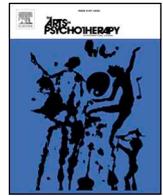




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Research Article

What soldiers can teach therapists who work with trauma: A qualitative examination of contemporary American war writing

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ABSTRACT

Eight contemporary memoirs and biographies focused on American soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were used as data sources for a qualitative investigation of war and its aftermath. Coding of these texts produced 6 themes that captured the experiences of soldiers in combat: Two Worlds (Away and Home); Teach you with Pain; the Ideal of Hero/ Be a Man; Male Intimacy/ Belonging; Old Me, New Me; and the Inevitability of Death. These themes are discussed as they inform an understanding of how soldiers are both similar to and unique from other traumatized populations. Clinical ramifications for trauma-focused psychotherapy are discussed, as are the potential for arts-based approaches in the treatment of soldiers.

Introduction

I am a drama therapist who specializes in treating traumatized people. I am also the son of a Vietnam veteran. These two facts about my identity have existed with surprisingly little correspondence between them for the bulk of my career. In many ways, my path to becoming a therapist began in my childhood home with hearing my father's stories of the war. The reverberations of my father's trauma were subtle and not apparent to me as I was growing up. But I carried those stories, and my subjective sense of the damage those experiences wrought, with me and held them.

Despite these formative experiences, or perhaps because of them, I thought very little about soldiers when I began working clinically with trauma. It wasn't until I attended a veteran-civilian dialogue just a few years ago, which was an event I entered with little awareness of the personal connections it might touch, that I began to appreciate and reincorporate those memories into my understanding of what holding a space for traumatized people meant for me personally. Shortly thereafter, I spoke publicly for the first time about growing up the son of a veteran, at a conference for first responders and survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While the process of sequestering the military to the periphery of my knowledge of trauma was personal, it also seems indicative of what has happened within the wider field of trauma treatment. Historical advances in the understanding of trauma have been closely aligned with the military, with the origins of diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) evolving out of the American Civil War, when the term *soldier's heart* was coined to capture the

manifestations of the war in its participants. However, as [Doerries \(2015\)](#) argued and shows through his Theater of War project, we can see aspects of what we now know as PTSD reflected in early Greek and Roman plays, which portrayed the impact of military combat on soldiers.

Following World War I, American psychiatrist Abraham Kardiner, noting the stereotypic movements, hyperarousal and environmental sensitivity exhibited by those soldiers, introduced the nomenclature *physioneurosis*. In doing so, he outlined many of the prominent diagnostic features of later definitions of PTSD ([Pitman, 2013](#)). Thereafter, American interest in trauma seemed to be revived with each war, and then forgotten again, as part of an ongoing cycle of movement into and away from conflict ([Harris, 2015](#)). Advocacy efforts on behalf of veterans following the Vietnam War catalyzed the inclusion of PTSD as a unified construct within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, capturing the impact of traumatic events, regardless of their type, on humans.

Despite this history, American cycles of societal amnesia around the military and war experiences as well as the general exclusion of these narratives from the main canon of clinical approaches to trauma treatment are striking. Perhaps it is because many therapists do not treat veterans outside of federal programs for the military. Or perhaps it is because the act of being a soldier means that one is potentially both victim and perpetrator, requiring a kind of empathy that many therapists are not used to providing. Or maybe it is, as [Boulanger \(2018\)](#) suggested, that the trauma of war is just too difficult for us to imagine without opening ourselves to vicarious traumatization.

