

Three Generations, Three Wars: African American Veterans

AUTHORS: Helen K. Black, Ph.D.
DATE: 2016
PUBLICATION: *The Gerontologist*, 56(1), 33-41.
PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article
PUBLICATION LINK: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv122>
KEYWORDS: African Americans veterans, suffering

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article emerged from pilot research exploring experiences of war and suffering among African American veterans who served in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Men's experiences as soldiers reflected both racism and the social change that occurred in the United States while they served. *Design and Methods:* We used techniques of narrative elicitation, conducting qualitative, ethnographic interviews with each of five veterans in his home. Interviews focused on unique and shared experiences as an African American man and a soldier. *Results:* Three important themes emerged: (a) Expectations related to War—Although men viewed service to country as an expected part of life, they also expected equal treatment in war, which did not occur; (b) Suffering as an African American—Informants interpreted experiences of suffering in war as related to the lower status of African American servicemen; and (c) Perception of present identity—Each man was honed by the sum of his experiences, including those of combat, racism, and postwar opportunities and obstacles. *Implications:* From 40 to 70 years after the wars were fought, there are few scholarly narrative studies on African American veterans, despite the fact that Korean War Veterans are entering old-old age and few World

War II Veterans are alive. The value of pilot research that offers narratives of unheard voices is significant; larger studies can interview more African American veterans to advance knowledge that might soon be lost."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- A majority of the literature that investigates veterans' experiences of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War lacks an African American elder perspective. Black addresses this gap in the literature, offering the unique experiences of five African American veterans who served in WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Because Korean War veterans are entering old-old age and few World War II Veterans are alive, this significant work documents their experiences.
- Three themes emerged from the study: expectations related to war, suffering experienced as an African American, and perception of present-day identity. Although men interviewed reported negative experiences, particularly racism that engendered suffering, they also perceived service to country aided their growth as men and as activists.
- Experiences of African-American veterans of these wars have been largely ignored or discounted. Thus, the value of research that offers narratives of unheard voices is significant. The men, all born in the first half of the 20th century, bring the suffering of war and racism to life in their first person accounts. This method of qualitative research captures men's complex memories of patriotism and discrimination in war, and future research may continue to elicit the accounts of veterans whose voice remain unheard.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Given the distinctive personality and role of each veteran who served in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, we encourage veterans to document their experiences about military service and their return home. As this article reveals, in sharing accounts of their service, veterans recalled not only the injustice they endured but also their triumph in overcoming obstacles against success. Unfair treatment of African Americans during and after their service, particularly in World War II and the Korean War, filtered into American and foreign consciousness and eventually led to a transformation of the cultural mindset about racism in the US military and in American society. Although African American service members were essential to the U.S. war effort, official accounts of their service, particularly during WWII, often excluded or misreported their contributions and focused on what “black units” lacked or failed to accomplish. This article serves as a correction for misreported and excluded contributions, and reveals how unrecognized bravery in war both hurt and motivated veterans. Presently, Gulf War I and OEF/OIF/OND veterans could benefit from hearing older veterans’ voices as they realize how far the military and our country have come in appreciating diverse cultures and worldviews, and how far we have yet to go.

FOR POLICY

In 1948, President Truman made segregation in the military unlawful. Although change was slow, by the time of the Vietnam War, a raised racial consciousness by African Americans forged a struggle toward racial equality at home and in the military. Continuing efforts to prohibit intolerance and discrimination due to ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation is crucial. Acknowledging the value of each service member in a unit, regardless of rank, also is key. The DoD and policymakers might consider using the narrative experiences of veterans to continue to introduce policies and programs that encourage diversity. It is important for future US presidents to continue to encourage racial, gender, and sexual equality and tolerance in the military, as did President Obama. When he repealed the Don’t ask, Don’t Tell policy, he reduced the possibility of discrimination against service members who identify as LGBTQ.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study reveals the complex memories of African American veterans’ who served in World War II, Korea, or the Vietnam War, and how their experiences highlighted racial tension in the military and in the US. Although the youngest Vietnam War veteran is currently in his sixties, we know little about his experience in war from his perspective and in his words. A limitation of this study is its small sample size. Therefore, we suggest researchers continue to collect data on this important topic, particularly through qualitative methods. It is through the detailed responses to open-ended questions that we learn from the experts—those who served and whose voices we have not heard—about war experiences and suffering in war.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Helen K. Black, Ph.D.¹

¹ blackh@umbc.edu; Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland