Vocational and Social Challenges experienced by Trauma-Exposed Military Veterans after Separation from Military Service

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Background

- While the effects of military trauma exposure on veterans' mental health are well-documented, the impact of trauma exposure on other aspects of veterans' lives, such as their ability to secure employment and maintain satisfying social relationships, is less well-understood.
- In addition, research on the effects of military trauma exposure have traditionally centered on documenting the impact of stressors such as combat exposure and military sexual trauma, as opposed to the extent to which veterans experience warfare circumstances that involve committing, witnessing, or failing to prevent violations of commonly accepted boundaries of behavior, or what has been termed moral injury.
- Research on how veterans' experiences change as they separate from military service also represents a substantial gap in the literature (RAND report).
- To address these gaps in the literature, this study aims to document the impact of warfare exposure, military sexual trauma, and moral injury on veterans' vocational and social well-being outcomes at approximately 3, 9, and 15 months post-separation.

Method & Analyses

A national sample of 9,566 post-9/11 veterans (23% response rate) who had separated from the military within the last 90 days was identified from the VA DoD Identity Repository (VADIR) and invited to complete an online survey about their well-being and program use. 6,480 veterans completed all three timepoints used in this study.

Demographics on the TVMI Cohort:

At the baseline assessment, veterans were primarily male (82%) and of non-minority race/ethnicity (66%). Approximately 67% were married, 53% were college educated, and 31% were in households making $35,000 or less. The average age was 35.

Primary Measures:

Military Experiences: Modified DRRI-2 Warfare Exposure Scale (Vogt et al., 2013), Primary care military sexual trauma screen (VA), and Moral Injury Scale (Nash et al., 2013)

Well-Being Inventory (WBI; Vogt et al. 2018) This newly developed and psychometrically sound inventory includes measures of status, functioning, and satisfaction within four key life domains. For the purposes of this study we used measures from vocation (work, school) and social (intimate relationships, parenting, and broader social relationships) domains.

Analyses:

Correlations were computed between military trauma variables and well-being outcomes at each timepoint. Because large sample study can provide statistically significant differences that are little practical utility, our criterion for interpreting effects was set at r = .20 .

Results

- Effect sizes (rs) for associations between warfare experiences and well-being outcomes are presented in Figures 1-3.
- Neither warfare exposure nor military sexual trauma was associated with consistent decrements in different aspects of occupational or social well-being.
- In contrast, moral injury was associated with reduced functioning and satisfaction within both occupational domains (average r = .20, .21, and .21) and social domains (average r = .21, .25, and .23) across all three timepoints.
- However, relationships between moral injury and both occupational involvement and social participation did not exceed our minimum criterion for practical significance.

Conclusions

- Findings highlight the pernicious impact that moral injury may have on veterans' military-to-civilian transition experiences and underscore the value of interventions that can mitigate against these negative effects.

Figure 1 — Warfare Exposure

Figure 2 — Military Sexual Trauma

Figure 3 — Moral Injury