

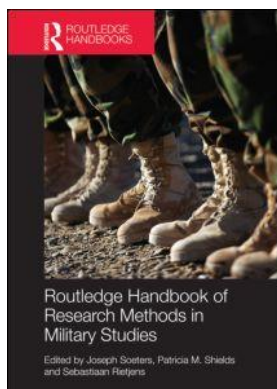
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20

EXPERIMENTAL METHODS IN MILITARY AND VETERAN STUDIES

Jeremy M. Teigen

R.S. Erikson, and L. Stoker (2011) “Caught in the draft: The effects of Vietnam draft lottery status on political attitudes,” *American Political Science Review* 105: 221–237.

Few governmental policies touch the lives of citizens more vividly than conscription. Compulsory induction into a country’s military means that individuals face the possibility of being taken out of their community or country, placed within a new hierarchy with different rules and norms than civilian life, possibly placed into dangerous combat duty, and must remain for an extended period of time, often more than a year. Only incarceration and taxation are in the same league as conscription in terms of how citizens’ fates can be controlled by a government, even in democratic regimes. Does the possibility of being conscripted during a war influence citizens’ attitudes about government? Foreign policy? Political preferences? Erikson and Stoker’s article “Caught in the Draft,” published in 2011 in the leading political science journal *American Political Science Review*, examines these questions using an experimental methodology. They exploit the natural conditions of the draft in the United States in 1969 during the Vietnam War to understand how vulnerability to conscription as a young adult influenced later-life political attitudes.

By using the randomly assigned draft lottery numbers as a proxy for the vulnerability to conscription for a group of men during an unpopular war, Erikson and Stoker’s work uses experimental methodology to reveal the causal influence of war and conscription on citizen’ political attitudes. Field experiments such as this take advantage of arbitrary, or in this case, random assignments of cases to different conditions and leverage the differences between groups to infer causation. Because an exogenous and random individual attribute, one’s birth date, determined the likelihood of being inducted into a wartime military, scholars can exploit these conditions toward understand how draft eligibility influences attitudes (see chapter for details on how the randomization occurred). While the randomization of young men toward their likelihood of military induction provided the causal inferential power, the authors’ data comprised a national panel study of individuals who were all approximately 22 years old. Hence, the authors were able to investigate the political legacy of

conscription's effects by using birth dates to mark vulnerability to military service in early and later life among the same men.

Their findings indicate that military induction policy influences citizens' political attitudes. For young men more susceptible to conscription into the US Army, their views toward the war were more negative. Even decades later, men who drew "unlucky" draft lottery numbers were more likely to see the Vietnam War as a mistake than those with less vulnerability to military service. Erikson and Stoker also found that these men's political preferences were transformed by their relative likelihood of conscription. In the 1972 presidential election, when this cohort was 25 years old, and their draft eligibility was no longer in question, men with high vulnerability to the draft were substantially more likely to vote for the Democratic Party nominee, George McGovern, than they were for Republican Richard Nixon, even when controlling for known correlates of voter preferences.

In the scholarly area of military studies, the opportunities for field experiments and other experimental methodologies are not massive but they are probably underutilized. While complications due to preemptive enlistment and other concerns require attention, conscription provides researchers with potential field experiment data if those that serve are randomly selected. If military service is randomly distributed among citizens, then differences between veterans and nonveterans provide an experimental window into the later-life effects of military service.

The essence of the experimental method is simple: divide individuals into different groups assigned randomly and, leaving one aside as a control group, expose the remaining groups to varying degrees or types of stimuli, measure outcomes among all groups, and infer that any intergroup outcome differences stem from the stimuli differences. Because of the random assignment of subjects to groups, potentially conflating influences that may be correlated with the hypothesized causal relationship are minimized. The method is tantamount to the way that pharmaceutical research tests for the influence of potential drugs in its most elemental form, with the control group standing in for the placebo group. The design of the study has the ability to control subjects' exposure to different treatments, the independent variable. After the groups' subjects are exposed to the stimuli (or in the case of the control group, straightaway), a measure of the dependent variable takes place, the attitude or behavior that the researcher theorized would change. Because the randomness in group assignment negates the role of confounding influences and the fact that the causal phenomenon of interest is the only thing different between the groups, any differences within the dependent variable between groups can therefore be explained by the experimental conditions the researcher set forth, so long as the approach and execution followed appropriate experimental protocols. To express the difference between experimental and observational studies in the most reductionist terms, the former assigns values of the independent variable to subjects while the latter measures those values as they occur naturally.

