

***Blaming the innocent:
Cognitive dissonance in Iraq war veterans***

**Deirdre Barry, Leah Dillard, Haili Polo-Neil,
Jesslyn Schnopp, Megan Warriner**

(Dr. Wayne Klug)

Berkshire Community College, Pittsfield, Massachusetts 01201

*Presented at the 13th Annual Massachusetts Conference on Undergraduate Research,
University of Massachusetts at Amherst, April 27, 2007*

Abstract

Will American soldiers who killed Iraqis seek to reduce dissonance by denigrating their victims? Sixty-one Iraq war veterans responded to a three-page questionnaire soliciting demographic, ratings, and narrative data about their war experiences. The group directly involved in killing (DIs) did not give significantly lower ratings to Iraqis than did other respondents, but they did, unexpectedly, give lower ratings to Americans, whom some described as "weak" or "cowards". The DIs also objected to fellow citizens who "protest the soldiers". Further demonstrating dissonance, they were significantly more inclined to see the war as beneficial to both countries.

What is cognitive dissonance?

"A state of tension that occurs whenever an individual simultaneously holds two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent."

Introduction

From Qatar, a military psychologist e-mails friends about treating combat veterans

At home I ask people if they have ever experienced or witnessed a traumatic event or abuse. But out here I ask, "Have you ever been in combat?" Apparently, this is a question with the power to unglue, because all four of these troops burst into tears at the mention of the word "combat".

And when I say burst, I mean splatter—tears running, snot flowing, and I literally had to mop my floor after one two-hour session. In other words, I mean sobbing for minutes on end, unable to speak, flat-out grief by an otherwise healthy, strong, manly guy who watches football on the weekends and never puts the toilet seat down.

Each time, I sit there with not a clue what to say . . . offering tissues . . . saying I'm sorry . . . trying to normalize . . . trying to say, "It was not your fault that so-and-so died" and "If you could have done differently, you would have" and "You had a right to be scared." And, even worse, "You had to shoot back," and "Yes, you killed someone, and you still deserve to go back to your family and live your life."

Next time you are hanging out with a friend, think about what you would do if he turned to you and said, "My boss made me kill someone, and I know I'm going to Hell for it, so why bother?" What would you say to "normalize" that?

I can't stop thinking about the fact that these folks have lost something that they will never get back—innocence (and a life free of guilt). My heart hurts for them.

—Captain Lisa R. Blackman, Chelmsford, Massachusetts
The New Yorker, June 12, 2006

Methods

Sixty-one veterans of the Iraq war responded to an original 24-item questionnaire containing scaled attitudinal ratings and demographic and open-ended questions. Through veterans' organizations and the authors' personal contacts, approximately 275 questionnaires had been mailed to potential participants, along with stamped envelopes that were self-addressed to a post office box set up for the study; another 25 had been e-mailed to personal contacts. Of these, 57 questionnaires were mailed back from participants in Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware, and Alabama; another four were returned by e-mail.

Based on a five-point scale, ratings of American and Iraqi civilians by three groups of soldiers—those directly involved in killings, those who witnessed killings, and those not at all involved in killings—were subjected to t-tests. Also t-tested were the three groups' ratings of the war's benefit to the United States and Iraq.

Responses to open-ended questions were grouped as to antiwar sentiment, denigration of American civilians, and sensitivity to criticism of soldiers. Percentages of those deriving from each of the three groups above were calculated.

Results

A. Ratings of Iraqis and of Americans

There was no evidence that soldiers denigrate their victims, as was predicted. In comparing the "directly involved" (DI) and "not at all involved" (NA) groups, the differences in their ratings of Iraqi civilians—and even of Iraqi insurgents—were not statistically significant.

But differences in their ratings of *American* civilians *were* significant (DI mean = 20.3; NA mean = 22.4; $p = .01$). The difference between the "witnessed" (W) group and the NA group was also significant, with means of 19.8 and 22.4, respectively ($p < .0001$). See Table 1.

