

Does Deployment to War Affect Public Service Motivation? A Panel Study of Soldiers Before and After Their Service in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

“Exposure to the extreme stress of warfare may affect soldiers’ perceptions of others and society. Using panel data from two companies on a tour of duty to Afghanistan in 2011, this article analyzes how different dimensions of soldiers’ public service motivation are influenced by deployment to war. As expected, soldiers’ compassion decreased and commitment to the public interest increased, while self-sacrifice did not change systematically. Deployment to war was expected to affect inexperienced soldiers more than their experienced colleagues, but this hypothesis was only partially satisfied. The key contribution of the article is the use of panel data and the examination of motivational changes. Moreover, studying soldiers’ public service motivation enables us to connect public administration and military sociology and thereby to establish a better understanding of motivation in extreme settings.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Servicemembers serve both individuals and society; they embody the definition of public service. Very few studies have examined soldiers’ public service motivation. Hitherto, none have studied the public service motivation of servicemembers before and after exposure to combat zones. Through a panel study, the researchers examine the public service motivation of 78 Danish servicemembers before and after deployment to the war zone in Afghanistan. Though this study examines non-US servicemembers, the implications of the findings can be extrapolated to US servicemembers, particularly how servicemembers became less affectively motivated during deployment.
- Measuring public service motivation allows the researchers to further analyze the three dimensions that measure service to community and individuals. These three dimensions are 1) commitment to public interest, such as delivering public services, 2) compassion, such as serving those in distress, and 3) self-sacrifice, such as willingness to bypass own needs to help others and society by providing public services.
- Findings show that deployment to combat zones decreases a servicemember’s compassion but increases commitment to public interest. Self-sacrifice is not affected. Future research is needed on how subsequent deployments affect public service motivation.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Given that service is a core element of military identity, servicemembers transitioning into civilian roles should consider seeking opportunities to serve others and the public at large. Family members and friends of servicemembers returning from a war zone should also consider volunteering with their servicemember or veteran. Employers of veterans might organize group volunteer activities, such as charity races, and opportunities to serve the local community. Offering such public service opportunities could increase morale of all employees. Practitioners who serve veterans with a past deployment should consider encouraging veterans to participate in public service opportunities.

FOR POLICY

Since no prior deployment experience had a negative impact on public service motivation (decrease in both compassion and public commitment), the DoD might consider creating opportunities for current servicemembers to interact with civilians and veterans through off-duty service projects and participation in service-oriented veteran organizations such as Team Rubicon, Team Red, White, and Blue, and the Mission Continues. The VA might continue providing opportunities for veterans exposed to combat to openly share their experiences with other veterans, or even nonveterans, to assist in restoring affective motivation. Since most individuals join the military because of their desire to serve both individuals and society, the VA might also consider partnering with veteran service organizations, as mentioned above, to offer more volunteer opportunities.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study provides valuable findings, a limitation is that it was conducted on Danish combat soldiers deployed to Afghanistan. Additional research is needed on public service motivation for American servicemembers deployed to war zones. Another limitation of this study is that soldiers were deployed between February and August 2011. The short time frame could have reduced reliability. To improve reliability, subsequent studies should include multiple deployment dates and sample servicemembers from all military branches. Future studies should study how time affects motivation, such as 3, 6, and 12 months into deployment and post-deployment. Participants made a distinction between UN deployments and military branch deployments. It would be beneficial to conduct a comparative study on public service motivations between the two groups. Future studies should collect data on length of deployment and demographic variables, such as age and gender. Another limitation of this study is the small sample size. Though the researchers gathered 211 individual responses, only 78 respondents completed both the questionnaire before and after their deployment; thus more than half of the questionnaires were not used for the analyses. The small sample size limited the number of control variables that could meaningfully be included in the analyses. Future researchers should employ other methods to increase response rates. Subsequent studies on public service motivation should evaluate how public service looks after deployment, and when servicemember is reintegrating into civilian life. Future studies should measure intensity of combat exposure on public service motivations. It would be beneficial to examine whether the lack of compassion after a deployment is long term or a survival mechanism that fades overtime. More studies are needed on how interactions with civilians impact public service motivations for servicemembers and veterans.

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