

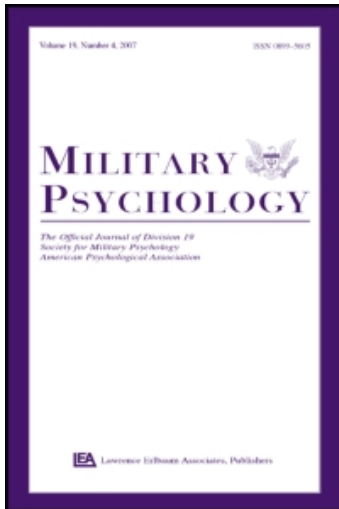
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Toward a Positive Military Psychology

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This article reviews the role of positive psychology-based research and application in advancing the science and practice of military psychology. The role of positive psychology in military training, clinical application, and enhancing the welfare and well-being of military spouses and children is reviewed. Early research suggests that positive psychology-derived constructs may offer substantial advances across the spectrum of military psychology.

The past 10 years has witnessed the birth and growth of the positive psychology paradigm (Weiten, 2007, p. 15). The emergence of positive psychology comes at a time when military psychologists are faced with a daunting array of challenges stemming from the U.S. military's lengthy combat operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Large numbers of soldiers¹ and veterans are affected by posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and related syndromes. Military trainers struggle to prepare new soldiers for the psychological risks of combat exposure. The families of military personnel deployed in combat face incredible stress while their loved ones are in harm's way. Over 4000 military members have been killed in action and many times that many have been wounded. This results in substantial challenges for surviving parents, spouses, and children of those killed or wounded in combat.

The purpose of this article is to describe the emerging field of positive psychology and to suggest implications it has on novel ways of training new sol-

¹The term *soldier* is used throughout this article in the generic sense and refers to any member of the United States armed forces including the reserve component and the National Guard.

This article is based on the author's APA Division 19 Presidential Address given at the 2008 meeting of the American Psychological Association in Boston. The views are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Army.

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diers, treating those with psychological trauma resulting from combat exposure, and helping military families cope effectively with the deployment of their loved one(s) or their death or injury resulting from combat. Positive psychology is not meant to replace traditional models and methods that military psychologists employ in their practice or research. Rather, positive psychology concepts and methods are proposed as adding to the military psychologist's toolbox. Selected examples of positive psychology research and application efforts will be reviewed in the domains of training, clinical application, and helping military families.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Peterson (2006) describes the origins of positive psychology as a formal psychological paradigm. The term was first used by then-APA President Martin Seligman in 1998, and developing the scientific basis of positive psychology was one of Seligman's presidential initiatives. Peterson (2006) defines positive psychology as "the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between" (p. 4). Positive psychology emphasizes positive states, positive traits, and positive institutions. It is about successful adaptation and excellence in all domains of life.

There were clearly historical antecedents to positive psychology. An example would be the humanist school of psychology with its emphasis on self-actualization (e.g., Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). Positive psychology, as a formal paradigm, is differentiated from such earlier schools of thought by its emphasis on a scientific analysis of the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and neurological bases of positive adaptation. In contrast, much of the first 125 years of psychology as a discipline distinct from philosophy and physiology was based on a disease model of human behavior. Freud's (1949) influential theory of the unconscious stemmed from his clinical work with maladjusted patients, from which he developed a theory that he generalized to all humans. To this day, our discipline continues to be dominated by a disease model of human behavior, as witnessed by its focus on maladaptation in its many and varied forms.

The issue is not whether the traditional disease model of human maladaptation is valid or needed. Substance abuse, schizophrenia, PTSD, depression, and anxiety indeed afflict millions of people and the techniques and procedures that have evolved over the past century to treat them are vital in helping people with such problems. The issue, rather, is one of balance. Psychology has developed sophisticated and sometimes effective methods for the 25% of the population that may be expected to experience a psychological problem over a lifetime (World Health Organization, 2000). But psychology has done very little, as a discipline, to help the psychopathology-free majority of the population learn to en-

joy life more, become more productive, and to develop a sense of positive engagement and meaning in life. This is what the science of positive psychology strives to do.