Table 1

MEAN RATINGS OF AMERICAN CIVILIANS, BY SOLDIER GROUP

(5-point scale x six traits = 30 possible points)

<u>Witnessed Killing [W]</u> (n=25)	<u>Not Involved [NA]</u> (n=23)	<u>P</u>
19.8	22.4	< .0001
<u>Directly Involved [DI]</u> (n=9)	<u>Not Involved [NA]</u> (n=23)	
20.3	22.4	< .01
<u>Combined W and DI</u> (n=34)	<u>Not Involved [NA]</u> (n=23)	
20.0	22.4	< .0001

B. Ratings of the war's benefit

All soldiers judged the war to be less beneficial to the U.S. than to Iraq—by about one point on a 5-point scale. But the DIs were significantly more inclined to see the war as beneficial to both countries; on this point, their ratings were significantly higher not only than those of the NAs, but also those of the Ws. See Table 2.

Table 2

MEAN RATINGS OF THE WAR'S BENEFIT, BY SOLDIER GROUP

(5-point scale: 1 = extremely unbeneficial, 5 = extremely beneficial)

War beneficial to the U.S.?

<u>DI</u> (n=9)	<u>W</u> (n=25)	<u>NA</u> (n=23)	
3.77	2.7	2.4	<i>DI v. NA = p < .01</i>

War beneficial to Iraq?

<u>DI</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>NA</u>	
4.66	3.67	3.4	<i>DI v. NA = p < .001</i> <i>W v. NA = n.s.</i> <i>DI v. W = p < .001</i>

C. Qualitative results

In response to open-ended questions (numbers 23 and 24), a large minority of respondents made comments objecting to criticisms of soldiers, antiwar attitudes, and moral "weakness" on the part of American civilians. DIs were overrepresented in this group. See Table 3.

Table 3

**REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS CRITICAL OF AMERICAN CIVILIANS,
FROM THOSE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN KILLING**

Everyone has a right to protest. Just do not protest the soldiers.

Society wanted to go to war after September 11, 2001. When we went to war, people realized that people will die. That's what war is. Americans wanted [it], now we have it and have to deal with the consequences of that decision.

No one hears about the good things.

[Protest] isn't exactly what I want to see on my return, but it is a civil liberty.

It all depends on how they protest. I think that the protests at a funeral for a soldier killed in combat are deplorable. When a citizen spits on a soldier, that act is inexcusable. . . . The rowdy and rude protesters forget that the people that ensure they have the right to protest, are their targets. They have lived their whole lives under a blanket of safety. They don't have to worry about government police coming into their homes in the middle of the night and arresting them for speaking out against the president.

They're disrespectful.

Fuck all of them! The military is fucked up also by the way they treat their own. The military is supposed to look out for their own and doesn't, and 60% of civilians are against the war. Also, the Mothers of America shit make the military soft. Let the military be tough on your sons and daughters--or America as a whole will be weak. Americans in general are weak.

C. Qualitative results (continued)

One-fourth of respondents made comments critical of the war or of President Bush, or supportive of the U.S. antiwar movement; of these, 29% described themselves as "liberal". The percentage of such statements doubled from 16% (in the first batch of responses received in May 2006) to 32% (in the second batch received in January 2007). See Table 4.

Table 4

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS CRITICAL OF THE WAR OR OF BUSH
(NO RESPONDENT DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN KILLING MADE SUCH COMMENTS)

I believe Americans *should* protest the war. No war anywhere, any time is a good thing for humanity.

I thought while there, that we were not supposed to be there, and to this day, I feel the same way.

The war is directed toward the greed and gains of the Bush administration. There are no reasons for American soldiers to die when the Iraqi Army only turns tail and runs when there is danger.

A lot of them are getting rich from this war.

It's all lies and propaganda.

My ideas have been the same since day one. We don't need to be over there.

The war is now taking us down the same road as the old Soviet regime. Strategically, financially, and emotionally, it can't be sustained to a victory. It will end like Vietnam, or like Afghanistan for the Soviet Union.

The lesson for anyone who chooses a long-term commitment to the military is that, eventually, one might be forced to participate in a war that they do not approve of, under a Commander-in-Chief whom they detest.

No comment other than I can't stand President Bush. He has not served his country and I do not respect him as Commander in Chief. I do not fight for him!

