Three Generations, Three Wars: African American Veterans

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Abstract

Purpose: This article emerged from pilot research exploring experiences of war and suffering among African American veterans who served in World War II, Korean War, and 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.

Key Words: African American veterans, Suffering

This article is based on pilot research that narratively explored experiences of five African American veterans through accounts of the wars—World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War—in which they served. The wars occurred within three decades of the 20th century, the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, with each decade pioneering major social changes in African Americans’ lives in relation to those wars.

Extant gerontological literature that investigates veterans’ experiences of World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War lacks an African American elder perspective. We contribute to this gap by focusing on older African American veterans’ complex memories of patriotism and discrimination in war. The literature shows that the racism African American soldiers experienced in all three wars engendered suffering and motivated many to return home as activists (Baldor, 2008; Burger, 1997). There are few studies that narratively probe how African American elder veterans interpret, in later life, experiences of racism in war (Black & Thompson, 2012). In exploring veterans’ narratives, we continue our work on the constructs of African American elder identity through their lived experiences. In this case, the lived experience is suffering in war.
African American Servicemen

All veterans represent a unique coterie whose shared experiences bind members with a collective identity. African American veterans present another level of inimitability as a group. Those who served in each of the wars are now older adults. The numbers of veterans from World War II and Korean War are rapidly diminishing, and the youngest Vietnam War veterans have reached age 60. African American veterans from World War II, Korean War, and many from Vietnam War were born in the first half of the 20th century when segregation was lawful and discrimination was sanctioned. Dubois’ (1903) notion of a “double consciousness” to describe African American males’ ruptured sense of self and masculinity in a segregated society (Pierre, Mahalik, & Woodland, 2001) was heightened during World War II. African American soldiers talked about the Double V(ictory) campaign: fighting on two fronts against two enemies—racism at home and in the service, and the opponent in war (Baldor, 2008; Lee, 1966). This campaign continued into the Korean War. During World War II, the armed forces were openly segregated. Although President Truman made segregation unlawful in 1948, African American soldiers reported being part of “all black units” at the beginning of the Korean War (Williams, 2001). By the time the Vietnam War began, the armed services were fully integrated on the battlefield (Westheider, 1997). In the barracks, in men’s social clubs, and in many African American soldiers’ minds, their place in a hierarchical military was shaped by continued racism. The face of the American soldier was white, yet the African American soldier was necessary to the war effort and increasingly so—in positions designated by white superiors (Jefferson, 2003). Still, little phenomenological material explored the double consciousness of African American soldiers juxtaposing cultural ideals of the warrior hero with the subjugated status of African Americans as men and as soldiers (Pierre et al., 2001).

World War II

African American men in the oldest generation believed that enlisting into World War II would generate a turning point in their lives (Whiting, 2010). They expected that competencies learned in the service would upgrade their status as skilled workers when they returned home. For many, this hope did not transpire.

Although the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 prohibited discrimination by race in recruitment, African American World War II soldiers did not train, camp, or serve with White soldiers. For African American men who were wounded and needed blood transfusions, they received carefully separated blood that was labeled either “White” or “Black.” When the war ended, segregated planes and trains took African American soldiers home (Stouffer, 1949).

Accounts of World War II written by White commanders excluded or misreported the contributions of African American servicemen (Arnold, 1991; Hunter & Clark, 1985), focused on the failures of African American units, and highlighted the supposed frailties of the African race (Bowers, Hammond, & MacGarrigle, 1996). None of these accounts noted that African Americans were denied opportunities for education and advancement in the military or discerned that injustice was the root of soldiers’ poor morale (Stouffer, 1949). African American servicemen viewed their experiences with a wartime version of DuBois’ “double consciousness.” In a prior study, an African American World War II soldier recounted his attempt to “earn a stripe.” (Black & Thompson, 2012).

You get a promotion (earn a stripe) when you take tests for open jobs. We had this Gunner’s test. I got a 99.5 which should have got me recognition. It was as if I hadn’t done anything. They didn’t want to say a black fellow scored that high in artillery. That’s why we get angry and discouraged.

The histories of World War II written from African American perspectives (Jabar & Walton, 2004) attempted to right the “gross omissions, distortions, and inaccuracies about black soldiers’ service” (Hargrove, 1985, p. 47), and garnered mostly African American audiences (Hunter, 1995; Johnson, 1978). Hargrove (1985, p. 47) remarked that “if problems existed in black divisions, it was caused by the wavering faith of commanders in the ability and determination of enlisted black men (who believed) they could not trust their leaders.”

