

RESEARCH NOTE

Workplace Perceptions of Veterans and Nonveterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs

Robert Teclaw, Katerine Osatuke, and Dee Ramsel

National Center for Organization Development, Veterans Health Administration, Cincinnati, Ohio

Much has been written about veterans and their reintegration into civilian society, but little or no information is available about veterans' workplace perceptions and how these might differ from those of nonveterans. The authors compared veterans' and nonveterans' attitudes about work (including job satisfaction aspects, perceptions of coworker interactions, supervisory support, and others) in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) based on responses to the organizational census, VA All Employee Survey (AES; $N = 179,271$). Based on differences in crude (unadjusted, but controlling for location) item odds ratios (range 0.65–1.08), compared to nonveterans, veterans scored modestly lower on most AES items. The authors show how controlling for demographics changes the relative size and, in some cases, the direction of the differences. This current study is 1 of only 2, to our knowledge, large-scale assessments of veterans' workplace perceptions and the only 1 which controlled the results for demographic characteristics.

Keywords: veterans, workplace, perceptions, job satisfaction, demographic characteristics

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Veterans' issues have received much attention from researchers seeking to explore the effects of wartime mobilization on citizens called to serve. Many studies have focused on the physical and psychological effects of war on combatants, their families, and society in general (Black & Papile, 2010; McFarlane, 2009; Spelman, Hunt, Seal, & Burgo-Black, 2012). Other studies have looked at issues related to

service members' transition back to civilian life—such as work opportunities, unemployment, recruiting, translating military skills to the civilian workplace, veterans preferences, vocational counseling, implications of psychological and physical impairment on employment, and so forth (e.g., see Adler et al., 2011; Bullock, Braud, Andrews, & Phillips, 2009; Clemons & Milsom, 2008; King, 2012). Largely missing from the literature on veterans and the workplace are studies of whether veterans have different perceptions of workplace climate and job satisfaction than nonveterans. This article compares veterans' workplace perceptions with nonveteran coworkers in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Why Study Veterans' Workplace Perceptions?

Work is a major area of adult life. Its importance for overall well-being and adaptive functioning is such that work-related problems (e.g., job dissatisfaction) may become a focus of clinical attention, such as therapy, even in the ab-

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Robert Teclaw, Katerine Osatuke, and Dee Ramsel, National Center for Organization Development, Veterans Health Administration, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katerine Osatuke, National Center for Organization Development, Veterans Health Administration, 11500 Northlake Drive, Suite 230, Cincinnati, OH 45249. E-mail: katerine.osatuke@va.gov

sence of medical, psychological, or psychiatric disorders (*American Psychiatric Association, 2013*). Understanding the veteran populations should therefore encompass their workplace perceptions, but conceptual and empirical understanding of this area is currently lacking.

Should We Expect Veterans to Have Different Workplace Perceptions?

Following a long tradition of thinking and research in personality, psychology, and semiotics, we, and others (see *Stiles, 2005, 2015*, for references), conceptualize people as psychologically composed of traces of life experiences. These comprise thoughts, memories, somatic reactions, and other elements of lived experience, including perceptions and attitudes. These experiential traces within persons also contain motivational elements, prompting people to respond (say, feel, or do something) in ways consistent with the source experience whenever their current situations resemble the original past ones. Thus, our view of people in general (e.g., *Osatuke, Gray, Glick, Stiles, & Barkham, 2004; Osatuke et al., 2004*) suggests that psychological make-up of veterans includes something they share with other veterans only, that stems from their past experience of service, and influences how they act, feel, and otherwise respond in their current life. That is, differences in specific backgrounds notwithstanding, their military past remains an important commonality.