This qualitative study is part of my effort to better understand the

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Table 1
Summary of War Writing that Served as Data Sources.

| Source | Focus | Author |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Blum (2017) | Male Special Operations commando in the 75 th Ranger Regiment's Second battalion, scheduled to deploy to Iraq | Soldier's cousin |
| Brennan and O'Reilly (2017) | Male Marine Corps sergeant in Iraq and a squad leader in the First Battalion, Eighth Marines in Afghanistan | Co-written by the soldier and a war photographer who was stationed with him |
| Finkel (2013) | Male Army soldiers of the US 2-16 Infantry Battalion in Iraq | War journalist who was embedded with the soldiers for 8 months in Baghdad and followed them upon their return home |
| Morris (2015) | Male Marine infantry officer and war reporter who covered the Iraq War | Self |
| Percy (2014) | Male machine gunner for the 160 th Special Operations Regiment in Afghanistan | Journalist who followed the soldier sporadically upon his return home |
| Sites (2013) | Male soldiers of various rank and division from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan | War journalist who has interviewed soldiers over the course of a decade, in combat zones and after their return home |
| Smith (2016) | Female Kiowa Warrior helicopter pilot for the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan | Self |
| Young (2018) | Male Soldier in the Marine Corps with three deployments to Iraq | Self |

experience of soldiers, and ultimately to gain a wider sense of how their stories might complement current clinical conceptions of trauma. I bring to this research the perspective of a naïve observer when it comes to the military, positioning me to gather and analyze data related to soldiers' experiences while bracketing a priori notions. However, the research to follow was still conducted through my lens as a practitioner who has treated trauma for the bulk of my career, which exerts an influence on my subjectivity. Efforts have been made through each stage of the study to stay close to the text and therefore honor and accurately reflect the voices and lived experience of soldiers.

As a step toward triangulation of the data, the findings were reviewed by two American veterans of the Vietnam War, who verified that the themes resonated with their own combat experience, as well as that of their traumatized peers. They also reflected on differences between their military service and that of contemporary soldiers, homing in on compulsory versus voluntary service and the impact of technology on modern warfare, deepening this researcher's understanding. Their feedback helped to refine the names of some of the codes and the emphasis within the descriptions.

War writing as data

In a recent study (Molendijk, 2018), Dutch veterans noted discrepancies between their on-the-ground experiences of combat and the ways in which their mission was framed for the general public back home. Similarly, research on trauma can sometimes capture overarching trends at the expense of missing individual people and their stories. The arts, however, offer emotionally resonant forms of expression that can bridge the divide between those who know and those who don't.

As an art form, writing can be a profound act of sense-making in the aftermath of trauma (Ironson et al., 2013; Stepakoff, 2009), particularly with an event as indescribable as war (Copen, 2013; Nevinski, 2013). Pieces of war writing, whether memoir or biography, locate soldiers and their stories as the central focus, providing a form of testimony (Morris, 2015). Such testimony has historically been used to empower traumatized people, offering validation and reparation for what was silenced or absented from official accounts (Stepakoff, 2008; Thomas, 2015). As Hynes (2018), a former Marine Corps pilot and professor of literature, wrote:

We can never entirely imagine what it's like to fight a war—all war is unimaginable. The closest we can come is reading the personal records of men who were there, ordinary young guys, most of them, writing to their parents, or alone in their tents at night writing in a diary...or old guys looking back, remembering what happened... keeping alive a sense of what war is really like, when you're in it. (p. 11)

Harari (2008) suggested that because soldiers have knowledge thrust upon them in a way that can challenge core beliefs about self, war writing is a form of revelation that has the capacity to communicate deep truths. War writers aim to convey an experience-near understanding to those who have never served in the military and, as such, offer detailed and graphic source material on the impact and after-effects of combat. As Woodward, Duncanson, and Jenkins (2017) noted, this "communicative intent" (p. 537) makes war writing a viable source of qualitative data. They asserted that questions about the veracity of these texts and the subjectivity of authors' memory, while valid, are no different from debates that exist around other forms of qualitative data, including interviews and ethnographic observation.