Experimentation has become mainstream in political science recently, but its use to understand causal relations is not new. The logic of experimentation is at the heart of scientific inquiry and a central tool in making predictions and enhancing generalizable knowledge. John Stuart Mill's contributions to science are difficult to overstate as his nineteenth-century writings formalized conceptions of scientific causation (see also Ruffa and Soeters 2014, Chapter 19 in this volume). Experimentation, the process of suppressing extraneous factors while varying a factor

of interest, is naturally congruent with Mill's method of difference (1848). The design that an analyst can use with an experiment to understand causal linkages can vary. The number of conditions can range from two to any number that befits the theoretical needs of the researcher. Further, the use of pretests and posttests has further implications for ameliorating concerns about an experiment's validity. Campbell and Stanley's authoritative work described these various ways to design stimulus groups within experiments and compares them with an eye toward minimizing validity issues (1963).

Types of experimental studies

Experimental studies generally come in one of two settings, the more controlled laboratory-style research and the more realistic field experiments. "Laboratory studies" accentuate control by bringing subjects into a space designed specifically for exposure to the experimental stimuli. The conditions need not be an actual laboratory of course, as studies frequently utilize classrooms, shopping malls, conference halls, or other venues that are appropriate and tailored for their study. Consider some recent studies that exemplify this type of research. Boettcher and Cobb (2006) used college undergraduates who had volunteered to join a psychological study subject pool for their research on Americans' sensitivity to casualties during war. They administered paper surveys to the students in routine educational settings, and found that the way that mock newspaper articles framed war casualties influenced support for the Iraq War. Schott and his collaborators conducted an important study to understand citizens' feelings toward war after sustaining casualties (2011). Using student subjects and other recruited adults in an experimental laboratory setting and exposing them to different hypothetical situations, they investigated attitudes toward casualties during war and whether people might tolerate higher casualties after having already sustained war deaths. They found that citizens' support for war actually increases after war deaths to avoid a sense of wasting earlier casualties. Attempting to understand how a political candidate's military experience influenced voters, a different study recruited adult subjects to view doctored election campaign advertising by candidates with military service to investigate how typical voters perceive candidates' military biography (Teigen 2013).

In those studies, each resembled some version of what Campbell and Stanley (1963: 8) call a "pretest-posttest control group design." With this design, subjects are randomly allocated to at least two groups: a control group and one or more treatment groups that will be exposed to the stimuli representing the variable of interest. A pretest is administered to all groups' members that includes some measure of the variable of interest. Then, the treatment groups are exposed to the experimental stimuli while the control group is not. Lastly, a posttest measures the variable of interest again. If the values differ between the control group and the treatment group, then the random allocation of subjects ensures that the only reasonable conclusion to explain the difference is the stimuli. Figure 20.1 depicts this experimental design with pretests and posttests and randomization.

A growing subset of the laboratory-style experiments embeds experimental designs within telephone surveys that query many subjects in representative samples of the population. These types of study do not take place in a laboratory at all; they more resemble a typical attitudinal survey conducted over the phone. They work by randomizing the subjects in the respondent pool and assigning them to the different stimuli groups. The groups can receive different background information, different priming, different batteries of questions, and conclude with a common set of questions regarding the dependent variable. In their research on Americans' perceptions of war casualties, Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2009) collected their experimental data

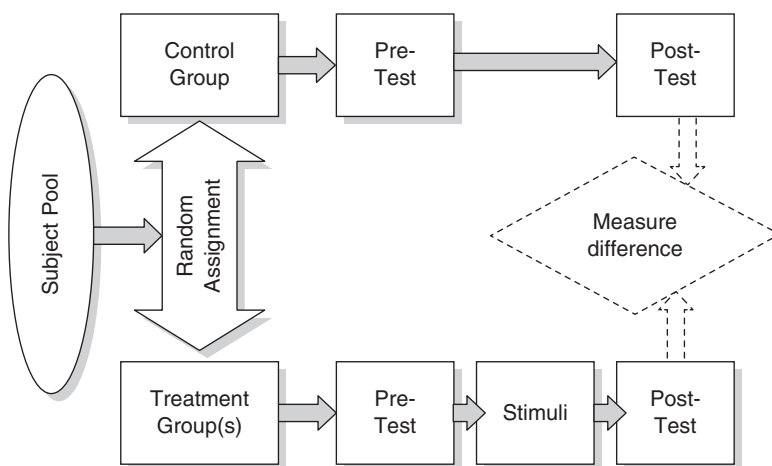


Figure 20.1 Pretest-posttest control group experimental design

Adopted from *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research* (Campbell and Stanley 1963).

using a “large-n” (a study that includes a large number of subjects, typically over 1,000) sample of the population. The subjects in their study were randomly placed into different groups who were presented with different hypothetical American security dilemmas. To generalize the findings from their book, their multi-method study provides evidence suggesting that Americans are more averse to military failure than to casualties.