Based upon the existing evidence about differences between veterans and nonveterans, this commonality between veterans reflects, first and foremost, their exposure to military culture (*Hobbs, 2008; Hall, 2011; Redmond et al., 2015*). In addition, even before entering the military, future veterans differ as a group from those who did not serve (*Beaver, Barnes, Schwartz, & Boutwell, 2015; Jackson, Thoemmes, Jonkmann, Lüdtke, & Trautwein, 2012*). Add to these initial differences the subsequent difference in exposure to military culture and in some cases combat (*Afari et al., 2015*), and it is reasonable to hypothesize that veterans have meaningful differences from nonveterans in many aspects of life. It also is reasonable to expect that these differences include attitudes to handling one's tasks in the context of a subordination structure, views of autonomy and collaboration with peers, perceptions of leadership, kinds of support needed for performing du-

ties of one's position, as well as stress, engagement, and interpersonal connections with peers—that is, the elements that collectively define what one deals with at work (*Heinemann & Zeiss, 2002; Leonard, Lewis, Freedman, & Passmore, 2013*). In addition to the initial differences associated with the enrollment choice and the subsequent differences reflecting exposure to the military culture, veterans, due to the effects of their military service, are known to have a higher prevalence of specific vulnerabilities—that is, risk factors for PTSD, drug use, and suicide ideation (*Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010; Seal, Bertenthal, Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007*). Being at higher risk for these conditions might also lead to or be associated with differential work perceptions as compared to the general workforce. Importantly, psychological differences between veterans and their nonveteran peers do not need to be as large as to constitute psychological impairment in order for these differences to still affect workplace perceptions (*Hobbs, 2008; Redmond et al., 2015*).

What Is Known About Veterans' Workplace Perceptions?

Much of the information about veterans and the workplace is anecdotal (*King, 2012*); we are aware of only two empirical studies. Attitudes of U.S. federal employees are assessed by the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). For civilian employees in federal agencies in 2013, FEVS results indicated overall lower workplace perceptions (expressed as percent positive ratings) for veterans than nonveterans (*OPM, 2013*), with the greatest disparities (3–5%) in perceptions of organizational fairness and relationship with supervisors. These results were for federal employees in multiple agencies; combining the data did not account for the potential influence of employee characteristics (such as occupations) that might differ across agencies while being related to both veteran status and to the concepts being measured. Such characteristics (confounds) may have constituted the real explanation for the reported differences between veterans and nonveterans (*Morabia, 2011; VanderWeele & Shpitser, 2013*).

In a study of 120 veterans and 118 nonveterans in a large communications company, *Olmstead (2011)* found, after controlling for age, years in the military, years at the company, and type of work, that veterans had higher levels of overall job sat-

isfaction and also for individual facets of job satisfaction. Veterans who did, versus did not, experience combat had similar job satisfaction levels. Although an important contribution to understanding veterans in the workplace, this study's small size and limited business sector and geographic scope detract from its generalizability.

Hypotheses

Given the paucity of empirical data and empirically based frameworks regarding job-related needs and attitudes of veteran populations, we adopted an exploratory approach. We compared workplace perceptions of veterans and their non-veteran coworkers at the VA using cross-sectional analyses of the VA annual All Employee Survey (AES; $N = 179,271$ in 2013; 56% response rate) results. We used all of the AES measures rather than a selected few, so as not to prematurely narrow our exploration of work-related aspects potentially relevant in differentiating veterans and nonveterans. In previous experience with the AES, veteran status was associated with specific organizational roles (measured by the AES demographic items—e.g., occupations, supervisory status), and employees' perceptions also differed across these roles (e.g., Teclaw, Osatuke, Fishman, Moore, & Dyrenforth, 2014). Our primary hypothesis was that, after controlling for relevant demographics, veterans' workplace perceptions would overall differ from nonveterans, but we did not specify on which AES items or in which direction.

VA is a federal agency providing primarily health care, but also financial benefits and cemetery services. Any demographic differences between VA veterans and U.S. veterans in general (i.e., public and private sector for all industry types) would impact the generalizability of our results. VA expends considerable organizational efforts in recruiting and retaining veteran employees. Particular targeted populations likely respond by joining VA in higher proportions than they join the general workforce. Thus a second hypothesis is that VA veterans demographically differ from other U.S. veterans.

