

Where Did You Serve? Veteran Identity, Representative Bureaucracy and Vocational Rehabilitation

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- In this study, the first to examine the link between veteran status of program counselors and veterans' views of the VA vocational rehabilitation programs, researchers interviewed 11 veteran rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) and examined a sample of veterans who had utilized veteran rehabilitation and employment services.
- VRCs reported that the relationship between counselors and clients was a key determinant in how well a client performs in the program, and that many clients will either ask counselors about veteran status, or request counselors who are veterans.
- Veteran counselors were reported by veteran clients to be more caring, explain things more clearly, care about the client's individual needs, respect the client and be more responsive to client needs. Veteran clients with veteran counselors were up to 7% more likely to report a positive outcome, and those with veteran counselors were 5.9% more likely to report being satisfied with the program.

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ABSTRACT:

“The research on representative bureaucracy investigates whether higher levels of representation within public agencies affect policy outcomes. We expand this line of inquiry by examining the effect of symbolic representation on the clients' perceptions of the vocational rehabilitation program administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We test the link between passive representation and symbolic representation for veteran identity. This is one of the first studies to investigate an identity not associated with immutable characteristics. We question how an identity related to a profession that an individual selects into, like veteran status, can influence a client's relationship with a government program. We find that veteran clients of the vocational rehabilitation system perceive substantial differences in the behaviors of their counselor and report significantly higher levels of overall satisfaction with the program when they know or believe their counselor is also a veteran.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

When veterans seek assistance from VA vocational rehabilitation services, the veteran status of the front-line bureaucrat they interact with makes a significant difference in the quality of their experience. Veterans appear to attribute more positive attributes to veteran counselors, including more positive counselor behaviors and more satisfaction with the rehabilitation program overall. Although it is not possible to determine whether veteran counselors are objectively outperforming their non-veteran counterparts, the difference in veterans' perceptions of counselors remains even when reports about counselor behaviors are controlled. Bureaucrats in the vocational rehabilitation system have discretion over the development and supervision of a rehabilitation or education plan, as such veterans may have very different experiences within vocational rehabilitation services, depending on the expertise of their counselors. Veteran and non-veteran counselors may need to work together to discuss and develop a set of "best practices" when working with veterans in vocational rehabilitation, or to simply share and improve their counseling strategies. All counselors may be motivated to act on behalf of a client, however, there are a variety of ways to pursue the client's best interests and non-veteran counselors may be approaching rehabilitation in different ways that are read as less effective by veteran clients. Alternatively, veterans may be responding more to identity than practice, as previous studies focused on alcohol counseling and alcohol counselors have shown. Researchers have found that recovering alcoholics working as counselors may behave differently and are preferred over non-recovering counselors, suggesting that they represent an identity shared with their alcoholic clients. Non-veteran counselors may need to look for other ways to connect with their veteran clients, which may improve both client-counselor relationships and client satisfaction with the vocational rehabilitation program.

FOR POLICY

The results of this study suggest that veteran and non-veteran counselors might approach their jobs differently. As such, VA administrators may wish to observe common practices among vocational rehabilitation counselors in order to identify any systematic differences in behavior between these two populations. Since the mission of the VA is to improve outcomes for all veterans, any practices that are viewed more positively by veteran clients or result in better vocational outcomes may need to be more widely implemented. There may also be a need for increased training to minimize disparate program outcomes. Should VA administrators find no difference in levels of service provided by non-veteran counselors and those with veteran status, they may wish to initiate studies focused on attitudes and behaviors of both clients and counselors to distinguish whether the effects observed in this study are due to differential behavior or some other factor.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, researchers should go beyond investigating the importance of veteran identity alone to examine whether salience is a necessary condition for passive representation to impact policy outcomes for multiple identities, including gender, race, socioeconomic status and more. The passive representation of identities tied to traumatic events may impact client behavior in all settings, while other identities may vary in their importance for outcomes. Researchers should also investigate whether veteran identity matters beyond accessing services in the VA, in terms of outcomes and perceived outcomes for veteran clients. These findings may have limited generalizability, due to the population being comprised of former government employees who have transitioned to work in a closely related government agency. Further studies should gather data on the practices of vocational rehabilitation counselors, to determine whether veteran counselors exercise their discretion more often than non-veteran counselors, whether differences in perception of veteran clients vary by veteran status or other identities and which other identities improve or disrupt the counselor and client relationship.

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