The Korean War (The Forgotten War)

A number of African American World War II veterans opted to remain in service at the end of World War II and later served in the Korean War (1950–1953; Bowers et al., 1996). The executive order that President Truman signed in 1948 ordered all branches of the military desegregated. This order also mandated equal treatment and access to opportunity for all servicemen and made racist comments unlawful. The American History Archives ([AHA], 2015) noted that senior personnel often ignored these directives. Some historians reported it was fear of American tragedies on Korean battlefields that brought about integration in segregated military units. New recruits went through 6 weeks of basic training (standard was 14 weeks) and sent into whatever combat unit needed reinforcing. Although in most cases, Whites did not go into all African American outfits, African Americans went into previously all White units. “The US military that went to Korea in 1950 was . . . looking squarely at defeat [due to sorely needed manpower]. With casualties mounting, segregation simply broke down.” (AHA, 2015).

Although AHA (2015) described the Korean War as the last segregated American conflict, all-Black units served
throughout the Korean War; with the last disbanded in 1954, after the war’s official end (Leipold, 2011). Fifty years later, in 2001, Colonel David J. Clark, director of the Korean War Commemoration Committee, described the situation of African American soldiers in Korea as “both a tragedy and triumph. [It was] astonishing that they fought for others’ rights while lacking [them] at home. It is a tragedy it occurred at all; a triumph that a fundamental injustice . . . began to turn the wheels of change in America” (Williams, 2001).

The Vietnam War

African American men served in Vietnam for reasons similar to those of World War II soldiers—they viewed military service as a forerunner to equality; it promised a better life in the postwar world (Beidler, 2004; Westheider, 1997). Despite integration of forces, research revealed a disparate experience for African American servicemen due to (a) a disproportionate ratio of African American men drafted into the war in light of their percentage in the population (Westheider, 2003); (b) disproportionately heavy frontline exposure (Appy, 1993); and (c) continuing racism (Westheider, 1997). The Vietnam War became a symbol of cultural fissures that ruptured America during the 1960s, and African American soldiers’ recollections of Vietnam differed according to year of entry (Appy, 1993). At the beginning of the war, many African Americans supported its cause. By 1965 African Americans soldiers, encouraged by antiwar demonstrations at home, began to agree with Mohammed Ali’s identification with the dark-skinned enemy and his famous repudiation of war: “I ain’t got no quarrel with the Vietcong” (Gallagher, 2014). In 1967 Martin Luther King denounced the Vietnam War, arguing that funds to finance it would be better used to aid America’s poor (Beidler, 2004). After Dr. King’s assassination in 1968, antiwar militancy grew stronger, as did incidents of racism in Vietnam. At home, a cultural divide (by age, education, ethnicity, and trust in authority) occurred between those who agreed with the conduct of the war and those who opposed it (Appy, 1993). A new consciousness of African American identity engendered support for the Black Power Movement and violent protests against systemic racism in American cities (Westheider, 2003).

African American veterans hold a collective memory of struggle throughout the history of wars in which they fought. World War II Buffalo soldiers repeated tales of heroism by Buffalo soldiers in the Civil War (Black & Thompson, 2012). Korean War Veterans spoke of the cruel propaganda used against African American World War II soldiers. As they guarded German prisoners who ate in mess halls that were off-limits to African American soldiers, the Germans mocked them: “Why are you fighting? Go home. Go home to your segregated world.” (Black, Groce, & Harmon, 2011). Despite continued racism in Vietnam, some African American veterans continued to honor the legacy of fathers and uncles from World War II and Korean War. An accumulation of both anger and pride threaded the memory of what African American soldiers experienced in war and what they were told about previous wars (Climo & Cattell, 2002).

Methods

Design

This pilot study resulted from research findings concerning the experiences of suffering in older age (Black, 2006; Black & Rubinstein, 2004). Data for the pilot study were collected in 2014, and research explored narratives of suffering and war from five African American veterans: one veteran from World War II, two from Korean War, and two from Vietnam War.

The framework of our research explores the intersection of age, racism, suffering, and war. Our methodology is qualitative ethnographic interviewing. The earlier concepts come alive when faces and voices of those who experienced them are heard, and we attempt to understand their perspective.