Method

Participants

The study population included all VA respondents to AES in 2013, a confidential, voluntary

annual census (Osatuke et al., 2012). VA Institutional Review Board has approved the research protocol of the AES data use for this study. AES respondents rated their job satisfaction (nine single-item indicators) and agreement with specific descriptions of workplace climate (40 single-item indicators) using Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*) for satisfaction and 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) for workplace climate. For logistic regression analyses, we dichotomized the top two responses and bottom three responses as favorable/unfavorable, respectively. Demographic characteristics of all U.S. veterans were extracted from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2013 1-Year PUMS file (U.S. Census, 2014)—a sample survey of U.S. households that collects more detailed information than the Decennial Census. Because VA veterans are civilian employees, the ACS respondents were restricted to those older than 17 years, who were on active duty in the past but not currently ($MIL = 2$) and currently employed ($ESR = 1$ or 2). We used the ACS person weights to calculate the proportion of veterans from specific demographic groups. We could not tell which, if any, VA employees were represented in the ACS veteran data, so we were unable to remove them. Thus we compare VA-employed veterans to all employed U.S. veterans (including VA).

Data Analysis

We report two types of cross-sectional analyses of observational data: (a) graphical display of item odds ratios of favorable responses to AES items from multilevel logistic regression; and (b) comparison of the relative effect size for each AES demographic variable with all of the others included in the general linear model predicting overall job satisfaction means. To assess demographic characteristics of VA veterans (to compare to U.S. veterans), we used a VA personnel database. To compare VA veterans' and nonveterans' workplace perceptions, we used responses to demographic questions on the AES. Data reflect the end of 2013. As the marginal distributions of demographic variables for veterans and nonveterans are dissimilar (Table 1, Online), demographic variables could potentially confound crude measures of difference between veteran and nonveteran perceptions. To assess these effects, we used multilevel logistic regression (PROC GLIMMIX, SAS

Institute, Cary, NC) both without and with demographic controls and with location (e.g., site) entering the model as a random variable. All predictors were entered as categorical except age (entered as the midpoint of each age range). We calculated odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of veterans' versus nonveterans' favorable responses to AES items.

We used general linear model regression (PROC GLM, SAS Institute, Cary, NC) to assess the effects of demographic characteristics on survey ratings (overall job satisfaction mean). The amount of variance explained by the overall model was reported as R-square. The statistical significance of the *F* test for each IV was determined by its *p* value in the Type III sum of squares table. Effect sizes for each of the IV's were determined by partial Eta-square with 95% confidence limits. Separate models were run for each item. Given that previous research suggests a U-shaped relationship of workplace attitude ratings to both tenure and age (Bedeian, Ferris, & Kacmar, 1992; Clark, Oswald, & Warr, 1996), the square of these variables was also entered into the original model. Because other demographic characteristics are expected to be associated with the dependent variables (e.g., Teclaw et al., 2014), they were kept in the model to control for these effects and place all the relative demographic effect sizes in context.

Results

In 2013, VA had 338,437 employees, 109,168 (32.3%) of them veterans. Compared to VA nonveterans (AES response 54.5%), VA veterans who took the AES (51.1%) were more likely to work in the central office, benefits, and cemetery divisions, less likely to be female, more likely to be Black, had similar years (tenure) with VA, had similar supervisory status, were less likely to have a clinical occupation, and more likely to have administrative and blue collar (wage) occupations (Supplemental Table S2).

Based on differences in crude (unadjusted) item odds ratios (range 0.65–1.08), veterans scored modestly lower on most AES items (see Figure 1). Figure 2 depicts odds ratios of veteran versus nonveteran for favorable ratings on AES items while controlling for the other demographic variables and location. Although veterans are much more likely to rate higher engagement-employee than nonveterans, except for one statistically non-

significant difference (on "achievement") veterans had less favorable workplace perceptions. Also, when controlling for other demographics rather than crude (uncontrolled) odds ratios, the relative disparities between veterans and nonveterans changed direction: veterans went from more favorable to less favorable responses, for four items (engagement-organization, safety climate, customer service, and exhaustion). Many items changed rank after controlling for demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, supervisory status, tenure, and occupation) as shown by the y-axes in Figures 1 and 2; controlling for demographics also narrowed the overall range of odds ratios and 95% CIs.

