



Testing the main hypotheses of the interpersonal–psychological theory of suicidal behavior in a large diverse sample of United States military personnel

Michael D. Anestis*, Lauren R. Khazem, Richard S. Mohn, Bradley A. Green

University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA

Abstract

Background: Preliminary data indicate the suicide rate in the United States military decreased in 2013, but the National Guard saw a continued increase.

Method: We examined the utility of the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior (IPT) in a sample of US military personnel drawn largely from the National Guard ($n = 934$; 77.7% male; 59.5% white).

Results: Results indicated the interaction of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness predicted suicidal ideation and resolved plans and preparations for suicide. In each case, risk was greatest at higher levels of both predictors. Furthermore, results indicated the interaction of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability for suicide predicted prior suicide attempts. In this interaction term, the relationship between suicidal desire (thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness) and suicide attempts was significant and positive only at high levels of acquired capability. All analyses were cross-sectional.

Conclusions: Results indicate the IPT may be useful for conceptualizing suicide risk in the National Guard.

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Suicide in the military has been a growing concern that has garnered much attention from both the media and those involved in suicide prevention efforts. Recent research indicates that members of the military are significantly more likely to die by suicide during an attempt than are members of the general population, even when only considering methods other than self-inflicted gunshot wounds [1]. Since 2009, when the suicide rate in the military first eclipsed that of the general population [2,3], a trend of increasing military suicides has been observed, as suicides increased from 18.5 to 22.7 out of 100,000 active duty

military members [4,5]. Recent preliminary data released to the Associated Press by the Department of Defense, however, indicate that this trend may be reversing, as the suicide rate for active duty members decreased by 18% in 2013 [6]. This promising shift was not universal across all components of the military, as suicide rates in the National Guard continued to rise in 2013 [7]. This continued increase in suicides in this branch of the military indicates a crucial need to investigate the mechanisms contributing to these individuals' desire for death and ability to engage in these suicide attempts.

Suicidal behavior in both military and civilian populations has previously been explained through the lens of the interpersonal–psychological theory of suicide (IPT) [8,9], which posits that the joint presence of three variables is necessary for an individual to engage in lethal or serious suicide attempts. The first variable – perceived burdensomeness – refers to an individual's belief that he or she is a burden to others, and other people would benefit more from his or her death than continued life. Research has supported the association between perceived burdensomeness and suicidal desire in both civilian [10–12] and military samples [13,14]. Those involved in the military specifically reported these aspects of burdensomeness post-deployment: feelings

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* Corresponding author at: Nina Bell Suggs Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive, Box #5025, Hattiesburg, MS, 39406. Tel.: +1 601 266 6742; fax: +1 601 266 5580.

E-mail address: michael.anestis@usm.edu (M.D. Anestis).

of being a burden to their families, loss of self, purpose, and status, and difficulty with reintegrating into civilian life after combat [15].

The second variable necessary for an individual to engage in a lethal or serious suicide attempt – thwarted belongingness – refers to an individual’s feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as a lack of reciprocal, caring and meaningful relationships [8]. Military personnel have previously reported feelings of disconnect (an aspect of thwarted belongingness) with others [16], including civilians [15], indicating the possibility of the existence of this construct in military members, specifically after deployment. Consistent with the IPTS, thwarted belongingness has been associated with suicidal desire in both military [14] and civilian [10,17,18] samples.

The joint presence of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, along with hopelessness that these factors will change, allows for an individual to actively desire death by suicide (i.e. thinking “I want to kill myself” and planning methods for attempting suicide) [10,17,19]. Within the IPTS framework, the vast majority of individuals with both thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are posited to be unable to act on their desire, thus explaining the large gap between the percentage of the population with suicidal ideation/plans and the percentage with a history of one or more suicide attempts [20]. The third IPTS construct – the acquired capability for suicide – refers to an individual’s comfort with bodily harm, tolerance of pain, and fearlessness about death and is developed largely through exposure to painful and provocative events (e.g., combat experience [21]).

Within civilian samples, the three-way interaction of the IPTS constructs has, in fact, predicted both clinician rated suicide risk and lifetime number of suicide attempts [10,22,23]. Within military samples, however, results have been less supportive. In two samples of US military personnel actively deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Bryan et al [13] reported that only the two-way interaction of perceived burdensomeness and the acquired capability predicted overall suicidality. Similarly, in a sample of US Air Force personnel who had recently completed basic training, Bryan, Morrow, Anestis, and Joiner [24] reported that only the two-way interaction of perceived burdensomeness and the acquired capability predicted lifetime number of suicide attempts. In these studies, the samples consisted either of soldiers actively deployed or soldiers who only recently joined the military. As such, generalizability to the bulk of the military population – individuals who are not currently deployed and who have been members of the military beyond basic training – remains open to question.

To our knowledge, the IPTS has not previously been examined in a sample of those serving in the US National Guard. Furthermore, no studies have included large, diverse samples of individuals with differing lengths of time since deployment (e.g., no prior deployment to recently demobilizing to not having been deployed for several years). Lastly,

research of suicide risk in the military has yet to utilize recently improved, gold standard measures of IPTS constructs. Our goals were to expand upon the extant research of the IPTS in military populations by incorporating these novel aspects of IPTS and military-related research into the present study.

We anticipate that the IPTS will be a useful lens through which suicidal ideation, resolved plans and preparations for suicide, and lifetime suicide attempts may be understood and predicted within the US National Guard. In line with the IPTS, we anticipated the 2-way interaction between perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness would predict suicidal desire, as indexed through two distinct constructs (suicidal ideation and resolved plans and preparations for suicide). Furthermore, we hypothesized that the 3-way interaction between perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and the acquired capability for suicide would predict lifetime suicide attempts.

1. Method

Data were collected as part of an ongoing longitudinal study examining prospective predictors of suicide risk and suicidal behavior within US military personnel. We received approval from all relevant regulatory boards (e.g., Institutional Review Board, Human Research Protections Program) prior to the onset of data collection and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

1.1. Participants

Participants were 934 United States military personnel who presented at a large Joint Forces Training Center in the southern United States ($m_{\text{age}} = 27.05$; 77.7% male). 57.5% identified as white, 24.3% as black, 4.1% as Hispanic/Latino(a), and 6.4% as other. 56.7% of the sample reported a total annual family income of \$50,000 or less. 53.3% reported never having been married, 27.6% reported that they were currently married and considered the marriage active, 3.5% reported that they were currently married and considered the marriage inactive (e.g., separated but not divorced), 6.4% reported being divorced, and 0.3% reported being widowed and not remarried. 28.6% reported a high school diploma or less as their highest level of educational attainment. 785 (84.0%) reported being affiliated with the Army National Guard and 562 (60.1%) reported previously having been deployed. 323 (34.6%) soldiers participated during demobilization from Operation Enduring Freedom. The demobilizing soldiers were thus considered active duty (federal), whereas no other soldiers who participated were active duty during the baseline assessment.

1.2. Self-report measures

1.2.1. Predictors and moderators

Perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness were assessed using the 15 item version of the Interpersonal

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