



Examining the effect of combat excitement & diminished civilian solidarity on life satisfaction for American veterans

Gary Senecal^{a,*}, MaryCatherine McDonald^b, Richard LaFleur^c, Charles Coey^d

^a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology, College of the Holy Cross, 1 College St, Worcester, MA, 01610, United States

^b Old Dominion University, United States

^c The University of West Georgia, United States

^d Brigham & Women's Hospital, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Military veteran social reintegration
Aggressive tendencies
Civilian solidarity
Combat excitement
Antisocial tendencies

ABSTRACT

The data accounting for the difficulties many OIF and OEF veterans experience upon reintegration into civilian society have been thoroughly documented over the last fifteen years. Among these difficulties, some veterans experience antisocial, self-injurious, and violent tendencies upon returning to civilian life. In this research project, 220 veterans were completed self-report surveys pertaining to their transition from military life to a civilian career. Some of the participants' responses revealed that there was a significant emotional and motivational dimension to the formation of otherwise aggressive and self-destructive tendencies activated upon leaving their military careers and culture. The term combat excitement was coined to articulate participants' anticipation of enemy contact while deployed. This study demonstrates that high levels of combat excitement correlated with lower life satisfaction and lower civilian solidarity for participants in their civilian lives after leaving an active duty setting. Furthermore, civilians solidarity had a strong positive correlation with life satisfaction for participants. Ultimately, this study looks at how significant strong civilian relationships are vital to the health and life satisfaction of veterans as they leave active duty, as well as how combat excitement can weaken the tendency of veterans to have strong civilian relationships after service.

1. Introduction

The mainstream literature on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and veteran reintegration overlooks the possibility of a serious void in the lives of veterans when they leave active duty or return from deployment. Some veterans find difficulties moving into a more sedated civilian career and lifestyle because they were emotionally, psychologically, and socially aroused by aspects of combat (Senecal, McDonald, LaFleur, & Coey, 2018a, b; Caddick & Smith, 2014; Junger, 2010; Junger, 2016; Worthen & Ahern, 2014). Resultantly, symptoms and struggles may onset that are consistent with the range of symptoms often tied to PTSD. However, the etiology of these symptoms is often not directly connected to traditional conceptualizations of PTSD and instead result from the absence of camaraderie and/or excitement in civilian life.

The classic description of the etiology and symptoms of PTSD in the DSM-5 is as an anxiety disorder that occurs after a person is victimized or has spectated a traumatic event or series of traumatic events (i.e., unexpected death, violence, brutality, aggression, sexual assault,

natural disaster, car accident, etc.). In order to meet criteria for PTSD, a patient has to presently manifest a series of symptoms from each of the four clusters specified in the DSM - intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. These symptoms also must be measured relative to their presence and duration in arousal and reactivity (DSM-5, 2013). Ultimately, when an individual is diagnosed with PTSD, they are presumed to have witnessed a tragic, life-threatening, or shocking event. The experience of such an event is what gives rise to these physiological, psychological, and somatic symptoms.

However, what is minimized in this conceptualization is the possibility that social reintegration struggles veterans face may not solely be the result of standing witness to a traumatic event. In this research project, we set out to examine the contribution of social reintegration issues for veterans. We hypothesize that beyond standing witness to traumatic events in war, there are likely other motivational and emotional struggles reintegrating soldiers may face when returning from active duty. Among these, we tested for the effect that combat excitement would have on the veteran, especially if he or she experienced

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gsenecal@holycross.edu (G. Senecal).

combat excitement but was unable to find a civilian career that matched the expression of this drive for the reintegrating soldier.

We defined sensation excitement and combat excitement as the soldier's desire to engage in combat and enemy contact, inclination to engage in high-risk behavior, and positive anticipation of such events. We asked questions that probed how willing the soldier was to move into dangerous territory and take up dangerous missions. In many ways, this factor – combat excitement – differs significantly from the classical conceptualization of PTSD. Combat excitement may even be the exact inverse of the classical definition of PTSD. If the soldier experienced combat excitement, the soldier's struggles are not necessarily derived from the witnessing of combat. In this instance, the range of symptoms and struggles are derived from the inability to experience combat on a regular basis.

Furthermore, this study also examined the strength of veteran's relationships upon leaving active duty service settings. We scrutinize the connections that veterans have formed or fail to form with civilians in their life after war (e.g. coworkers, neighbors, family, friends, etc.). We suspected that the strength of these relationships would have an effect on health and wellness for soldiers who are no longer serving on active duty. Likewise, we examined the relationship between the veteran's experience of sensation/combat excitement and the relationships he or she was able to cultivate with civilians.

1.1. Theoretical considerations - the allure of war

It is important to examine the allure of war, violence, and violent circumstances in relation to a life-style that conditions and promotes violent tendencies, mindsets, and behaviors. A broad array of thinkers – from psychologists, to philosophers, to war journalists – have speculated upon the draw to war and other violent circumstances for those who engage in conflict and/or live in warzones. These thinkers have produced a subset of theoretical literature on this topic.