I believe that the anti-war protests were instrumental in turning public opinion against our immoral war in Iraq.

Discussion

1. The DIs' moral and religious upbringing is likely responsible for their dissonance in war. Once killing has become part of their experience, a kind of innocence is lost—one they see as continuing to delude their friends and families. Feeling the deaths they caused were necessary, these soldiers resent the implicit disapproval of other Americans—to whom they give lower ratings, and whom several soldiers describe as "uninformed", "weak", and "cowards". To say, as several do, that "only those who served could possibly understand", may be to discredit their fellow citizens and deflect their judgments.

Indeed, this is a cause they espouse quite openly. DIs lead in responding to Question 24 with such statements as "Don't protest the soldiers" and "Don't take it out on the troops". Comprising only a fourth (26%) of the entire sample's combined DI and W group, they nonetheless represent almost half (46%) of the combined DI-W sub-group who make such comments.

2. Cognitive dissonance may also be seen operating in the way these groups rate the war's benefit. Those *not* involved in killings see the war as unbeneficial to the United States and barely beneficial to Iraq, while those *involved* in killings see the war as beneficial to the U.S. and "extremely" beneficial to Iraq. This finding is consistent with the notion within cognitive dissonance theory that we value outcomes requiring great effort—even if its application is especially ironic here: Those who have killed Iraqis see the war as extremely beneficial to their victims.

3. Liberals represent 10% of the entire sample but 29% of the antiwar sub-sample, thus demonstrating a threefold increase in liberals among war opponents. But the overwhelming majority of antiwar sentiments (71%) nonetheless come from those describing themselves as moderate or conservative. This unexpected finding contradicts claims of war supporters that the antiwar movement is dominated by liberals who are out of touch with the American mainstream. At least within our military sample, it is moderates and conservatives who dominate.

4. Also interesting is the growing *frequency* of antiwar sentiments in the sample. In the first group of data—approximately half of the questionnaires, received by May 2006—16% of responses contained antiwar sentiment; in the second group, received by January 2007, this sentiment appeared in 32% of responses. Even if we view this finding with caution because of the low numbers involved, it seems likely that growing American combat losses, results of the midterm elections, and the departure of Donald Rumsfeld have all contributed to the doubling of our respondents' antiwar sentiment in eight months.

5. Should the cognitive dissonance demonstrated by veterans in this study lead to policy implications? After all, what could inspire this kind of internal struggle but the cruelty demanded by war—a cruelty that under normal circumstances most soldiers would find repellent? "I try to shut out my emotions," writes a National Guard Lieutenant on *The Sandbox* milblog. "I tell myself it's part of the job. Still, I don't have to like it."

In this study, the guilt induced by killing seems to rest, at their own suggestion, on the shoulders of the veterans themselves. Even these people, placed in the "kill or be killed" environment of combat, seem reluctant to lay blame elsewhere. As the blogger modestly writes, "I'm not talking politics, that's above my paygrade." In this study, likewise, two or three respondents hint, but none directly argue, that a political elite should be held accountable for a war of its own making—even if a growing number have come to oppose it. But *indirectly*, the ratings and comments of 61 respondents provide compelling evidence of the bewilderment, anger, and shame that none of them anticipated but all Americans should remember.

References

Aronson, Eliot (2004). *The Social Animal*. New York: Worth Publishers.

Blackman, Lisa (2006). Soldiers' stories. *The New Yorker*, June 12.

Glass, David (1964). Changes in liking as a means of reducing cognitive discrepancies between self-esteem and aggression. *Journal of Personality*, 32, 531-549.

Mandel, D.R., Axelrod, L.J., & Lehman, D.R. (1993). Integrative complexity in reasoning about the Persian Gulf war and the accountability to skeptical audience hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 49:4, 201-215.

Shane, Scott (2004). Experts fear mental scars as Iraq legacy. *New York Times News Service*, reprinted in *The Berkshire Eagle*, December 17.

Tiffen, Adam (2007). *The Sandbox: The replacements*. Reprinted in *Mother Jones* (January/February).

The authors thank Michaeleen Barry and Professor June Tooley for their assistance.

Questions and comments: wklug@berkshirecc.edu