Inclusion Criteria

African American male veterans, aged 60 and older. All respondents were (a) English speaking; (b) cognitively intact; and (c) willing to engage in a 2-hour interview session.

Data Collection

Ethnographic portraits of African American veterans are based on two items of collected data: (a) one digitally recorded open-ended ethnographic interview processed through transcription and (b) field notes created by interview/author that included a description of the veteran, his home, environment, and demeanor in relation to the interview. The Institutional Review Board at the author’s university approved the ethical conduct of the project. The author audio-recorded a statement of informed consent to each participant and each participant's consenting response. Data collected for this project, including interview questionnaires, transcripts, and field notes were kept in a locked file in the author’s locked office. All identifiers on collected data were removed.

The Interviews

Private interviews were conducted with each respondent. Each complete interview included one session, which lasted 2 hours. Men’s responses resulted from queries from an original interview guide created by the author. Questions elicited narratives about war, suffering, and being a veteran. Other questions focused on beliefs, values, social support,
and advantages and disadvantages of military service. All questions were followed with tailor-made probes and follow-up questions.

Data Analysis

The general approach to data analysis used methods of qualitative research rooted in anthropology and religious studies (Black & Rubinstein, 2004). These disciplines have traditions of descriptive analysis in which individuals and groups communicate through narrative (Rubinstein, 1992). We used the following methods: After transcription, the author read each transcript carefully, asking, “What are in the data? How are data relevant to the major topic?” The next step was large-level sorting of each transcript, which codes for broad themes and topics intra- and interindividually (Mischler, 1986; Silverman, 2001). Fine-grained analyses, which codes for patterns within transcripts, were also completed. As new data were transcribed, transcripts from respondents who completed interviews were rechecked to confirm themes and add others. Data emerged from men’s responses to interview questions, follow-ups, field notes, and informal conversations.

Results (all names are pseudonyms)

We present our findings under three interrelated themes. Theme One—Expectations related to war—Service to country seemed a normal pattern of coming of age for African American men, who expected to be recognized as vital to the war effort, and to progress in postwar society; Theme Two—Suffering as an African American—Men interpreted racist war experiences as reflecting their “lower” status in society. Suffering was perceived as an aspect of African American life in relation to existence in the United States; and Theme Three—Perception of present identity—Men recognized that support for their accomplishments was gained from ancestors, family, community, and faith.

Theme One: Expectations Related to War

Mr. Turner, a World War II Buffalo Soldier, was born in Virginia in 1921 and moved as a child with his family to West Philadelphia. With pride, he reported he had been part of the “Buffalo Soldiers,” the 92nd Infantry Division, an all African American U.S. army unit officially organized in 1917. The Buffalo was selected as the insignia of the 92nd because of their original nickname, The Buffalo Soldiers. “This name was given to Black American cavalrymen by Native Americans in the 19th century because the Indians thought that the black soldiers, with their dark skin and curly hair, resembled buffalos” (Hodges, 1999). Mr. Turner described himself in 1942.

I was drafted in November, 1942. I was 21 and just got married. I was put into the 92nd Infantry Division—the Buffalo Soldiers. I was proud to go to war. I wanted to be a boy scout and my family couldn’t afford the uniform. When the army came along...I wanted to be a soldier. This was an opportunity to change the board.

Mr. Turner perceived that wearing an army uniform symbolized an improved status in society. He was a member of the only African American Infantry Division to see combat in Europe during World War II. His first day as a soldier revealed an unexpected reality.

We were in Philadelphia ready to have lunch. The white soldiers walk in the restaurant; black soldiers weren’t allowed in. They handed us our boxed lunch outside. We all just got drafted. We’re all eating a sandwich but whites ate in the restaurant and we sat outside. We’re all going to Fort Meade, but we’re going in segregated trains. They needed soldiers, but they didn’t really want us.

Mr. Turner’s experiences of overt racism continued. When asked how segregation affected him and fellow infantrymen, he replied: “We were concerned but we had allegiance to this country and wanted to excel.” He described how fellow soldiers were treated after being wounded.

One man from my division was badly wounded and sent home. He didn’t get a Pullman where he could lay down, but a segregated train car where he had to sit up the whole way, breathing soot that came in the first three cars, where they put blacks.