Sebastian Junger's renowned and acclaimed documentary “Restrepo” was produced and released alongside his book “War” (2010). Both serve to recount the lived, subjective, firstperson experience of the young men who served in 110th Infantry Battle Company in the Korengal Valley in Eastern Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008. When Junger discusses killing, he turns his attention toward the complex relationship that some soldiers have to this facet of combat. Despite the antipathy to some aspects of battle (e.g. death of comrades), the adrenaline rush, focus, experience of flow, and psychosomatic energy experienced while engaging the enemy in a firefight is unprecedented and possibly difficult to recreate outside of war.

Beyond these emotional experiences, there is an incredible sense of purpose, meaning, and connection to one's peers that individuals find in violent situations. Junger writes:

Perfectly sane, good men have been drawn back to combat over and over again, and anyone interested in the idea of world peace would do well to know what they're looking for. Not killing, necessarily ... but the other side of the equation: protecting. The defense of the tribe is an insanely compelling idea, and once you've been exposed to it, there's almost nothing else you'd rather do. (Junger, 2010, p. 214, p. 214)

In this case, the draw was a primal reckoning of certain instincts that lead an individual, even a sane and moral individual, to return to violent circumstances. Despite the fact that neither the vulnerability of one's platoon members nor the killing of the enemy is totally satisfying to all soldiers, there is an incredible sense of honor and dignity in standing courageously in the midst of risking harm to oneself for the sake of others. Junger describes a moment when the lieutenant of the platoon, after five days without a firefight, expresses how he wishes the platoon would be attacked (Junger, 2010). It is indeed curious - if not bizarre - that the individual charged with protecting these men would wish for a firefight.

This illustrates a more generalized notion among the soldiers - the notion that there was at least an element of combat that was sought after. The rush of adrenaline in the combat experience can be arousing and there are grounds to speculate that some soldiers will miss the ability to bask in the intensity of this experience when returning to a peaceful, orderly, safe, and civilized world. When one soldier is asked what he misses most about being in the army and being deployed in a combat zone, he answers strangely and politely – “Ma'm, I miss almost everything about it” (Junger, 2014). Ultimately, Junger is expressing how violence, combat, and high-risk behaviors have much to offer and can be deeply alluring to those willing to engage.

Similar to Junger, veteran war journalist Christopher Hedges (2002) articulates the draw to war for large contingents of people. According to Hedges, whole communities derive a profound sense of purpose by joining in the collective pursuit of violent endeavors. He coins this as a sort of primal cultural seduction in the collective blood lust that is so easily and readily conjured across cultures and through time. Articulating the cultural draw of war, he writes:

Casual encounters are charged with a raw, high-voltage sexual energy ... The erotic in war is like the rush of battle. It overwhelms the participants. Women who might not otherwise be hailed as beauties are endowed with the charms of Helen. Men endowed with little more than the power to kill are lionized and desired. (Hedges, 2002, p. 25, p. 25)

That is, we are all drawn, time and time-again, to the theatre of war. If not as soldiers or combatants than as civilian participants, open to and complicit with the nationalist cause – cheering our troops in the heat of combat and offering our unconditional support no different than we do prior to the start of a sports season. According to Hedges, there is a ubiquitous, primal, and collective drive to be involved in war as a culture, nation, and community. Our lives are, at least temporarily, enriched, given clarity, bound in solidarity with our peers, and offered a heightened level of sensations and perceptions in the midst of these conflicts.

Lastly, James Hillman (2004), working within a Jungian psychoanalytic framework, has attempted to make sense of the human propensity for violence, conflict, and, most specifically, war. His work is ranging, but the theme worth examination for this paper is his espousal of the subliminal nature of war. Regarding the subliminal experience of war, Hillman classifies a pervasive and aesthetic hunger in the human psyche when it comes to the process of engaging an enemy with a group of like-minded comrades. He opens the book with a quote from the character that plays General David Patton in the biopic film of his life. Hillman writes, “The General walks the field after battle ... He takes up a dying officer, kisses him, surveys the havoc, and says: ‘I Love it. God help me I do love it so. I love it more than my life’” (Hillman, 2004, p. 2).

Hillman continues, further explaining this curious marriage between love and war, marking war as aesthetically equivalent with “the sublime.” In broaching the notion of the sublime, Hillman, again, conjures the intellect of a large breadth of thought. He begins by defining the sublime in quoting Edmund Burke: “(the sublime is) what is any sort terrible ... it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling.” He continues, demonstrating Kant's notion of the sublime as a sort of “negative pleasure,” beauty as “an awesome and heart-stopping universal force that stands over the entire universe as a kind of ultimate principle.” Hillman continues, offering vivid examples of individuals chasing the sublime, all while posing the questions that plagues our conscience around violence: what are we doing when we pursue violent endeavors; why are we drawn to places of conflict, danger, and self-harm; what are we after in these experiences? Hillman alludes to possibilities that have drawn individuals to violence throughout history and across cultures. First, according to Hillman, an inappropriate division has been made between beauty and horror. The uniqueness of the sublime experience is that within horror,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/11008053>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/11008053>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)