PTSD in Returning Soldiers: Guilt and Witnessing Harm to Others Joanna Morgan,^a Lynn E. O'Connor,^a Jack W. Berry,^b David J. Stiver,^c Vansen Wong,^d and Ngoc-Diem Nguyen^d

Abstract

In an anonymous online study of 79 active members or veterans of the US Military (77.2%) male; 81% Caucasian; 45.5% enlisted, 44.1% officers), we investigated the relationship between empathy-based guilt (survivor and omnipotent responsibility guilt), depression, satisfaction with life, and scores on a measure of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We expected PTSD to be associated with empathy-based guilt, and that soldiers who witnessed harm happening to others would experience negative psychological outcomes at least to the same degree or more, than those who were harmed themselves.

Method

Fifty (69.4%) participants had served at least once during the war in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and 12.6% had served in the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom).

Instruments

PTSD Checklist-Military Version (PCL-M)

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (guilt based on empathy) subscales of *Survivor Guilt* (broadly defined) and *Omnipotent* **Responsibility Guilt**

Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CESD)

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

Participants also indicated whether they experienced a threat to themselves and/or a threat to others. Finally, one Likert-type item asked the degree to which they experienced distress and intrusive thoughts related to witnessing extreme harm experienced by others.

Procedure

The study was announced online, through listservs and Facebook, where participants were invited to complete an anonymous online survey. They were directed to the survey site, on the Emotion, Personality and Altruism Research Group, Wright Institute server. After reading a letter of introduction and indicating their consent to be a part of the study, the were taken to the survey itself. Data came in on FileMaker Pro, was then translated into Excel, and finally into SPSS for analysis.

Acknowledgements / Information

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This is an ongoing study. For further information, go to <u>www.eparg.org</u> or contact Professor O'Connor at loconnor@wi.edu. a The Wright Institute, Berkeley; b Samford University & UAB Injury Control Research Center; c Graduate Theological Union; d University of California - Berkeley

Volunteers: Invitation to Participate in Study of Emotions



VOLUNTEERS: Invitation to participate in an **ANONYMOUS Online study** about empathy and emotions in members of the US military (enlisted and officers, active duty and vets). It takes about 5 to 10 minutes to complete & is anonymous. To get to the study go to:

http://www.eparg.org/wright/mil2/

This study is being conducted by the Emotion, Personality, & Altruism Research Group, Wright Institute, Berkeley, URL: http://www.eparg.org Results will be available at EPARG web site, after data is collected and analyzed.

Results

 Table 1 presents correlations between PTSD
(measured with the PCL-M) and measures of depression (CES-D), life satisfaction, empathybased interpersonal guilt scales, whether a traumatic event was a threat to self and/or to others, and the frequency of rumination about a threat to others. Consistent with previous research, PTSD was significantly positively associated with depression and the experience of a threat to self, and negatively associated with life satisfaction. As hypothesized in the present study, PTSD was also positively associated with survivor guilt, the experience of a threat to others, and current rumination about a threat to others.

To determine whether threats to self or threats to others is a stronger predictor of PTSD symptoms, a three-step hierarchical regression was conducted (see **Table 2**). At Step 1, threat to self was entered as a predictor of PTSD symptoms. There was a significant positive association. At Step 2, threat to others was added to the prediction equation. The partial regression coefficient for threat to self was not statistically significant. However, the partial coefficient for threat to others was positive and statistically significant. At Step 3, distressing rumination about threats to others was added. At this final step, only current rumination about threats to others was associated with PTSD. These results suggest that the experience of threats to others, and rumination about such threats to others, have stronger independent predictive value of PTSD symptoms than threats to self, which is consistent with the theoretical expectations of this study.

Discussion

As expected, scores on the measure of PTSD were positively associated with depression (*r*=.71, *p*<.001) and negatively with satisfaction with life (r = -.34, p < .01). Consistent with our hypotheses, PTSD was positively associated with survivor guilt (r=.39, p<.01). PTSD was positively but not significantly associated with omnipotent responsibility (r=.14, ns). Survivor guilt was also a significant predictor of depression (r=.43, p<.01) but not life satisfaction. In a hierarchical regression, a threat to self was positively associated with PTSD symptoms at Step 1 (β =.44, *p*<.001). At Step 2, a threat to others was significantly associated with PTSD (β =.30, p<.05) and threat to self was no longer significant (β =.23, *ns*). Finally, at Step 3, current rumination about a threat to others was strongly associated with PTSD symptoms (β =.60, p<.001) and the previous variables were no longer significant predictors. We conclude that in contemporary war conditions, conscious and non-conscious empathy-based guilt and intense concern about the well-being of others may be particularly relevant to the severe mental disorders, including high rates of suicide, currently found in our returning soldiers.

