



The Impact of Spiritual Fitness, Perceptions of War and Military Performance



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Development Activity

Overview

- ▷ Advances in Spiritual Fitness research
- ▷ Threats to Spiritual Fitness that impact performance

TOTAL FORCE FITNESS



Spiritual Fitness

- ▷ Definition: “the beliefs and practices that strengthen the connection to sources of hope, meaning, and purpose”
- ▷ Necessary for holistic, sustained performance
 - ▷ How do we know this?

Qualitative Spiritual Fitness Research

- ▷ Many personal reports from across history
- ▷ Overall, both secular and non-secular sources of meaning and purpose can provide sources of resiliency, even under battlefield conditions (e.g., Russell et al., 2018)

Quantitative Spiritual Fitness Research

- ▷ Traditionally limited by measurement issues
 - ▷ Spiritual Fitness often conflated with outcomes (e.g., meaning in life)
 - ▷ Measures are often insufficiently pluralistic
 - ▷ Measures often focus on a single source of meaning and purpose

The Vertical and Horizontal Spiritual Fitness Inventory (Krauss & Silver 2021)

- ▷ 11 items measuring 4 sources of meaning and purpose
 - ▷ Traditional Spirituality
 - ▷ “Prayer is important to me”
 - ▷ Core Values
 - ▷ “The meaning I give my life comes from my core beliefs, principles, and values”
 - ▷ Community Service
 - ▷ “I strive to make this world a better place”
 - ▷ Work
 - ▷ “The work I am doing is meaningful to me”

Validity of the Vertical and Horizontal Spiritual Fitness Inventory

- ▷ Validated in diverse, civilian population
 - ▷ Christians (N = 1029)
 - ▷ Atheists and Agnostics (N = 351)
 - ▷ Non-Christians (N = 121)
- ▷ As or more predictive than the 141-item gold standard (Schnell, 2009) in 4 out of 5 outcomes:
 - ▷ Satisfaction with life
 - ▷ Meaning in life
 - ▷ Purpose in life
 - ▷ Crisis in meaning

Can we increase Spiritual Fitness

- ▷ Yes we can!
- ▷ Leaders vary in the amount that they create a sense of meaning and purpose in their subordinates.
- ▷ Military leaders who do better at purpose-based leadership have subordinates who think about suicide less (Trachik et al, 2021)

Impact on Military Performance?

- ▷ Currently, we are reliant on
 - ▷ Qualitative data
 - ▷ Research on threats to Spiritual Fitness

Moral Injury Definition

- ▶ The ***impairment of normal functioning*** caused by a failure to successfully resolve ***moral dissonance*** created when one "perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that ***transgress his / her moral beliefs and expectations***" (Litz et al., 2009; see also Larson & Züst, 2017).

Military Moral Systems

- ▷ Specific moral codes and laws pertain to military operations
 - ▷ These include:
 - ▷ US Constitution
 - ▷ Uniformed Code of Military Justice
 - ▷ International treaties and agreements
 - ▷ Law of War
 - ▷ All of these are guided by Justice in War Theory

Justice in War Theory

- ▷ Ancient tradition laying out moral behavior in war (*jus in bello*)
- ▷ Part of a larger Just War tradition on why countries could justly go to war
- ▷ 4 major principles
 1. Distinction-Attacks should not be directed towards non-combatants, including prisoners of war
 2. Proportionality- Harm to civilians is proportional to military gain
 3. Military necessity- Attacks need to be militarily necessary
 4. No use of evil means (*malum in se*)

Implications for Research

- ▷ May use exposure to certain war events to objectively measure impact of moral injury
- ▷ “Just” and “unjust” war events may have different effects
- ▷ Requires adequate and specific measures of combat events

The Dichotomy of War [Military Service]

“There are two different kinds of killing here [in Afghanistan]. The ODA [Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha] killed a plethora of bad guys last mission. The team was happy with their accomplishment. Three or four missions before, they caught some children in an air strike being used as human shields. They struggled with that.”

