



Coming Home: Attitudes toward U.S. Veterans Returning from Iraq

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- The purpose of this study is to determine whether the general public stigmatizes wartime veterans because they have served in the military or have been exposed to combat. This study explores the essence of such stigma by evaluating whether combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan face stereotypes and discrimination. This study is important because with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, more men are serving in the military, being exposed to combat, and being reintegrated in society (this study focused only on men).
- The authors found that views toward service members who have served in the military and have been exposed to combat are mixed. In general, public perceptions of service members who have been exposed to combat coincide with stereotypes of behavior which indicate mental health instability, substance abuse, and violent behavior, however, the general public also simultaneously is generally supportive of veterans, favorably viewing their service, presenting a paradox.
- The authors found that veterans exposed to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan benefit from symbolic capital – the belief that the service members are deserving of honor because of their service. Non-military contractors who have been exposed to combat while working on military operations are typically less favored than veterans.

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ABSTRACT:

“In this article, we investigate public attitudes toward combat veterans returning from Iraq. Using data from a nationally representative survey that incorporates an experimental design, we assess the extent to which attitudes toward military veterans and private contractors differ, and whether public attitudes toward men vary based on combat and war zone experience. Drawing on social psychology and military sociology, we test hypotheses derived from a conceptual model of stigma and from research on the cultural injunction to ‘support the troops.’ Consistent with the first portion of the stigma model, members of the public are not surprised to learn that men who went to a war zone behave according to stereotypes that imply that such men have problems with mental health, substance abuse, and violent behavior. Yet they do not discriminate against these men. Instead they favor men who went to Iraq compared to those who stayed in the United States. They also favor veterans compared to contractors. While combat veterans may be stereotyped, they are not stigmatized. They benefit from symbolic capital, which outweighs the effect of stereotypes on discrimination.”



Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Since at least the Vietnam War and the poor treatment of veterans who served in that conflict, stigma relating to military service and combat experience has been a concern of veterans and the individuals and organizations which support them. This study finds a paradox that though the general public often believes that combat veterans do fit into stereotypes involving negative behaviors, veterans are not stigmatized. Instead, views towards veterans are generally positive, with members of the public supporting veterans. With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, and the redeployment of service members and non-military private contractors exposed to war zones, public-facing campaigns to “support our troops” should be careful to provide information on the psychological and physical struggles that post-9/11 service members experience upon their return to the U.S., but do so in a way to minimize stigmatizing the individual and highlight the strengths and capabilities these service members have gained through their experiences. These campaigns, while educating the public about veterans’ struggles, should play on the public’s general favorable view of veterans and use the opportunity to educate about the positive benefits of service, leveraging the opportunity to advance the causes of service member support, employment, etc.

FOR POLICY

Recognizing the effects of exposure to combat and how this can impact successful re-integration into society, the VA has established several programs to help returning service members, such as a peer support program, a 24-hour mental health crisis hotline, and PTSD programs for veterans. The VA has also increased available information for families and friends of veterans. U.S. policymakers might allocate funds to the research and establishment of similar mental health programs for non-military private contractors who were exposed to combat during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Policymakers could also implement more programs that inform employers and the general public on issues facing men and women returning from war zones.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholars have argued that public attitudes may significantly shape the reintegration experience, as seen by attitudes toward veterans of the Vietnam War. The authors found that attitudes toward veterans present a paradox: service members returning from war zones are seen as fitting into the stereotype of negative behavior due to combat exposure, however, veterans returning from a war zone are often favorably viewed by society. This leads to people wanting to help veterans returning from war zones despite the stereotypes that they hold about such service members. MacLean and Kleykamp speculate that the paradox is because of the increasing rhetoric in the media encouraging society to “support the troops.” Future research is needed on how common slogans to “support the troops” shape how Americans view service members returning from war zones, differentiating veterans from private contractors. Future research should also explore how veterans who have not deployed are viewed and treated by the general public. With military contractors playing an increasingly significant role in military operations, more research is needed on how military contractors are viewed by the general public. Future researchers should evaluate if attitudes toward service members returning from war zones depend on the era in which the war occurred. Future researchers might introduce interacting factors when researching how veterans are viewed by the general public, such as race, education, and region. More specifically, future researchers should explore whether these findings are consistent when applied to different racial and ethnic groups. A limitation of this study is that women returning from war zones were not included in the analysis. Future researchers should examine how females returning from war zones are viewed by the general public and whether there is a gender difference in those attitudes. More research is needed regarding whether and how attitudes toward Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans change over time. Future researchers should assess how the opinions and attitudes toward combat veterans affect how veterans are treated by employers, placing special attention on hiring practices. Future researchers should explore how the public views the implementation and costs of veteran preferential hiring programs.

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