Table 1. Correlations between PTSD symptoms and other psychological outcomes

	PTSD		
Depression (CES-D)	.71***		
Satisfaction with Life	34**		
Survivor Guilt	.39**		
Omnipotence Guilt	0.14		
Threat to Self	.46**		
Threat to Others	.54***		
Rumination about	.70***		
threat to others			

** *p*<.01 *** *p*<.001

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Predicting **PTSD from Threat to Self and Threat to Others**

Model		<u>Beta</u>	<u>t</u>	p
Step 1	(Constant)		11.8	0
	Threat to Self	0.44	4.32	0
Step 2	(Constant)		10.2	0
	Threat to Self	0.23	1.58	0.12
	Threat to Others	0.3	2.05	0.04
Step 3	(Constant)		5.47	0
	Threat to Self	0.06	0.47	0.64
	Threat to Others	0.16	1.36	0.18
	Rumination about threat to others	0.6	6.53	0

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Google News: PTSD Military

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lealth Department program offers counseling for veterans cago Sun-Times - Beth Kramer - 13 hours ago One in every five WWII veterans had **PTSD** symptoms, 31 percent of all Vietnam veterans had **PTSD** and 71 percent of all female veterans suffer **PTSD** from sexual assault within the

ranks. Symptoms include difficulty sleeping, flashbacks and hallucinations, .



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suicide rates are up across all branches of the military, even the National Guard, where the rate has increased 82 percent since 2009. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-marked by distressing, intrusive traumatic memories, flashbacks and a feeling .. Female veteran fights an invisible injury Sacramento Bee Another war hero dies from PTSD Examiner.com TweetNews: Clay Hunt; an uncounted casualty of war Press TV

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military to receive treatment so that they have an opportunity to lead a full life. The mission of the Salem Award Foundation for Human Rights and Social Justice is to ...



Stigma of PTSD is costing US lives Atlanta Journal Constitution - Apr 19, 2011 I have PTSD. And I'm not afraid to admit it. Until more senior military leaders

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The resulting study discovered the persistence of PTSD for 8.5-14 percent of soldiers returning home from combat. Furthermore, "The findings of the study show that at 12 months following combat, the prevalence of mental health problems among veterans ...



Female veteran fights an invisible injury Los Angeles Times - Apr 8, 2011 Angel Harris returned from Afghanistan eight years ago pregnant and - like thousands of other female veterans - with a case of PTSD, a disorder that took six years to diagnose. The military has only recently begun to offer

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"I have no idea how to counsel military families and soldiers while promising to send all clinical notes to be read by who knows who," he said. "I have no idea how to counsel people and not treat addiction, depression, PTSD or behaviors that are ... Counselors forced to sign form to NOT treat PTSD? FavStocks

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Veterans Support & Discussion Group Victoria Advocate - Apr 22, 2011

The Victoria Area Veterans Support Services is facilitating a free support and discussion group for area **military** Veterans and their families. Certified Peer Facilitators with combat service as well as personal experience in PTSD recovery and other ...



ietnam veteran sues to change discharge status Boston Globe - John Christoffersen - Apr 21, 2011 During the Vietnam era, people did not understand when service members like John Shepherd developed PTSD," said Dr. Thomas Berger, executive director of Vietnam Veterans of America's Veterans Health Council. "Honoring Boston Globe our commitment to veterans means ... New Clinic Goes To Court For Troubled Vet Connecticut Law Tribune Vietnam Vet Sues For Mental Health Benefits New Haven Independent Vietnam veteran with PTSD sues Army over discharge WTNH

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Our young men and women of the **military** need our support not your liberal CRAP!!!! [This invisible, burgeoning effect of **PTSD** begs ever more Pentagon research into prevention, diagnosis and treatment of the silent killer.] how about not starting and ...