With laboratory type research, the mechanism that exposes the experimental subjects to the different stimuli must be as standardized as possible. An experiment is thought to have high internal validity if it is internally consistent. The questionnaire or survey instrument, the tone with which the instructions are given to subjects, recruiting protocols, consent forms, et cetera, must be identical across groups. Only the factor that is intended to vary across the groups should differ. The point of the exercise is to attribute any difference in values of the dependent variable to the causal factor introduced to the non-control group(s), ergo every care must be taken by the researchers to homogenize everything else about the experimental conditions.

Beyond the laboratory-style experiments that use subjects who are recruited or surveyed with tightly controlled stimuli designs or in large surveys, the other type of experimentation in the social sciences is field experimentation, sometimes referred to as natural experiments and quasi-experiments. These studies exploit conditions in the real world that either closely resemble random or arbitrary subject selection into different groups to create a natural experiment, or are quasi-experiments that take advantage of nonrandom group selection that is methodologically useful because of the group contrasts. The subjects live and react to the forces that the research identifies post hoc as variables of interest, so the research lacks the artificiality of the laboratory setting. Researchers refer to the ability to extrapolate findings from an experiment to the real world as external validity, and field experiments enjoy higher external validity than their laboratory counterparts (Gerber 2011). On the downside, researchers with these designs are constrained in the questions they can research because they lack control over the parameters and application of the stimuli.

Scholars have taken advantage of conscription policies for experimentation in the area of military and veteran studies. When demand for manpower was at its highest during the

United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, young men's chances of being compulsorily drafted into the armed forces were based upon their birth dates starting in 1969. The 366 days of the year were randomly selected to create an order to draft young men as needed. The government's purpose in conducting this draft lottery system, using arbitrary attributes of the eligible men such as the month and day of their birth was presumably to make the system fair. For a researcher, because the men were randomly ordered into groups with higher and lower likelihood of being inducted, men born between 1944 and 1950 inadvertently comprise a rich study pool to measure the effects of draft eligibility through natural experimentation. One such study by Erikson and Stoker is highlighted as this chapter's illustrative study. The dataset from which the study measures political attitudes had the further benefit of being a longitudinal study, so political attitudes prior to the draft were measured, which serves a pretest akin to the experimental design depicted in Figure 20.1. Their important work studies how an individual's early-life vulnerability to the 1969 draft shaped later-life attitudes toward war, political ideology, and even their voting behavior in subsequent presidential elections.

Earlier studies have also exploited the draft lottery system as a natural experiment. One study ruled out draft vulnerability as an explanation for higher self-reported alcohol consumption among military veterans with the lottery data (Goldberg et al. 1991), and other studies have used the same lottery data to examine the implications of military service on later-life earnings (e.g. Angrist 1990). In essence, these studies exploit the government's induction policy to remove confounding explanatory reasons, such as self-selection or socioeconomic origins, and allow them to isolate and ascribe causal explanations to data patterns in the real world. It is important to note the difficulty in conducting a pretest prior to the stimuli. While not fatal to the inferential power of such an experiment, studies with pretests exhibit more validity. Figure 20.2 visually demonstrates the process of a simple version of this experimental design without a pretest, which Campbell and Stanley refer to as "posttest-only control group design" (1963: 25). Goldberg et al.'s study on drinking (1991), for example, uses this experimental design by comparing those with high draft eligibility versus those with low likelihood of conscription on alcohol consumption measured years later.

