to decide what, if any information, they wanted to share. Respondents had agency throughout the interview process and could exercise their rights at any time.

Although we had procedures that informed and allowed respondents to utilize their agency, we encountered concerns from IRB about respondent's access to counseling. As a result, we agreed to provide additional procedures in our research protocol, including a listing of counseling services both on campus and off, consenting to only interview students on campus during the hours that the campus counseling center was open, and agreeing to walk students to the counseling center should they become emotionally triggered during the interview process. As prior studies have noted, IRB may instruct researchers to provide a detailed account of strategies and additional procedures to enact should any issues arise and to assuage apprehension that a study might cause undue emotional and psychological harm to respondents (Corbin & Morse, 2003). There appeared to be an underlying assumption that student-veterans might require intensive and immediate access to counseling post-interview even though this group may actually vary in terms of background and emotional and psychological needs (Vaccaro, 2015; Vacchi, 2012).

Furthermore, we were asked to share our experiences working with vulnerable populations to demonstrate we had the skillsets necessary to conduct this research study. We both have experiences conducting research on diverse groups such as racial/ethnic and religious minorities as well as other marginalized groups. Similar to other qualitative researchers, we built rapport and remained sensitive and empathetic to these community members (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Under the review process for this study, IRB required we provide an explanation of our extensive social science training and research backgrounds to alleviate any concerns that student-veterans might be put at risk due to a lack of strongly equipped researchers.

While there is the potential that respondents may encounter psychological or emotional harm in qualitative interviews, researchers argue the risk is rather minimal in many cases, even when research subjects participate in interviews where sensitive topics are broached (Corbin & Morse, 2003). The risk of emotional upset in qualitative interviews is often no greater for the respondent than if they shared the same information with a friend (Corbin & Morse, 2003). In addition, unlike the dynamic present in many intimate relationships, researchers often serve as non-judgmental, fully engaged and empathetic listeners for respondents during the interview process (Corbin & Morse, 2003). This type of dynamic can help build rapport with respondents and create a comfortable space for them to share their experiences.

However, when it comes to vulnerable groups, ethics review boards continue to primarily focus their attention on the potential risks that research participants might face. Institutional agents who provide researcher access to these groups further echo this concern. They can associate vulnerability with weakness and feel as though they need to protect vulnerable groups from perceived emotional and psychological damage. We will discuss the role of institutional agents in the research process in the following section.

Framing Vulnerability as Weakness

Similar to ethics review boards, institutional agents working with vulnerable groups can view the group's participation in qualitative interviews as potentially harmful. Institutional agents can conflate the group's vulnerability with weakness - emotional fragility

and inability to discuss personal issues without becoming upset (Gilson, 2016; Roulstone, Thomas, & Balderston, 2011; Wishart, 2003). These ideas can contribute to gatekeeper bias where institutional agents undertake actions to protect the group from perceived harm in the research process (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Groger, Mayberry, & Straker, 1999; von Benzon & van Berk, 2017). These actions can limit the access that researchers have towards vulnerable groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Groger et al., 1999; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). While assumptions about weakness and emotional fragility may apply to some members of vulnerable groups, broadly applying these notions to all vulnerable groups can be problematic (Hurst, 2008; Luna, 2009). These generalizations can actually work to limit the participation of vulnerable groups in qualitative interviews, deny them agency in the research process and silence their voices, thus further contributing to the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Dubois et al., 2012; Have, 2016; Juritzen et al., 2011; Luna, 2009; Rhodes, 2010; von Benzon & van Berk, 2017).

We encountered these types of assumptions regarding weakness when interacting with a veteran's support organization (VSO) at a local university campus. We contacted this group in order to learn more about their services and to locate potential interview respondents. As we explained our study to the director and a campus administrator, the director informed us that they felt compelled to protect student-veterans as they were concerned student-veterans could become emotionally triggered in the interview process. Further, the director informed us that the staff were trained to "talk students down" if they became emotionally upset and inquired about the measures that we had in place to alleviate any potential distress that members of this group might encounter. The emotional fragility of student-veterans assumed here may be connected to the stereotype that all student-veterans suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). This generalization does not account for the diversity among student-veterans as many may not have actually served in combat roles or encountered traumatic situations during their service (Arminio, Kudo Grabosky, & Lang, 2015). Further, it assumes all student-veterans will respond in a similar way to the research process. This assumption works to homogenize this diverse group (Vaccaro, 2015). We informed the director that we had the necessary IRB approved protocol in place if such an event occurred and had conducted extensive background research on student-veterans.

The VSO expressed concerns about the study's research methods. These concerns were often rooted in particular deficit assumptions regarding the vulnerability of student-veterans. The VSO director requested to review our entire IRB application and informed us our intended method of collecting one-on-one in-depth interviews might be too personal for student-veterans and suggested focus groups would be more comfortable for this group because it would enable them to be a part of a shared community in the research process. The VSO appeared to hold an underlying assumption that due to their vulnerability, student-veterans are ill equipped to engage in personal reflections about their lives and that they require group membership in order to discuss their experiences.

