



A prospective study of homesickness in soldiers during military deployment



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ABSTRACT

Homesickness has been shown to negatively affect a person's physical, social, and cognitive wellbeing. Research on homesickness tends to focus on university students, young students, and immigrants, and has largely ignored another vulnerable population, namely soldiers deployed to military service. Here we examine homesickness in a company of soldiers who were deployed to Afghanistan for six months in 2009. We used measures of personality, depression, and autobiographical memory, all obtained prior to deployment, to predict homesickness during deployment. Pre-deployment measures of neuroticism, and depression as well as a tendency to rehearse one's most negative autobiographical memory, were all predictors of homesickness during deployment. The present study is unique in its prospective design, use of a military sample, and the inclusion of autobiographical memory measures. It replicates and extends previous findings to a military sample and shows the importance of considering memories of negative life events.

1. A prospective study of homesickness in soldiers during military deployment

Homesickness has been shown to negatively affect a person's physical, social, and cognitive wellbeing. Typically, it is described as arising from a response to a geographic move away from one's normal environment (Fisher, 1989). Homesickness is mainly examined in populations of university students (Beck, Taylor, & Robbins, 2003; Carden & Feicht, 1991; Fisher & Hood, 1987; Fisher & Hood, 1988; Lu, 1990; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010), young students (Fisher, Frazer, & Murray, 1984; Fisher, Frazer, & Murray, 1986; Kerns, Brumariu, & Abraham, 2008; Tartakovsky, 2007), and foreigners in a new country (Eurelings-Bontekoe, Brouwers, & Verschuur, 2000; Nicassio & Pate, 1984; Vergara, Smith, & Keele, 2010; Ying, 2005) (for reviews see Fisher, 1989; Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015). Unfortunately, these studies ignore a large population who have experienced a significant geographic move and who therefore may suffer from homesickness, namely, soldiers deployed to military service abroad. In the present study, we examined homesickness in a company of soldiers who were deployed to Afghanistan in 2009. We used measures of personality, depression, and autobiographical memory obtained before deployment to predict homesickness during deployment.

Most of the studies on homesickness have focused on children and young adults, and typically examined personality traits as predictive measures of homesickness (see Fisher, 1989; Stroebe et al., 2015, for reviews). It is often found that high levels of neuroticism are predictive of homesickness (Van Heck et al., 1997; Verschuur, Eurelings-Bontekoe,

Spinhoven, & Duijsens, 2003). Low levels of extraversion and openness to experience have also been shown to play a role in the development of homesickness (Eurelings-Bontekoe, 1997; Van Heck et al., 1997). Furthermore, those who seek to escape the reality of their new environment with fantasies and day dreams of home have an increased likelihood of homesickness (see Van Heck et al., 1997 for review). Of the psychological disorders, depression is often correlated with homesickness, though their exact relationship is less understood (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002). Stroebe et al. (2002) conducted a cross-cultural comparison study of homesickness in college students in the Netherlands and the UK. One purpose of the study was to determine the relationship of homesickness and depression. Using path analyses, the authors found support for their hypothesis that homesickness precedes depression. However, the authors note that given their cross-sectional design, a common limitation in the homesickness literature (Stroebe et al., 2015), they cannot rule out the possibility of other relationships between homesickness and depression (i.e., depression precedes homesickness) Therefore, the authors suggested longitudinal studies to examine this relationship further (Stroebe et al., 2002).

1.1. Homesickness and military populations

While military populations are often studied in relation to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), little is known about the extent to which soldiers experience homesickness during military service.

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¹ The data analyzed and presented in the present article is available upon request to the second author.

However, research on homesickness in the military has theoretical as well as applied relevance. First, homesickness may interfere with performance during military service, by involving a sense of loneliness, ruminations about home, depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms (Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, & Currid, 1998; Bell & Bromnick, 1998; Burt, 1993; Fisher, 1989), which are states associated with cognitive and attentional problems. In a study of military-trainees, Du, Derks, Bakker, and Lu (2017) found that daily homesickness negatively affected not only job performance, but also safety on the job. Second, homesickness might add to our knowledge on desertion, which is a major problem receiving substantial attention (Ramsberger & Bell, 2002; also see Woodbury, 1921). In a recent study on deserters at Fort Knox, the two most common reasons given for leaving were family problems (33%) and a failure to adapt to the military (31%) (Briefing, n.d.; also see Bell & Houston, 1976). Given the previously mentioned symptoms, homesickness has been shown to consequently affect one's ability to adapt to a new environment (Bell & Bromnick, 1998; Fisher, 1989; van Vliet, 2001) and therefore may prevent a soldier from adapting to military life.