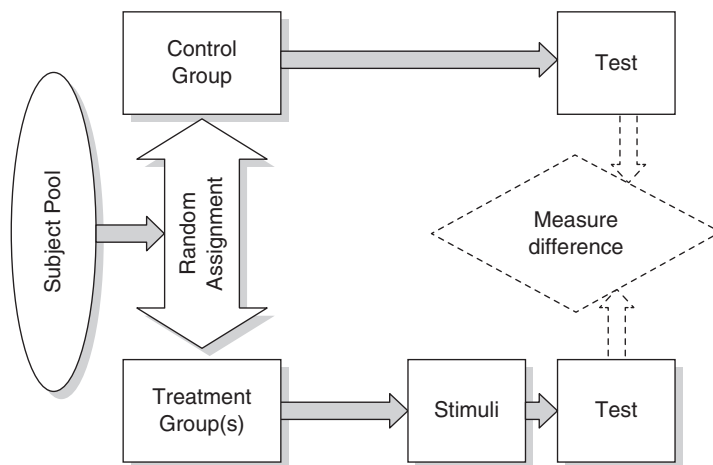


Figure 20.2 Posttest-only control group experimental design

Adopted from *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research* (Campbell and Stanley 1963).

Subject selection

The selection of subjects depends on the nature of the research question. The relatively small number of experimental studies in the field of military and veteran studies have generally used civilians or civilian military veterans as subjects because the research questions they posed related to attitudes about the military, foreign policy, war casualties, and other topics. Some of these studies have sought to understand how citizens within a democracy feel about military institutions, governments, policy, or wars, and with this aim, the subject pool need not be members of the military. Sometimes, researchers select specialized or unique subject pools to match with their study's design. Kleykamp's (2009) study on whether past military service makes a job candidate more attractive to potential employers sent manipulated résumés to real, advertised job listings to compare responses, making the hiring employers the subjects of the study.

While some question the use of samples of convenience when conducting experimental research, college students can serve as appropriate experimental subjects if the study seeks to generalize knowledge about how typical members of the public would react to given stimuli. An observational study hoping to infer something about attitudes or behavior in a nation's electorate requires a representative sample of the public, typically achieved through the random sampling methods used by polling outfits, and these samples need to exceed approximately 1,000 to keep the margin of error at or under about 3 percent. An experimental study does not need a representative sample of the public, nor does it demand a large sample akin to a national survey. It only needs to be large enough to obtain sufficient statistical power, depending on in part, the level of significance sought (Stephano 2003). The inferential power of an experiment stems from the random assignment of subjects to groups and the controlled stimuli, not necessarily from the size or representativeness of the subject pool itself.

Rationale

The key reason behind employing experimental methods is to gain leverage on causal relationships. Observational studies provide scholars with an estimate of the existence and strength of relationships between variables or concepts and may give great insight toward possible causal relationships. However, these studies cannot account for all the possible reasons behind why some cases exhibit one value of the dependent variable while others cases vary. Imagine a tongue-in-cheek hypothetical study that found, through a well-conducted survey of service members, compelling evidence that members of a nation's navy preferred life at sea while those in that same nation's army preferred to keep their boots on terra firma. If the researchers of such a study hoped to conclude that something related to serving in one branch or the other influenced their attitudes toward nautical or terrestrial life, the observational methodology only hints at causation. While the research would be valid if it concluded nothing beyond "those in the navy prefer x, while those in the army prefer y," the epistemological aim for many social scientists is to establish and understand causal explanations. One could not conclude that service in the navy is what engendered the preference for life on the high seas. Self-selection biases might also explain the difference, meaning those with a priori preferences for life at sea seek out a career in the navy. Social desirability might also explain the difference: those in the army's ranks may perceive a "correct" response to the survey question. Beyond those, many other conflating forces might be muddying the waters of why members of one branch feel one way or the other even if the two variables correspond in a strong pattern.

While the correlation between branch of service among military members versus their preference for living ashore or at sea may be vivid and obvious in the data, observational studies

indicate relations and inform our scholarly understanding of the phenomena but cannot rule out other causal paths that might explain variation of the dependent variable. To observe and measure people, countries, or military institutions is to see how they are, and can reveal how different phenomena interrelate, but making conclusions about causal relationships based on those observational studies alone is methodologically problematic. Even when observational studies control for known correlates of their independent variable, by their nature, no observational study can possibly “control for” as many possible causal explanations as an experimental design.