Mr. Turner remembered his mother’s advice to him: “Fight back. Don’t take no for an answer. Keep trying. And protect yourself.” Mr. Turner believed that he “fought back” by showing the skill of the 92nd Infantry and their readiness to do battle. “Even though we were not given opportunities to excel, we changed that. We built up camaraderie. We fought.” His country’s respect never materialized, but fellow soldiers’ bravery surpassed his expectations. He recalled the honor awarded to “the brown skinned” Buffalo Soldiers by the Italians when they liberated Genoa, Italy from the Germans in April, 1945 (Viviano, 2008).

Mr. Carson, a veteran of the Korean War, was born 9 years after Mr. Turner, in 1930. Because his mother was hospitalized when he was 14, and he met his father only once, Mr. Carson learned early on a fundamental lesson about what he could expect from others.

My mother migrated from West Virginia. After she was hospitalized, I was on my own. I met my father once; I was 10. When I was 15 I made the football team; I asked him for football shoes from the pawn shop. He said, “I don’t have any money.” When Billie Holiday sings, “God bless the child that has his own—‘ that was my theme for life. That’s what fortified me: never ever depend on anyone.
Mr. Carson expected to learn skills in war that would improve his future. He believed that African American Korean War veterans would not share the same fate as World War II veterans when they returned home.

When the soldiers came back [from World War II] they couldn’t get a job driving trolleys or taxis. This was 1946. No employment and the housing situation was equally terrible. We were going to change all that.

Mr. Carson’s first experiences in Korea revealed little change for African American soldiers.

I trained at Fort McClellan. The group that was trained before me was the 24th Infantry—the Buffalo Soldiers. They were trained with sticks. They gave us rifles but no ammunition. When we got to Korea, the Red Cross set up coffee and doughnuts. We (African Americans) had to go to the end of the line. There were several hundred of us; we refused out of pride.

Yet, enlisting in the service did change his life significantly.

With no family, I floundered. I didn’t have a nutritious diet until I was in the military; they gave me three meals a day. I got to meet people from across the country. It was a great education.

Although African Americans remained segregated despite the “official” integration of troops, Mr. Carson believed his war service “put [him] on the right track” of a life path. He found the guidance he craved through the army’s discipline.

Mr. Harris, also a veteran of the Korean War, was born in Philadelphia in 1931. He became a track star at West Philadelphia High School and was awarded a college scholarship after winning a national track meet. Once enrolled in college, and sensing war on the horizon, he took ROTC courses to become an officer. Despite good grades, he was dropped from the program.

They said it was because I wore glasses. They should have told me before they let me enroll. I think they didn’t want too many black officers. You’d think they’d want more black officers in Korea ‘cause they’d put them on the front line and get them knocked off. This kind of thing eats at you for a lifetime.

Despite this beginning, Mr. Harris’s experience during the Korean War exceeded his expectations. While in basic training, an American general recruited him as a track athlete. He became one of the few men selected to compete against top German track stars.

I went to Germany in April of ’53, and I ran track that summer. My wife came over and we stayed in Germany and traveled. I ran track in Berlin, Heidelberg and Nuremberg. In fact I made the All Army Track Team.

Mr. Harris’s military path was different from most veterans. His later work as a reporter gave him the opportunity to interview World War II soldiers. He made their experiences of suffering during and after the war public.

Mr. Dorsett, a decorated Vietnam Veteran, was born in 1945. He described his introduction to the Marines.

I grew up in West Philadelphia, in a church that’s predominantly African-American. It was founded in 1792 by Absolom Jones and Richard Allen who were famous ex-slaves. My best friend and I were altar boys there. He wanted me to go into the Marines and talked me into making a bet. By losing the bet I became a Marine. We were the Baby-Boomers—the largest group of kids in the history of the US.

Mr. Dorsett, at age 19, was on an aircraft carrier when President Johnson signed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to start the Vietnam War. He described the moment: “This is the greatest thing we ever heard. We were getting ready to fight. I was gung ho.” His expectations about war were linked to his respect for men like Mr. Turner.

We were sons of soldiers who fought in WWII. Americans glorified them. Memorial Day, Veterans Day—they were sacred days, like sacraments. We knew how Marines fought on Okinawa. We would not be the generation that let our country down. We were combat oriented. We could fight. We wanted to fight.