Figure 3 illustrates the effect sizes (Eta-squared) for each of the AES demographic variables regressed on "overall satisfaction" in a general linear model. The overall effect size for all of the demographic predictors considered together was low (model R-squared = 0.039), indicating that demographic characteristics had little, though statistically significant, effect on workplace ratings. Importantly, the relative effect of veteran status on "overall satisfaction" was quite low compared to occupation, tenure, tenure-squared, and supervisory status (approximately 59, 34, 22, and 6 times lower, respectively). The results for survey ratings other than "overall job satisfaction" were similar (not shown).

Compared to all employed U.S. veterans, VA veterans were much more likely to be female (Supplemental Table S3); VA female and male veterans were more likely to have at least some college credit and degrees (Supplemental Table S3); to have occupations in health care and office and administrative support (Supplemental Figure S3); and less likely to work in personal services, production, protective services, sales, educational, and transportation occupations. VA male veterans were more like to work in health care support and building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, and less likely to work in equipment installation, maintenance, and repair and in construction occupations than their employed national counterparts. By definition, all VA veterans work for the federal government, in contrast to only 12.4% of U.S. employed veterans (11.3% males and 21.2% females). For both sexes, younger veterans (18–30 years of age) are underrepresented and middle-aged veterans (ages 40–60) are overrepresented among VA employees (Supplemental Figures S4 and S5). This effect