-Deployed Navy Chaplain

Proof of Concept

▷ Created measures of combat events based on Justice in War

▷ Perception I – Some persons may see “Just” war events as:

▷ Life-threatening events

▷ E.g., “believed you would be seriously injured or killed”

▷ Killing enemy combatants

▷ “Being directly responsible for the death of an enemy combatant”

▷ Perception II – Some persons may see “Unjust” war events as:

▷ “Seeing ill/injured women or children who you were unable to help”

▷ “Feeling directly responsible for the death of a non-combatant”

▷ “Witnessing brutality/mistreatment toward non-combatants”

▷ “Observing abuse of the Laws of War/Geneva Convention”

Initial Testing

Sample Characteristics	3 Months (N=1,777) % (n)	12+ Months (N=1,005) % (n)
Life-Threat: High Exposure	53.82% (950)	45.45% (454)
Unjust War: Exposure	41.14% (729)	38.76% (388)
Killing Enemy Combatant: Exposure	44.85% (796)	35.59% (357)

List of Outcomes

- ▷ Examined 8 outcomes
 - ▷ Missing work during the last 30 days
 - ▷ Self-rated stress, emotional, alcohol, or family problem
 - ▷ Desire for help with stress, emotional, alcohol, or family problem
 - ▷ Mental health referral
 - ▷ Receiving mental health care
 - ▷ Received mental health care
 - ▷ Medication for mental health
 - ▷ Medication for sleep

Accounting for Other Combat Events

▷ Life-Threatening Events

- ▷ **2 of 8 outcomes** in recently returned sample (receiving mental health care over the past 6 months and taking sleep medicine)
- ▷ **0 of 8 outcomes** in over 1 year returned sample

▷ Killing Enemy Combatants

- ▷ **0 of 8 outcomes** in the recently returned sample
- ▷ **1 of 8 outcomes** in over 1 year returned sample (currently receiving mental health care)

▷ Unjust War Events

- ▷ **8 of 8 outcomes** in the recently returned sample
- ▷ **5 of 8 outcomes** in over 1 year returned sample

Longitudinal Study

- ▷ Followed 402 Soldiers over 13 months
- ▷ Examined 15 outcomes
 - ▷ 12 performance/behavioral health outcomes (functional impairment, self-rated behavioral health problems, PTSD symptoms, depression symptoms, suicidal ideation, anxiety symptoms, somatic symptoms, insomnia, aggressive feelings and behaviors, emotional burden, trust difficulties)
 - ▷ 3 measures of benefit finding (i.e., pride, positive effect on life, and appreciation)

Longitudinal Results

▷ Life-Threatening Events

- ▷ At start, predicted **3 of 12** performance/behavioral health outcomes (increased functional impairment, PTSD, and somatic symptoms)
- ▷ **Effects dissipated** over the 13 month period

▷ Killing Enemy Combatants

- ▷ **Unrelated** to performance/behavioral health
- ▷ Predicted long lasting increases in **benefit finding**

▷ Unjust War Events

- ▷ At start, predicted **12 of 12** performance/behavior health outcomes
- ▷ 13 months later, predicted **7 of 12** performance/behavioral health outcomes

Summary of Threat Research

- ▷ Unjust war events are driving the long-term effects of combat exposure
 - ▷ Transdiagnostic pattern of negative outcomes
 - ▷ Evidence not-responding to treatment
- ▷ Just War Events
 - ▷ Seems more PTSD-specific
 - ▷ Life-threatening events may not be a long-term health issue
 - ▷ Killing enemy combatants increases pride
 - ▷ Outcomes may change over time

Why is Exposure to Unjust War Events Transdiagnostic?

- ▷ Moral dissonance may be experienced as general psychological distress
- ▷ Exposure damages sources of meaning and purpose, resiliency, and/or coping abilities
 - ▷ Some limited evidence to date

Conclusion

- ▷ Spiritual Fitness Matters!
- ▷ Morality Matters!
- ▷ Leaders Matter!
- ▷ Measurement Matters!
- ▷ Warfighters exposed to unjust war events have unmet needs
 - ▷ We need better screening protocols, including the development of physiological and objective biomarkers.
 - ▷ We need to reexamine classic assumptions related to mental health treatment

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