

Understanding veteran privacy rules could help improve counseling strategies

16 May 2018



Douglas Wilbur, a retired major in the US Army and a doctoral student at MU, says therapists treating veterans can improve their counseling strategies if they seek to understand privacy rules formed by military culture. Credit: Missouri School of Journalism

When combat veterans return home, they often are faced with questions about what they experienced overseas. However, choosing to disclose this information can be complicated, as responses can impact one's public image and personal relationships. Now, a researcher at the University of Missouri has found that veterans tend to disclose wartime information on a strict need-to-know basis, and that therapists treating veterans can improve their counseling strategies if they seek to understand veteran privacy rules that are formed by military culture.

"Like many other marginalized groups, veterans have certain rules that arise from military culture for how they share private [information](#) about their

experiences," said Douglas Wilbur, a retired major in the U.S. Army and a doctoral student in the Missouri School of Journalism who studies the link between strategic communication and military culture. "For therapists and other professionals to help [veteran](#) clients, they first have to understand why veterans disclose or withhold information from certain groups of people."

Past research shows that disclosure of traumatic wartime events can have mental health benefits for veterans seeking help. However, many veterans face several obstacles that can make disclosure difficult, such as trauma-induced anxiety that may arise from the act of disclosure and national security laws that prohibit the sharing of certain information. Veterans debating sharing wartime events also might face moral injury, which is when a veteran has done something in combat that directly violates his or her own morals.

"Western moral values typically abhor killing," Wilbur said. "When a soldier comes home, they might avoid discussing the more violent aspects of their service for fear of being judged by civilians. This puts our veterans in a difficult, often isolating frame of mind."

Through in-depth interviews with veterans from varying wars and conflicts, Wilbur found that the veterans operated on a need-to-know basis when confronted with questions about their service and that they were more likely to have less boundaries with immediate family, close friends and other veterans. For example, one veteran explained that his wife needed to know his experiences so that she understood why he sometimes gets into a bad mood for no apparent reason. Wilbur says learning these privacy rules is a crucial first step in informing better counseling strategies.

"While a therapist may not share the same experiences as a veteran, they can create a healing space for veterans if they emphasize that they will

not be judged for what information they reveal," Wilbur said. "Counselors should also consider outlining what [privacy rules](#) they will follow before disclosure and work to maintain the trust they build with their client over time."

"Have you shot anyone? How [combat veterans](#) manage privacy with family and friends," will be published in *Psychology of Language and Communication*.

More information: *Psychology of Language and Communication*, [DOI: 10.2478/plc-2018-0004](https://doi.org/10.2478/plc-2018-0004)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

APA citation: Understanding veteran privacy rules could help improve counseling strategies (2018, May 16) retrieved 25 September 2018 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-05-veteran-privacy-strategies.html>

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