A more realistic example might entail the analytic problems with understanding the causal mechanisms behind why different individuals with different racial and ethnic identities in the armed forces perceive different level of satisfaction with their job in the military. Much has been written about race and identity in the U.S. armed forces on important topics such as racial integration, the all-volunteer force, noncitizens' service, and other matters. One recent article used cross-sectional survey data from men and women in the ranks of the U.S. military to demonstrate differences between gender, race, and ethnic groups in regard to views about job satisfaction and happiness in the ranks (Lundquist 2008). Using appropriate multivariate models to quantitatively estimate the relationship between race, ethnic, and gender variables and self-assessed job satisfaction, Lundquist concluded that minority groups enjoy higher levels of satisfaction in their military roles than minority groups in civilian occupational roles. This finding, she asserts, stems from the meritocratic nature of military hierarchies that lacks many of the structural inequalities found in civilian life.

To be sure, her conclusion is plausible, empirically based, and accords with other persuasive and previous research in this scholarly domain (Moskos and Butler 1996). However, it is difficult to infer causation from the relationship that the regression tables indicate exists. Is the ostensibly meritocratic structure of promotions and recruiting in the military the reason behind elevated levels of minority job satisfaction? Certainly, job satisfaction depends on the military's structure in some fashion, but an observational study such as this one, while valuable and informative, only suggests at the causal role of structure on attitudes. The study comprises control variables in the quantitative models, and the cross-sectional data quality and size are about as good as one can expect given the difficult-to-sample nature of military members (Dempsey 2009). Self-selection biases that likely influence who serves and who does not in the all-volunteer era are challenging to contend with analytically. Lundquist's observational study does not control for a priori attitudes because the data design cannot allow it, and large, representative panel studies are costly endeavors. Even if the study could control for previously held attitudes, it would still not be able to claim that the military's structure is the sole cause of the racial differences because racial, ethnic, and gender identities are likely correlated substantively with a host of other attitudes and social phenomena that are not ‘in the model,’ and hence are possibly biasing inferences about the causal role of the specified independent variables.

As a complement to observational studies, experiments help understand the causal relationships because they manipulate values of an independent variable, a postulated causal path, and then assess how those differences influence variation within the dependent variable. Experiments in political science have increased substantially, starting in the 1980s and beyond (Druckman et al. 2006), and while experiments do not benefit all studies of the military, veterans, and civil-military relations, recent experimental studies within the field show that there is room for increased use of the method.

Drawbacks and limitations of experimental research

Considering again the problems of observational research highlighted with the superficial example of the army and navy service members, I pointed out that observational studies cannot nail

down the causal explanation while experimental methodologies have that ability. In order to design an experimental study that would provide an explanation of cause, we could consider the following: the observational study lacked the ability to pinpoint cause due to the potentially confounding influences of unseen correlates, such as self-selection. We cannot state that service in the navy engenders a preference for life at sea even if the observational data correlate strongly because we cannot rule out alternative explanations, such as the fact that people with a priori nautical preferences choose the navy over the army. So, to remedy this analytic shortcoming by piloting an experimental approach, the solution is theoretically simple. To eliminate the potentially biased results, we only need to randomize the subjects' entry paths into the military by contacting the government in question and directing them to change their recruitment and induction policies. Rather than recruit to further defense and security needs, the government should instead allow social scientists to direct manpower decisions for the purposes of conducting research. This outcome is obviously not only unlikely but is rather politically and ethically dubious.

Experimental approaches to conduct social scientific research are circumscribed by limits that proscribe their use in several contexts. An early empirical study refuting claims that experience in the armed forces increased authoritarian attitudes among its members actually concluded by lamenting the impossibility of using an experiment in their context while explaining its difficulty: ' . . . ideally one should have had a true experiment in which equated groups were assigned by lot to various military and civilian life experiences and their attitudes compared after an appropriate period of time. But such an experiment not only is unfeasible but would not even then be ideal, as the experimental assignment would inevitably be obvious to the participants and as such would be so special a source of resentment and self-consciousness as to preclude generalization to the normal' (Campbell and McCormack 1957: 489). The drawbacks and limitations of experimentation generally stem from two sources: problems with external validity and shortcomings stemming from practical and ethical limits. These limits, which vex experimental researchers across the social sciences, are also constraining to those studying military topics and veterans.