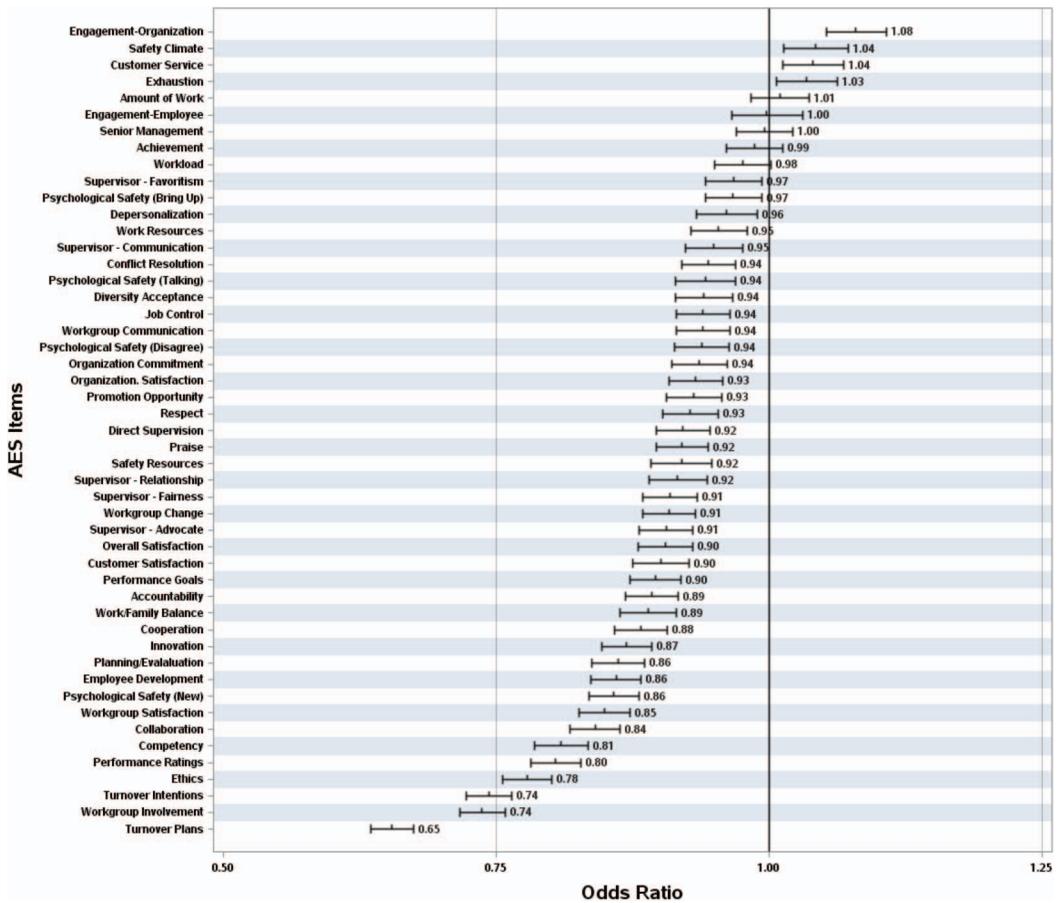


Figure 1. Unadjusted odds ratios of VA veterans' versus nonveterans' favorable responses to 2013 All Employee Survey, by item. PROC GLIMMIX (SAS Institute, Cary, NC): controlling for location (facility/office). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios. Error bars not including 1 are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Odds ratios less than 1 indicate that veterans were less likely to respond favorably to an item than nonveterans. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

is stronger for male than for female veterans. From age 60 upward, the relative percent of VA male, VA female, and U.S. female veterans drops precipitously; for U.S. male veterans this decline is delayed for several years.

Discussion

Ours is the first large-scale, detailed examination that we are aware of that compared veterans' to nonveterans perceptions of work. The main merit of this study thus lies in its contribution to filling this gap. Our results will be especially of interest to mental health workers and others who

care about veterans' readjustment to civilian life, as work ranks in importance with marriage, parenthood, spirituality, and other key determinants of a fulfilled life. Understanding veteran employees' perceptions should also inform human resources and organization development practice, for example, veteran recruitment and retention policies.

Compared to nonveterans, we found that VA-employed veterans had modestly lower, statistically significant crude odds ratios for 40 of 49 AES items and modestly higher, crude mean difference for four of 49 items. After controlling for demographics, veterans were more likely to rate favorably only one item: engagement-