But why is positive psychology important to the military? I have argued elsewhere (Matthews, 2008a) that the military is a perfect “home” for positive psychology. The military is composed of relatively young, healthy, and pathology-free individuals (see Booth et al., 2007, for a detailed review of the demographic characteristics of military personnel and their families). One must be young and healthy to join the military. Those who develop a medical or substantive psychological problem after entering the military are let go. Only 7% of Army enlisted soldiers are 40 years of age or older (Booth, 2007). Moreover, the military, with its strong emphasis on character development, morale, and welfare, can easily be construed as a positive institution. Traditional psychology is needed to deal with PTSD among soldiers, for instance, but positive psychology may be of great value in helping the healthy majority (>80%) of soldiers to learn to achieve even greater satisfaction, adapt more effectively to novel and challenging situations, and develop the sense of existential meaning that appears to be linked to soldier adaptation (Bartone, 2005). Interestingly, as we will review below, there is empirical evidence that positive psychology-based interventions may even provide effective tools for working with psychologically distressed soldiers, thus adding to the practitioner’s toolkit.

TRAINING APPLICATIONS

In 2004, I began a collaboration with Angela Duckworth and Christopher Peterson that aimed to explore the relationship between “grit,” a measure of passionate pursuit of long-term goals, and success among new cadets at West Point. West Point traditionally uses three general classes of variables for selecting cadets who will be most likely to complete Cadet Basic Training (CBT) and the subsequent 4 years of academic and military instruction that lead to the award of a bachelor of science degree and a commission as an Army officer. These three classes of variables are aptitude (e.g., ACT scores, high school grades), leadership (e.g., team captains in high school, being an Eagle Scout), and physical fitness (participation in athletics and score on a physical fitness screening test). West Point is very selective, accepting about 1300 new cadets each year from a pool of well over 10,000 applicants. We were interested in how grit, a positive character trait, might contribute relative to aptitude, leadership, and physical fitness indexes in predicting retention through CBT and academic performance during the first year at West Point.

Toward this end, the grit scale was administered to all incoming members of the West Point Class of 2008 ($N = 1218$). This cohort was followed through CBT and

their first year at West Point and the role of grit, compared to the existing predictor variables, was assessed. As reported by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007), grit did not correlate with aptitude, leadership, or physical fitness measures. Moreover, grit was the only statistically significant variable in predicting retention through CBT. The relationship between grit and retention was relatively robust ($\beta = .44$). Indeed, cadets who scored a standard deviation or more above the mean were 60% more likely to complete CBT than those with lower grit scores. Interestingly, while grit was a significant predictor of academic grades during the cadet's first year at West Point, aptitude scores accounted for a greater proportion of the explained variance.

Intrigued by Duckworth et al.'s (2007) results on the role of grit in predicting CBT, Matthews, Peterson, and Kelly (2006) had all members of the entering West Point Class of 2009 self-rate themselves on the 24 character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as universal to the human species. The self-ratings, like grit, were obtained on the day after the cadets arrived at West Point for their initial summer training. Results indicated that character strengths closely related to Army doctrine (Department of the Army, 1999) were related to retention through CBT. Cadets who successfully completed CBT were higher than those who left on nine strengths: bravery, optimism, persistence, enthusiasm, fairness, honesty, leadership, self-control, and teamwork.

Young men and women attracted to military service may manifest a different profile of the 24 strengths than civilian counterparts. Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, and Peterson (2006) compared West Point cadets, Norwegian Naval Academy cadets, and U.S. civilians age 18–21 with some college on scores on the Values-in-Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), an instrument described by Peterson and Seligman (2004) that assesses the 24 universal character strengths. Surprisingly, West Point cadets were more similar in their rank-ordering of character strengths to Norwegian cadets than they were to their own fellow American citizens. Both military samples scored high on strengths that are easily construed as important for military success, including teamwork, persistence, honesty, and bravery.

These and other (see Matthews, 2008a) results clearly suggest that positive psychology–derived constructs such as character strengths may contribute strongly to our understanding of how to train and educate soldiers. It is important to learn that grit, a character strength of “the gut,” may play a pivotal role in the success of soldiers experiencing extremely challenging training situations. Research on grit and related character constructs needs to be conducted in other military training contexts, including training new recruits and special forces to parse out the role of character in successfully adapting to and performing in such demanding situations. We know that intelligence and grit are orthogonal (Duckworth et al., 2007). It may well be that noncognitive factors, such as grit, are of special importance in situations such as those just described.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

There is growing empirical evidence of the utility of employing positive psychology-based interventions in treating a variety of disorders. For example, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) reported that a variety of positive psychology interventions were effective in diminishing depression and increasing happiness. Using a Web-based, random-control trials design, they recruited 577 adults to participate in a 6-month-long study. Participants in experimental groups were instructed to employ one of five different interventions for a week. Subjects in the control groups were asked to write down early childhood memories for a week. All subjects then periodically completed Web-administered measures of depression (the Beck Depression Inventory) and happiness (the Steen Happiness Index) over the next 6 months. It was found that three interventions had statistically significant and lasting impact on happiness and/or depression. The gratitude visit, in which the participant writes a letter thanking someone for positively influencing their life (typically a teacher, mentor, friend, or family member) and reading the letter to that person face-to-face, increased happiness and decreased depression, with the effect lasting for one month. More lasting effects, up to 6 months, were found for the three blessing exercise and the signature strength exercise. The former involves writing down each night, just before bedtime, three things that went well that day and why they went well. The strengths exercise involves taking one of your top five character strengths, as measured by the VIA-IS, and intentionally using it to deal with a problem or issue. Each of these interventions significantly reduced depression and increased happiness.