The ability for an experiment to yield findings that pertain to the real world is referred to as external validity. Experimental designs gain their analytic advantages from controlling the environment in which subjects encounter the stimuli, but this control also contributes to the main weakness of experimental methodologies: the setting in which the experiment takes place where "results" are measured may be too far removed from how ordinary subjects in the real world encounter stimuli and react to it. Several of the experimental research examples cited above, as well as others, illustrate how citizens in a democracy react to battle casualties while a nation is at war. They employed experiments where arbitrary subjects were exposed to hypothetical wars or conflicts, often with conditional statements about casualties. Part of Gartner's (2008) study on how Americans' perceive casualties and casualty trends uses an experimental design with manipulated casualty rates in a hypothetical conflict. As the author concedes, it is challenging to infer that the findings from an artificial setting extend to explaining how people will react to real casualties, stating "[t]he concern is about external validity, that the scenarios represent artificial tests that lack real world applicability" (Gartner 2008: 105). His work is similar to Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler's (2009) book, not only in its subject of war and perceptions of casualties, but also in the way that it uses multiple methodologies to hedge against the analytic shortcomings of any one of them.

Another criticism of experimental methods on external validity grounds is the unrepresentativeness of the usual subject in experimental studies: college undergraduates. Their availability and willingness to participate in studies have made students a staple of experimental research in the social sciences. Random assignment of test subjects to the experiment's various conditions washes away potentially confounding attributes that subjects bring with them. However, if the

pool of possible subjects differs substantially from the population, representativeness concerns arise. College students represent a “narrow data base” and they differ in important ways from the population and those distinctions might have implications for the inferences drawn from experiments that employ them (Sears 1986: 515). They are younger and enjoy more cognitive skills than average, but their attitudes have often not coalesced and they have an underdeveloped sense of self and are more likely to comply with authority figures. They also consume news media in different ways than older adults. The degree to which college sophomore data are biased in this way may not always be a problem for experiments in military studies and potential biases hinge on the questions asked. In terms of the topic that has heretofore been most commonly investigated in military studies with experiments, war casualty sensitivity, potential bias from college sophomore data may arise from the fact that conscription or selective service may seem more salient for that age group.

Other threats to external validity for experiments in military studies are common to most laboratory or classroom style experimentation. The execution of the experimental research design may create effects itself that may erroneously appear as effects from the hypothesized independent variables. Unintended artifacts of the testing conditions, forms, question wording, research assistant demeanor, or other peculiarities may introduce results that will quietly bias the results that appear in the data. So-called “observer effects” may also introduce exaggerated or understated findings, referring to the possible tendency of experimental subjects to change their attitudes or behavior because of their awareness of the observation. For these issues, endemic to laboratory experimentation, the best remedy is to scrutinize the experiment’s setting and protocols seeking to homogenize the experience across all groups.

Beyond practical limits to the subject and nature of experimentation in military and veteran studies, there are also ethical limits. In order to conduct human subject research, colleges and universities since the 1960s have developed ethics panels and institutional review boards to approve research on human subjects based upon an evaluation of the risks to subjects versus the potential for generalizable knowledge gained by such a study. The need for such protection of human subjects has its roots in concerns over biomedical research, and implementing these protections for evaluating work in political science, especially with interviewing and field work, has not been without problems (Schrag 2010). Experimentation as it has manifested in military and veteran studies presents little risk of harm to human subjects beyond the use of deception and the presentation of hypothetical casualties in a fictional scenario. It is the norm for studies to acquire subjects’ consent for conducting research, frequently in written form. Deception in social scientific experiments, ruses that researchers employ to obfuscate the nature of the experiment’s protocol and intent, generally involve minimal risk to subjects and these risks are minimized by conducting a debriefing after the experiment’s stimuli and measurements have concluded.

Conclusion

To summarize, experimental methods are not a rival to observational studies, they are a complement to help scholars better establish causation. Using experiments successfully entails carefully balancing the concerns of internal and external validity. With gains in controlling the stimuli and context for experimental subjects come commensurate declines in the real world generalizability of a study. The most successful examples of research here rely not solely upon experiments to draw conclusions but rather employ multiple methodologies to gain traction on understanding causes and effects (e.g. Erikson and Stoker 2011; Gelpi et al. 2009). In the realm of military studies, investigating how citizens react to and feel about war casualties has been the most ripe area for experimentation, but that does not preclude innovations in other areas of studying civil–military relations, staffing, leadership, veterans, or other topics. New data sources

have emerged that allow for relatively low-cost experimentation using internet opportunities, such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Experiments are not a panacea for all scholars or questions in military and veteran studies, but their increased use and acceptance in political science means that we should look for opportunities to employ them to better understand phenomena within our field.

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