Mr. Dorsett’s expectation about war—to fight as bravely as his father—was fulfilled. “Everybody in the Marine Corps is trained to be a warrior. And that’s what I became. You have to understand we were in a Marine culture. They indoctrinated you.” Mr. Dorsett’s comment, “You have to understand . . . ” revealed that Marine culture provided the context for his life and a secure mold for his identity.

Mr. Gilson, also a veteran of Vietnam, was born in North Carolina in 1950 and moved to Philadelphia after serving in Vietnam. Mr. Gilson went to war with one expectation—“Come back alive.” He explained how being both African American and a combat soldier forged his sense of self.

I am calm, stable. That’s learned behavior; you learn to be that way. I’m a Vietnam vet. I was trained not to get excited about anything because when you’re in combat and you get close to somebody. Every day we lost troops. They trained us to put a wall up, and I still have it. I don’t let people get close, no matter how friendly I am. It’s a wall you don’t see, that if something goes down I won’t be affected mentally.

Mr. Gilson believed that, in war, strong emotion was his enemy. If he saw a friend killed, grief could paralyze him on the battlefield.

I had no control in Vietnam. But when I saw situations I didn’t like I spoke up. The enemy knows if he knocks out the radio man, he can kill everybody. One day I see this white guy carrying the radio sitting here (gestures toward one direction) and his radio’s over there
(gestures toward the opposite direction). I said, ‘Ain’t gonna work. If we get hit he don’t have time to get from here to there. I went to the captain. ‘Captain, I want to go home in one piece. Look where the radio man’s at; look where his radio’s at.’ I snitched because it’s about survival. I said, ‘I want that radio.’ The captain gave it to me—a white operator and a white officer. I had the radio from that time on.

Mr. Gilson used the word “snitch,” which connotes a lack of loyalty. He also displays pride that the white officer recognized his acumen and “gave [him] the radio.” Despite snitching and choosing a court-martial for doing so, he fulfilled his ultimate expectation in Vietnam. He came home alive.

Theme Two: Suffering as an African American

When asked about experiences of suffering, Mr. Turner said, “What hurts me is they falsified information about us. There was no recognition of what we accomplished with what we had to work with.” Although some African American veterans had been honored, it was not until 1996—50 years after the end of World War II—that President Clinton awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to seven African American veterans. Unfortunately, by that time only one of them was alive. And now, as Mr. Turner pointed out, “there’s just a few of us left.”

I want my government to say I’m sorry. We said you were cowards. You persevered. I want them to realize what was done to us. It’s not enough to say we honor you now. They must first say we treated you badly. They didn’t have to love us, but they didn’t have to lie about us.

Mr. Turner felt dishonored as an African American and a soldier for over six decades. The United States had apologized to Japanese citizens for their internment during World War II, and reparation was paid. African American soldiers and citizens had been forgotten. A theme throughout his narrative was the durability of the lies his country told about his fellow soldiers and the persistence of the men’s suffering.

When asked, Mr. Carson defined suffering as “a point of helplessness.” He recalled himself as a youth and the experiences he described as suffering:

When I was overseas I didn’t have family, my mother was ill and can’t write. This was heartbreaking. It tears your heart out when everybody is receiving mail. After awhile I wouldn’t go to mail call. Those experiences were hard; they were suffering.

Mr. Carson added that suffering also resulted from “the racism that you felt at any camp you went to. You knew you weren’t wanted.” When asked how he endured these experiences, he replied:

It’s part of our life. We are fortified about suffering because we are descendants of slave ships. People survived a month on a slave ship on their back; never able to walk around—they had babies on their back; relieved themselves on their back; never changed position. We are fortified with them so we can survive anything.

Despite growing up without family, Mr. Carson’s kinship with slave ancestors provided him with strength from their unimaginable suffering. He would not be the descendant to succumb to present day sorrows.

When asked about experiences of suffering, Mr. Harris mentioned the World War II soldiers he interviewed as an African American radio show host, including his uncle Raymond.

In England someone brought him (Uncle Raymond) a pillow to sit on. There was this idea that black men had tails. They brought him a pillow so he wouldn’t hurt himself by sitting on his tail.

Mr. Harris followed this stunning account with a list of the “legends, myths, and lies” that followed African American men throughout the wars. “It was different for me,” he explained. “As an athlete I ate the best food.” Despite his preferred status, he became emotional when he remembered the Christmas he and his wife spent in Germany during the Korean War.