The role of character strengths in coping and resilience is of particular relevance to the military. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006) employed a Web-based retrospective study to examine the relationship between character strengths, again measured by the VIA-IS, and response to physical and psychological illness. They found that people with physical illness who were high in the character strengths of bravery, kindness, and humor experienced “less of a toll” on life satisfaction. For people suffering from psychological illness, those high in appreciation of beauty and love of learning fared better in life satisfaction. Moreover, Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, and Seligman (2007) reported that the character strengths most related to life satisfaction in nonclinical populations are capacity to love, hope/optimism, curiosity, and zest. Collectively, these results underscore the importance of positive character strengths in adapting to the challenges of life.

There is also evidence that character strength-based interventions are effective in helping veterans enrolled in a Veteran’s Administration psychiatric recovery program. Resnick and Rosenheck (2006) asked clients enrolled in this program to complete the VIA-IS and examined how their character strengths might be employed to facilitate their recovery. Their qualitative analysis indicated that clients who completed the VIA-IS experienced a variety of positive outcomes. These in-

cluded a sense of mastery and increased mood after completing the test and that many felt that the strengths approach was very relevant to their needs. Additional research with similar populations employing more stringent experimental designs is needed to more fully understand the role of character strengths in dealing with psychiatric issues among veterans, but these results are promising and important in that they suggest a fruitful area for future research and application.

In the military context, identifying character strengths that are vital to dealing successfully with the stresses of combat exposure and long deployments may inform military psychologists on how to build more resilient soldiers. Toward this end, I administered a questionnaire to 140 U.S. Army captains who had recently returned from combat tours in Iraq or Afghanistan (Matthews, 2008b). The captains were asked to write a paragraph describing a particularly challenging episode that they experienced during their tour and then rate how important each of the 24 character strengths defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004) were in dealing successfully with the situation. The five highest rated strengths related to successful coping were teamwork, honesty, courage, persistence, and judgment. Results such as these reinforce the notion that character may play a key role in adapting and performing in combat, a finding quite consistent with Army doctrine (Department of the Army, 1999). Moreover, they empirically verify specific character strengths that can perhaps be developed or made more salient during military training and education. Soldiers may be taught to reach down into a character “toolbox” to activate character strengths that mediate adaptation to specific challenges. It is worth noting that character strengths that are important in combat may differ from those vital to success in training or in administrative jobs within the military.

Matthews (in press) offers a more detailed review of positive psychology-based interventions in the military context. But it is clear that approaches based on building positive states, traits, and behaviors offers a supplemental approach to the traditional method of reducing negative states, traits, and behaviors that is the more traditional way of dealing with psychological problems. Given the premise that soldiers are fundamentally a young, healthy, and resilient population, it makes sense that positive-based interventions may be quite effective within these populations.

A positive psychology-based approach to dealing with psychopathology is in its infancy and much work needs to be done. Given the incidence of PTSD and related syndromes among soldiers and veterans, exploring the impact of positive psychology-based interventions on these pathologies would seem to be a particularly fruitful area of future research. For a variety of reasons, many soldiers are reluctant to admit to psychological problems or to seek treatment. A health-oriented, positive psychology-based approach might be more palatable to this population and destigmatize the seeking of assistance for those who experience adverse psychological effects of combat-related trauma.

HELPING MILITARY FAMILIES

The family plays a vital role within the military. This is especially true for soldiers assigned to dangerous and lengthy combat deployments. Such deployments result in many stressors to family members. All of the responsibilities of managing a home and family suddenly fall upon the spouse, who may also be employed outside the home. Added to these responsibilities is the knowledge that their deployed husband or wife is in constant threat of being killed or wounded. Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of separation from their deployed parent. In sum, combat deployments inflict a heavy toll on the family.