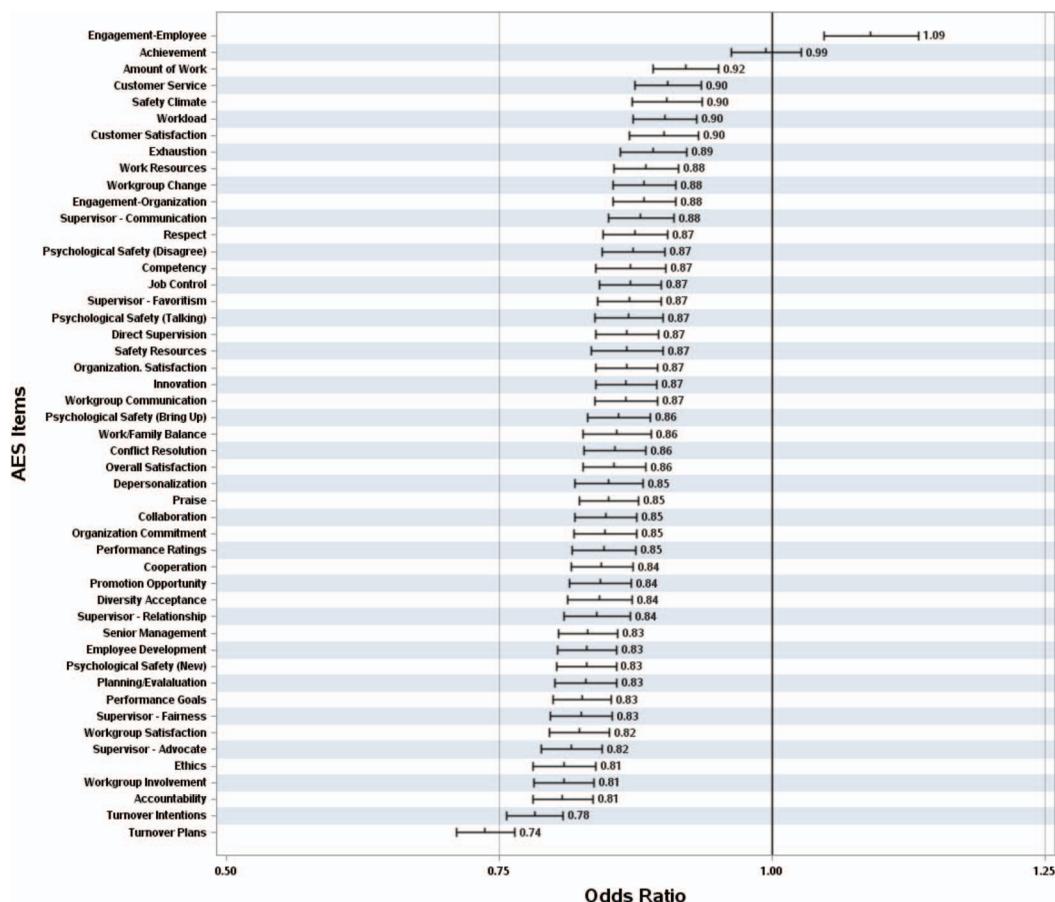


Figure 2. Odds ratios of VA veterans’ versus nonveterans’ favorable responses to 2013 All Employee Survey, by item and adjusted for demographic characteristics. PROC GLIMMIX (SAS Institute, Cary, NC): controlling for location (facility/office). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios. Error bars not including 1 are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Odds ratios less than 1 indicate that veterans were less likely to respond favorably to an item than nonveterans. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

employee; for the remainder of items, they were similar to VA nonveterans (one item) or less likely to rate favorably (45 items). Adjustment for demographic confounds thus caused changes—in direction for some items, and in relative importance for many items. Thus our primary hypothesis that veterans differ from nonveterans in workplace perceptions after controlling for demographic differences was supported. Our findings are consistent with the FedView results (OPM, 2013), but not with Olmstead’s (2011) findings. The latter divergence could reflect the nature of VA as employer, thus the need to study veterans’ perceptions of work in

various settings. (see Baarspul & Wilderom’s, 2011 review of 28 empirical studies comparing public to private sector employees.)

We also found many differences between VA veterans and U.S. employed veterans in many respects. The largest differences were the proportions of females, medical occupations, and office and administrative support workers (all higher for VA veterans) and the proportion in sales and manual trades (all lower for VA veterans.) Thus our second hypothesis that VA veterans differ from U.S. veterans in demographic characteristics was supported, and we were able to describe the specific differences. These are important to take into