A couple things happened. We were in the club where German civilians served us. One officer came over to me, said hello, but wouldn’t look at my wife. Some black GIs came in and later on we all started singing Christmas carols. The Americans sang in English and the Germans sang in German. We all sang in our own language, and it was beautiful. See, there’s no barrier in music.

He recalled the end of that evening. “Pat and I were going back to our off-post housing. When the black GIs left, they were probably going back to their barracks, and I wondered how they felt.” The night was full of contradictions. Singing became the language that transcended differences. He was treated with respect because of his elite status as an athlete. His wife, an African American woman, was ignored. They were given housing reserved for guests or luminaries; the African American GIs returned to their barracks. These images held, for Mr. Harris, a stark reminder of the power of color, gender, status, and the possibility of transcending these differences.

When Mr. Dorsett was asked about suffering, he described himself as a realist, but described others who had suffered.

Do you know what US high school suffered the most casualties? Edison High School in North Philadelphia made up primarily of African-American and Latino males. They had something to prove: they were as brave as any white boy. They joined forces that faced the most
combat, like the Marines. Those were the people that got killed. Persons of color wanted to be heroic for a lot of reasons. We didn’t want to let our race down.

Mr. Dorsett added that he never allowed issues of war or race to cause him suffering.

I’ll never forget one of my guys, 19 years old, six foot two, 240 pounds, a white boy from Alabama. In the barracks there were racial issues. Out in the bush, in the war zone, you kept that to a minimum. In the barracks, there were issues. Before this kid could take cover he gets hit. Above the din he hollers, “Sergeant Dorsett, I’m hit, come get me.” Here he is, shot, crying, throwing up, but he didn’t run. First thing he does is screams out to an African-American staff sergeant to get him because he knew I would. (Pause) So, was there racial tension in the Marine Corps? Yes. Did I come home to a parade? No. Did I care? No. Did people suffer during and after Vietnam? Yes. Thank God I wasn’t one of them. Challenges are inevitable. Suffering is optional. I did my job; I did it well. When you do that you don’t suffer. I decided if I would suffer. Suffering is not only optional; it’s volitional.

Mr. Dorsett’s complex answer reveals that being a “warrior” in Vietnam was incumbent upon him as an African American and a Marine. Real suffering would be not helping a man under his command, or showing weakness in battle, thus disappointing soldiers from prior wars who forged the path for him to become a hero in Vietnam.

Mr. Gilson explained that war did not cause suffering; it offered another life lesson in endurance.

Being Afro American in America—we’ve gone through things others haven’t. That got me through Vietnam. I’m there fighting and supposed to be treated equally, but we’re being prejudiced against. They didn’t want to serve us in the [social] clubs. I’m sacrificing my life, but if I want a beer; they treat us secondhand. They go to the white folks’ table and smile, but you come serve us in the [social] clubs. I’m sacrificing my life, but we’re being prejudiced against. They didn’t want to serve us. I was in the boy scouts and I was on track. My father encouraged me. I had models. I emulated Paul Robeson and athletes like Jesse Owens. When he won four gold medals Hitler refused to shake his hand. I loved sports and music. Music was my family.

Mr. Carson pointed to the picture of President Obama on his wall. “He’s the highlight of success for African Americans who suffered indignities throughout life, but even him . . . there are some learned, powerful people who hold animosity for him.” When asked what protects someone from racial hatred, he replied:

It’s dangerous not to know your history. When Trayvon Martin was killed, the young came together. That’s what we’ve been telling them: It can happen to you. Eisenhower said: “You can change the laws but you can’t change the man’s heart.”

Mr. Carson, now in his 80s, viewed his life as well lived. When asked if he would like to add anything to our discussion, he smiled. “Just fall back on your faith and forgive. God decides who suffers and who survives.”

When Mr. Harris was asked how his past experiences influenced the present, he replied:

I had a couple things on my side. I belonged to the church, I was in the boy scouts and I was on track. My father encouraged me. I had everything working for me.”

While in the service, buddies noted that Mr. Harris had the “voice” for radio. After leaving the service, he trained for a career in broadcasting. He hosted radio programs that revealed the history of African Americans in war, science, education, entertainment, and politics. He became emotional when he remembered attending the Civil Rights marches of 1964.