The director felt participant observation would upset student-veterans as well. One of our undergraduate student researchers went to the VSO to conduct observations and the director told him the VSO was a "safe zone" and that his presence would violate the safety, comfort and privacy of students there. This implies that the presence of a fellow student who is there to learn about the center's resources and observe everyday interactions would disturb student-veterans. While the VSO works to create a space for student-veterans, it formulates generalizations about this group that may actually contribute to creating an exclusive space that alienates student-veterans from the rest of campus and prevents them from making individual decisions about research participation.

Given these assumptions about student-veteran's vulnerability, the VSO scrutinized our interview questions. The director reviewed all of our interview questions, shared them with some student-veteran staff members at the organization unbeknownst to us, and then asked us to eliminate nearly all of our interview questions based on the feedback from the student-veteran workers that they were not comfortable answering such questions. The act of revealing the interview questions to student-veterans beforehand implies that they are so emotionally delicate that they can not engage in impromptu conversations about their own lives and that each question no matter how mundane may make them upset.

Social science research requires the individual consent of human subjects, not the consent of institutional agents who support vulnerable groups. Human subjects have the right to choose to participate in a study and to decide which questions they would like to answer in the interview process. Moreover, in this case, the VSO asked a select group of student-veterans their opinions about our interview questions. We do not know the specific nature of student's feedback, how the questions were presented and if the opinions of the VSO director and others in power were asserted in this conversation. For example, we wondered if the organization took particular interest in constructing the potential narrative to be shared by student-veterans in the interviews, especially because respondents would be asked about their use of resources on campus, including the VSO. This group is also not representative of all student-veterans and the VSO can not speak on behalf of the entire group. The VSO's attempt to intervene in the research process actually works to deny student-veterans the right to choose to answer or not answer particular interview questions thus limiting student-veteran's ability to guide the content of the interview without the oversight of an institutional agent.

Vulnerability and Agency

In the process of emphasizing the potential risks vulnerable groups like student-veterans might encounter in research, IRB and institutional agents can overlook the benefits these respondents might experience from participating in the qualitative research process. For example, participating in interview-based research can often be a cathartic and therapeutic experience for respondents (Alexander, 2010; Carter et al., 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003). It provides respondents, especially those from vulnerable groups a space to process and share their emotions. Student-veterans may not always be afforded the opportunity to express how they feel or have family and friends who they feel comfortable engaging in emotional conversations with. However, the confidential space of a qualitative interview coupled with a researcher who serves as a non-judgmental and understanding listener, can provide student-veterans with a necessary emotional outlet and even serve as a way to process traumatic events (Alexander, 2010; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Wolgemuth et al., 2014). In fact, we interviewed many participants (located primarily through snowball sampling) who elaborated on their experiences in rich detail and we utilized the interview context to deconstruct various myths about veterans within the larger community. In talking about these misconceptions, Jag, an Iraq war-veteran and a sociology major explained,

There is a stigma with PTSD in general because they think that number one if you have PTSD you can't function and number two, is that you are like a ticking time bomb. You can go off and you can actually shoot somebody... The assumption is that we are all suicidal, we all take pills, we are afraid of the dark, we are alcoholics, we drink like f***ing crazy. No we don't do that.

Brian echoed similar sentiments when asked about the perception that student-veterans dislike talking about their military experiences. He notes,

Believe it or not, vets love talking about their enlistment. For some they feel like it's the only interesting thing about them. Some throw it in your face with large amounts of pride or will mention it in passing to elicit a response.

As researchers (Wolgemuth et al., 2014) have documented, the interviews created a space for student-veterans to reveal their personal opinions and share significant experiences. In recalling personal experiences, research participants are able to reflect on their own lives and construct new meanings (Carter et al., 2008; Wolgemuth et al., 2014).

In addition, student-veterans can benefit from their participation in research by sharing their stories as a contribution to larger society (Alexander, 2010; Carter et al., 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Wolgemuth et al., 2014). Research participants from vulnerable groups can gain a sense of satisfaction by knowing that their experiences may help other people like them or to understand the issues that they have encountered. Moreover, respondents can feel empowered because they are providing important information that will allow the researcher to further their study (Wolgemuth et al., 2014). For example, when asked about the interview experience, one of the participants explained,

I hope this (the interview) gives you a little bit of insight on the challenges some of us face that juggle a military and college life.

Similarly, another participant noted,

They (student veterans) like talking about their experience because they can educate people who have never been in the military on what happens.