Positive psychology may offer strategies to help families deal with the challenges they face. Once again, because positive psychology is based on a mental health model, rather than a disease model, its applicability to military families may be more palatable to them than traditional psychological interventions. The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) provides an exemplary model of how positive psychology-based programs and interventions may assist military families (e.g., MCEC, 2007). The focus of MCEC is on the children of military personnel, and their mission is to offer programs to aid these children in all aspects of their adaptation to the exigencies of being in a military family. Because military members are frequently reassigned to different posts, families move on the average every 3 to 4 years. This means that military children seldom stay within a single school system for their primary and secondary education. Each move necessitates the making of new friends and losing contact with old ones. Because school systems across the country do not follow the same curriculum, children may find themselves behind (or ahead) of classmates at their new school. It may be difficult to establish oneself in sports or school clubs. And, for the children of deployed soldiers, there is the fear and anxiety that compounds the stresses of separation from the parent.

Given the conditions that military children face, they are a particularly resilient population. For the same rationale as developed earlier regarding the relevance of positive psychology to military members, I began working with the senior leadership at MCEC to educate them about positive psychology. In 2006 we met with Martin Seligman and other leading positive psychologists to discuss ways of formally implementing positive psychology into MCEC's programs. One promising area for integration is a program started by Patty Shinseki, spouse of former Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, called Living in the New Normal (LINN). LINN represents a collection of programs to aid military children who have had a parent killed or seriously wounded in military service. Since the 2006 meeting, MCEC and especially LINN have formally introduced character strength-based education and interventions into their curricula. Qualitative response to these efforts is uniformly and strongly positive.

There are many other ways that positive psychology could benefit military families. Strength-based interventions could be derived to help spouses deal with the

added stresses and responsibilities encountered during the deployment of their spouse. Seligman et al. (2005) demonstrated that Web-based interventions can be effective in decreasing depression and elevating happiness. Applying and systematically evaluating a parallel approach in this context is an important extension of positive psychology that should be undertaken.

OTHER APPLICATIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO THE MILITARY

The purpose of this article is not to present an exhaustive list of previous research and possible applications of positive psychology in military contexts. I have offered a more comprehensive review of existing basic research in this domain elsewhere (Matthews, 2008a). The purpose of this article, rather, is to introduce the concept of positive psychology to the community of military psychologists who, in turn, may see value in conducting basic and applied research or who may see tools that may assist them in their roles as clinical or counseling psychologists.

There is much work to be done. Other fruitful areas of research and application of positive psychology to the military include

- developing predeployment training protocols to build resilience of soldiers to combat-related stress;
- utilizing positive psychology methods to assist in reintegration following combat deployments;
- examining how character strengths might interact with cognitive factors to facilitate tactical, operational, and strategic decision-making;
- facilitating selection and training of elite combat units;
- evaluating the efficacy of positive psychology-based intervention in treating PTSD and related disorders;
- educating government agencies and healthcare organizations on the potential value of positive psychology in working with their target populations;
- conducting research to identify best practices for application to military families; and
- exploring the extent and nature of posttraumatic growth (PTG) that may follow exposure to combat or other dire situations.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Noted military historian and retired Army General Robert H. Scales (2007) argues that success in 21st-century warfare will hinge on the “psycho-cultural” dimension of military operations. Nations that learn to employ the latest developments in psy-

chological science and advances in related fields will have a decided advantage over the enemy. For example, advances in cognitive science in understanding the nature of operational decision-making may be leveraged with emerging digital technologies to redefine how tactical decision-making is taught to soldiers (Matthews, 2005).

The three pillars of positive psychology—positive states, positive traits, and positive institutions—provide a framework for pursuing research and application of positive psychology principles to military psychology. Soldiers may be taught to better regulate affective states and to be aware of and to capitalize on their own hierarchy of personal character strengths. Work in this domain holds great promise for developing more effective strategies to enhance and maintain resilience and to develop effective skills in dealing with the psychological impact of trauma when it does occur. Existing work on psychological hardiness (e.g., Bartone, 1999) represents a promising start in this domain. An empirically based understanding of the role of character in adaptation and performance in all spectrums of military training and operations may inform innovative methods of enhancing soldier success. Finally, the positive psychology paradigm embraces the existing positive nature of the military as an institution, with its overarching concern for soldier and family welfare and well-being.

I conclude by challenging military psychologists to look at positive psychology as a means to extend and improve our understanding of the soldiers and soldier-related issues. Through this approach, we should be able to improve selection and training, better prepare soldiers for combat and the return from combat, build new and better ways of helping military families adapt and cope with the challenges they face, and, through building resilience, decrease the incidence of combat stress-related disorders among our military personnel and devise alternative ways of treating those who are afflicted. Traditional psychology has yielded many advances in these areas. But now is the time to develop a paradigm shift and adopt new ways of going about our business as military psychologists.

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