When I think back, everybody was polite. If you stepped in front of someone—“Oh, excuse me.’ ‘Sure, that’s all right.’ We realized how important this was because we knew our past. You can’t move forward if you don’t know yourself, where you came from. Some of our past has been denied. The history of America encompasses all of us.
Now in his 80s, Mr. Harris said he enjoys showing his grandson, Kai, “a world of possibilities. Every time I take him somewhere or introduce him to someone, it’s a step forward for him.” Kai is the major repository for Mr. Harris’s generativity.

Mr. Dorsett noted that he entered and left Vietnam “literally as an individual.” He talked about individualism as a process of the Vietnam War.

“You’re 19 years old and drinking a milkshake; in 48 hours you’re traveling alone—we never traveled as a unit—into Okinawa, then Vietnam, then you’re in combat. This is where you find the NV, or they find you, and one of you gets killed. This is what you are trained to do.

“Realism” seemed to be Mr. Dorsett’s theme—realism about being trained to kill; his conviction about the “volitional” nature of suffering; and pride that he became a soldier who did not bend, break, suffer, or die. Mr. Dorsett reported that he “never looks back” on his Vietnam days except when someone like the interviewer asks questions. He reported having two goals after Vietnam: To remain “untouched” spiritually by war and to succeed professionally. He believed he achieved both.

When Mr. Gilson was asked how past suffering influenced his life presently, he replied:

“I’ve always been a frontrunner, a leader. I’m over 60 years old and tired of hatred. On the news [we hear] Afro-Americans are thugs and don’t take care of our families. I’ve taken on a goal—to get along with all races. I’ll speak to the white man and the Asian I know don’t like us. I don’t kiss your butt. If you’re a bigot, I move on. Hatred is unnecessary. This isn’t a one man university; it’s a university of all mankind. Even if I’m stereotyped—my goal is to show all Afro-American males are not what you see on the news every day.

Mr. Gilson felt an internal push, motivated by the continuing racial divide, to show African American men as they are—diverse in interests, varied in talents, and driven by concern about the common good—rather than one-dimensional figures created on evening news.

Discussion

For the men interviewed, war experiences mapped particular meanings onto the concept of suffering through racism. Men related that there is no African American experience of suffering and no amelioration of suffering that stands outside of being an African American man (Cone, 1970). Only Mr. Dorsett deemed suffering to be an act of the will.

Each man brought expectations to war that reflected individual context and communal identity. Mr. Turner had expectations that African American soldiers’ talent and bravery would rescript their future (Burger, 1997). By the time Mr. Carson entered Korea, World War II veterans had heralded racist treatment by the military. Although integration of forces was the law, it was not always fact, and organized supporters at home protested racist treatment in war (Rees, 1964). The symbols of war, described eloquently by Mr. Dorsett, remained powerful and pointed to varied meanings. Wearing a uniform, celebrating “sacred” days, and the surety of receiving “three square meals” also represented order, direction, and belonging to something larger than self (Livingston, 1987). These external attractions diminished in the Vietnam years. The individualistic nature of how men came to Vietnam (not as a unit), the uncertain goal of war, racial unrest, and continuing inequality at home, provoked disaffection and mistrust in America (Appy, 1993; Onkst, 1998). Still, as Mr. Dorsett explained, the Baby Boomers would not be the generation “to let their fathers down.”

In the light of older age, the men perceived they had done well in life, and believed their participation in war aided their personal and professional growth. A paradox might be mentioned here. Although Mr. Turner described a profound suffering due to his experiences in war as an African American man, he disclosed that he benefited greatly due to his pride of service, education, and friendships. Mr. Harris also felt he had been educated by the countries he visited during his service. The other men perceived they had not been cowed by negative experiences of war.

In reconstructing memories about war and suffering, men fashioned coherent narratives that created scenes frozen in time. Their narratives built a bridge between past and present and knit within each man a continuous and persistent sense of self. They also painted moving pictures of African Americans through time and placed the movies on a background that existed in fact—three generations; three wars, and a multitude of expressions of frustration, identity, suffering, and pride in African American history.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is the small number of veterans interviewed. In a short time, the voices of veterans from World War II and Korean War will be silenced. It seems important that research add survivors’ voices to the infinite space reserved for narratives of suffering in war.

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References