By placing intense focus on vulnerability and risk, IRB and research ethics boards may be limiting the rights of vulnerable populations to participate in research and denying them the benefits of such participation, including having their voices heard (Luna, 2009). Emphasis on risk to the exclusion of considering research benefits can limit the number and scope of research studies on vulnerable populations, contributing to the further marginalization of these groups. Research on vulnerable populations such as student-veterans is necessary in order to better meet their needs and provide access and opportunities. This is particularly critical for student-veterans as they navigate higher education and seek future professional employment.

Conclusion

In this paper, we demonstrate how ideas about a group's vulnerability can shape the ways that ethics review boards and institutional agents (who have access to these populations) engage with qualitative research studies. Researchers note vulnerability often carries negative connotations- those who are vulnerable are weak, can be easily manipulated and require protection (Gilson, 2013; Luna, 2009). The IRB and the Veteran's Support Organization reflected these notions in their concerns regarding our study of student-veterans. As we navigated the IRB application process, we encountered repeated concerns about the potential for student-veterans to become emotionally triggered during interviews and were asked to incorporate further precautions to lessen this risk. Similarly, we encountered gatekeeper bias from the VSO as they placed our project under extreme vetting, even requesting that we change our IRB approved methods and protocol because they believed that student-veterans could encounter psychological and emotional harm in the research process.

This gatekeeping ultimately limited our access to student-veterans at this organization (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Groger et al., 1999; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; von Benzon & van Berk, 2017).

We argue that perceiving vulnerability through the lens of risk and weakness can have a detrimental impact on student-veteran's participation in qualitative research. By assuming student-veterans are particularly susceptible to harm in qualitative research actually works to homogenize student-veterans, who are a broadly diverse group (Luna, 2009; Vaccaro, 2015; Vacchi, 2012). It can limit the agency of student-veterans to provide informed consent and make decisions about their own participation in qualitative research (Dubois et al., 2012; Have, 2016; Juritzen et al., 2011; Luna, 2009; Rhodes, 2010). This can silence the voices of student-veterans and ultimately marginalize them (Dubois et al., 2012; Have, 2016; Juritzen et al., 2011; Luna, 2009; Rhodes, 2010). Further, social scientists may actually become dissuaded from researching vulnerable groups. This is critical because this can limit the research generated on vulnerable groups, many of whom are likely already understudied.

Moreover, there are numerous benefits for vulnerable groups if they participate in qualitative interviews, including emotional catharsis, empowerment, helping others and contributing to the larger research community (Alexander, 2010; Carter et al., 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Wolgemuth et al., 2014). Student-veterans should be allowed to fully access these benefits through making informed decisions about their research participation.

Ethics review boards should expand their understandings of vulnerability to more fully capture its nuance and complexity in the research process. Ethics review boards can draw on epistemologies that interrogate the positive aspects of vulnerability. For example, while vulnerability can place some people at risk of harm in qualitative research, vulnerability can also provide avenues for reflection, growth, to establish empathy for others and form relationships (Fineman, 2012; Gilson, 2011, 2013). The vast array of backgrounds and experiences within vulnerable groups should also be recognized so as not to homogenize the entire group (Luna, 2009). Moreover, we need to move from conceptualizing vulnerability as a static concept to more fluid in nature, with vulnerability becoming more or less salient throughout the research process depending on aspects of the research design (Hurst, 2008). Finally, ethics review boards should underscore the multiple benefits of participation in qualitative research for vulnerable groups (Alexander, 2010; Carter et al., 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Wolgemuth et al., 2014).

These broader ideas of vulnerability also need to be disseminated to institutional agents who provide researchers access to vulnerable groups. This may help to alleviate some of the gatekeeper bias that researchers encounter that can limit their access to vulnerable groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Groger et al., 1999; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). Researchers can provide institutional agents with information highlighting more empowered conceptions of vulnerable groups to challenge the largely deficit notions about these groups (Fineman, 2012; Gilson, 2011, 2013). Similar to our recommendations to ethics review boards, institutional agents should also consider the intra-group diversity of vulnerable groups in order to avoid sweeping generalizations about the emotional state of potential subjects and their ability to participate in research (Luna, 2009; von Benzon & van Berk, 2017). Researchers may have to include a discussion of this diversity when they describe their projects to institutional agents.

In addition, researchers can inform institutional agents about the process of informed consent. It is important to emphasize that qualitative research requires that respondents provide their individual consent and community/institutional agent consent is not needed. Each individual is afforded the opportunity to make decisions about their own participation in research and has the power to shape the interview by making choices about how/if they engage at any given moment (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Institutional agents should afford

vulnerable groups the right to make their own choices in qualitative research to ensure these agents are not “speaking for” these groups.

While IRB and other institutional agents take actions to provide protections some vulnerable populations might require in the research process, we must also be careful not to obstruct individual’s rights and deny them the benefits of participating in qualitative research. Otherwise, we risk further silencing the voices of already marginalized groups. Vulnerable groups need to be heard, and qualitative in-depth interviews provide an important vehicle for these groups to share their important stories.

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