The few studies that have measured homesickness in the military have mainly focused on somatic symptoms (Corp, 1791; Tausk, 1969) and personality characteristics (Eurelings-Bontekoe, Duijsens, & Verschuur, 1996; Sandal, Endresen, Vaernes, & Ursin, 1999) in order to predict or explain homesickness. Eurelings-Bontekoe, Vingerhoets, and Fontijn (1994) examined how personality traits correlated with homesickness in soldiers in the Dutch army. Those, who were suffering from severe homesickness, were found to score high on measures of shyness, social anxiety, and low assertiveness. Furthermore, the homesickness group had poor coping mechanisms for dealing with their homesickness, using such techniques as daydreaming and withdrawal (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 1994).

One limitation of these previous studies is that they have adapted a cross-sectional design, such that measures of personality, cognitions, and psychological disorders are obtained after homesickness has developed. This design limits the ability to disentangle variables predictive of homesickness from states caused by, or following, the development of homesickness. Only a few studies have used a prospective design. In the non-military literature, Smith, Hanrahan, Anderson, and Abbott (2015) predicted homesickness in athletes at sporting institutions. Smith et al. (2015) measured personality, coping styles, and homesickness at two intervals, three weeks apart. The authors found that neuroticism, lower self-esteem, and mental escape were predictors of homesickness (Smith et al., 2015). In the military literature, Sandal et al. (1999) examined homesickness and stress in a study of NATO submariner crews who participated in 10-day or 40-day missions. Comparing the 10-day versus 40-day missions, the authors found a significant increase in homesickness for the crew on the 40-day mission, especially in the last week of the mission. Seeking social support was also predictive of homesickness, which the authors conclude may be related to dependency and low self-esteem (Sandal et al., 1999).

1.2. Homesickness and autobiographical memory

By involving longings for a temporarily or permanently lost personal environment, homesickness is related to autobiographical memory (e.g., Salaman, 1982). Autobiographical memory is closely related to the self and the way in which we interpret and makes sense of the past (i.e., Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Berntsen & Rubin, 2007; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Pillemer, 2003). It is therefore possible that differences in the ways we remember our personal past may be associated with vulnerability to homesickness. In non-clinical populations, the fading affect bias, which is the rate at which a memory decreases in affective intensity as time passes, helps to maintain a generally positive state of mind. However, rehearsal of autobiographical memories for non-social purposes (e.g., recalling an event involuntarily) has been shown to reduce the fading affect bias such that negative memories may be remembered with the same intensity as

positive memories (Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Ritchie, 2009; Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003). Highly vivid and intense negative autobiographical memories prior to deployment therefore might be associated with a vulnerability to developing homesickness during deployment, particularly if these memories are kept to oneself.

1.3. Present study

The present study is unique in several major aspects. First, it uses a prospective design, predicting homesickness measured during deployment by measures obtained prior to deployment. Most of the studies examining homesickness do so after homesickness has developed. That is, they measure all variables at the same time and separate groups based on their levels of homesickness (Stroebe et al., 2015, for review). Second, the present study predicted homesickness in soldiers deployed to military service, which is rarely done even though it could be of critical importance with regard to desertion, job performance, and company morale. Third, we extend previous work on personality as a predictive factor by also including measures of autobiographical memory. While previous studies often measure tendencies to use mental escape to deal with homesickness or having repetitive thoughts of home (see Fisher, 1989; Stroebe et al., 2015, for reviews), we included autobiographical memory measures on soldiers' most negative and most positive memories from their lifetime. Therefore, we are not solely focusing on their thoughts of home, but how their negative and positive memories are affecting their current well-being.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 381 soldiers of the Danish Contingent of the International Security Assistance Force 7 (ISAF 7) completed personality, mental health, and autobiographical memory questionnaires prior to deployment to Afghanistan in 2009, as well as a homesickness questionnaire during deployment (see Berntsen et al., 2012, for details). The sample had a mean age of 26.14 years ($SD = 8.00$), and 359 (94.23%) were men. All soldiers were volunteers and varied in rank: 67.72% were privates, 21.00% were sergeants, and 11.29% were officers. The soldiers were part of a larger company of 746 Danish soldiers involved in a longitudinal study addressing mental health, risk factors, and other relevant measures before, during and after deployment (see also Berntsen et al., 2012).

2.2. Measures

The soldiers answered a series of questionnaires prior to their deployment (Berntsen et al., 2012). However, only some are relevant for the present study. We included measures typically used in homesickness studies, in addition to measures of autobiographical memory, as described in the introduction:

(1) The second edition of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) which is a 21-item measure of depressive symptoms (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$).

(2) The NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1989) is a 63-item questionnaire which measures the five-factors of personality: Neuroticism (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$), Extraversion (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$), Openness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$), Conscientiousness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$), and Agreeableness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

(3) The White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) which is a 15-item measure of thought suppression (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

(4) The Autobiographical Memory Questionnaire (AMQ; Rubin, Feldman, & Beckham, 2003). Soldiers answered the AMQ prior to deployment with their most negative memory and most positive memory

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