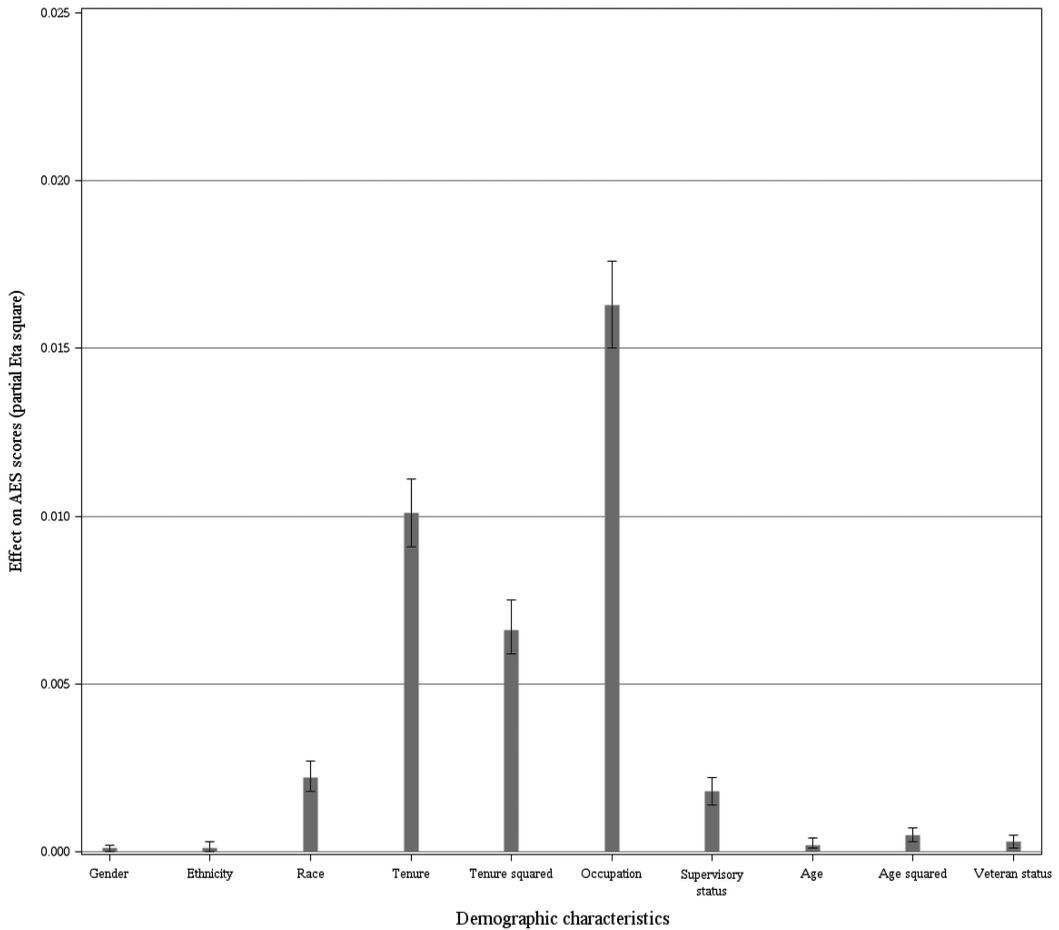


Figure 3. Effect size (partial Eta-square) of demographic characteristics on response to AES 2013 “Job satisfaction” item (PROC GLM, SAS Institute, Cary, NC). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Except for gender and ethnicity, individual demographic characteristics have a statistically significant, but small effect on “Job satisfaction.” Compared to race, tenure, tenure squared, occupation, and supervisory status, veteran status has a relatively minor effect.

account when generalizing our results to U.S. veterans or to specific veteran groups.

Though the results indicate real disparities in workplace perception for veterans, importantly, the overall size of the differences is small. Of note, other demographic variables—occupation, tenure, supervisory status, and race—play a larger role than veteran status in explaining AES scores.

In the observational design of this study, differences between veterans and nonveterans could reflect unmeasured factors other than veteran status. Controlling for nine demographic variables for which we had data resulted in redefining rel-

ative importance of the rated items (i.e., which differences were the largest), and reversing the direction of effect (of being a veteran) on some of the ratings. Although this set of findings underscores the point we wished to make—the need to control for demographic confounds, we did not have data available for each and every relevant characteristic (e.g., family responsibilities, second job, or school). Ours was the first large study to systematically use demographic controls of veterans’ workplace ratings. Future studies of this topic should expand upon our range of demographic controls.

A second limitation was the exploratory nature of the study. We examined group differences on a broad variety of AES items; some could have been significantly different by chance alone. However, as we found differences on 48 out of 49 items examined, and 47 of these differences were consistent in direction, the probability for this finding being due to chance alone would be infinitesimal, especially given our very large sample size. Thus, although we do not claim that veterans are necessarily less happy with their workplace for any of its particular aspects that we assessed, our results do suggest that veterans are overall less satisfied than their nonveteran peers—although the size of these differences is small.

A third limitation is that our sample, although very large and very diverse (e.g., over 200 specific occupations in 13 occupational groupings and 271 major locations across all U.S. states), still came from a single, large public agency. Theoretically, veteran workplace perception disparities could reflect unique factors within VA or federal employment and thus veterans outside VA would not differ from nonveterans in ways we described. To address this limitation, we presented a detailed comparison of VA veterans to U.S. employed veterans, so that readers can verify how generalizable our findings are to specific veteran populations of interest to them, or to veterans at large. This comparison was to a certain extent diminished by our inability to compare on race and ethnicity and by the inclusion of VA veterans in the U.S. veteran population (though comprising just 1.3% of all employed U.S. veterans).

Veterans' perceptions of work are an important but grossly understudied topic. We hope that our results form the basis for furthering this work, both conceptual and empirical, in private sector and in nonhealthcare industries. For example, while outside of the scope of our study, it would be of interest to determine whether the high engagement of veterans in VA results from VA's unique mission, and to establish why veterans have lower workplace perceptions—to inform their recruitment and retention.

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