Method

The text of 8 memoirs and biographies of American soldiers in combat were used as data sources for this study. This number provided a survey of diverse experiences of soldiers at various levels of rank and across branches of the military. The sample of books chosen prioritized those written by soldiers, frontline war journalists, and their family members in which the voices and narratives of service members were foregrounded (see Table 1). The focus was on books published within the last 5 years, therefore emphasizing modern warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as readjustment to life after combat. Of this sample, 7 of the 8 texts were written by and/or focus on the experiences of male soldiers while one (Smith, 2016) was written by a female soldier. This disparity is consistent with the wider landscape of military writing, where the proportion of published works by women is much smaller than those by men (Woodward et al., 2017).

Each text was given a close reading and data were identified that offered direct understanding of the psychological experiences of soldiers, with the aim of selecting passages related to emotions, reflections on the wartime experience, and the emergence of and efforts to cope with trauma. In books that also featured the perspective of non-soldiers (e.g., Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017), or that gathered information from soldiers from various wars (e.g., Sites, 2013), only data related to those who served in a military capacity in Iraq or Afghanistan were used. Likewise, for sources that were not written by the soldiers themselves, only passages that captured subjects' direct reporting or that conveyed their own reflection on the meaning of their experience were selected, rather than formulations or theories posited by the author.

Data selection was a recursive process in that, as subsequent books were read, material began to be identified that echoed content from earlier texts. In the second phase of data gathering, I returned to the texts to re-examine pages that had been marked, at times identifying additional relevant content. During this phase, passages of interest were

extracted and transferred as raw data. In total, this process yielded 191 pieces of data, ranging from single sentences to multiple paragraphs, with a mean of 24 selections per text.

During first cycle coding, data were organized into 25 categories. During second cycle coding, these categories were grouped into 12 themes that captured their essence. They were subsequently collapsed into the following 6 themes, some of which contain subthemes.

- 1 Two Worlds (Away and Home)
 - a Confronting American Obliviousness
 - b Addicted to Combat
 - c Finding Danger in the Ordinary
- 2 Teach you with Pain
- 3 The Ideal of Hero/ Be a Man
- 4 Male Intimacy/ Belonging
- 5 Old Me, New Me
 - a Monster
- 6 The Inevitability of Death
 - a Haunted

In the following section, each theme will be presented utilizing wording from the writers themselves, with representative quotes provided.

Two worlds (away and home)

The most prominent theme, echoed in all the texts, was the extent to which the conditions of combat, the “twenty-four hours, seven days a week of nonstop stress, testing, and being under the microscope” (Smith, 2016, p. 72), as well as the sensory overwhelm of the environment—“The heat. The smell. The language” (Finkel, 2013, p. 5)—contribute to a sense of “the horror of daily life” (Morris, 2015, p. 271). These moments were described as being punctuated with downtime and boredom, “urgency followed by indefinite waiting with little or no information” (Smith, 2016, p. 76). Being in a war zone introduced the soldiers to conditions that were so different from their lives back home that there seemed to be a sharp dividing line that those who hadn’t been to war were incapable of crossing. As such, soldiers were left harboring “esoteric knowledge that came from living so close to death for so long” (Morris, 2015, p. 27), as well as from assuming an adaptive mode of operations for being in a space in which the rules were so different.

There are no moral or immoral...The world is different over there. Women and kids pull guns on you and try to kill you. Five- and six-year-olds running around out there with AKs” (Percy, 2014, p. 71).

Home. It now had a new meaning to me. It seemed part of my old life...America seemed so far away from the reality I was living in (Smith, 2016, p. 127).

As indicated in the preceding quote, the experience of being in a war zone is described as “entering a new plane of existence” (Blum, 2017, p. 34) that changes one’s perception of life back home, so that the soldier encounters “the almost blinding brightness of coming home” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 222) as not only unsettling, but at times a source of resentment as they engage with civilians who live in ignorance of the war.

I am in a different reality then [sic] the majority of easy going [sic] Americans...I am only twenty-four and have lived a life I wish on no one (Sites, 2013, p. 82).

That these two worlds, war and home, could be kept isolated, one living in almost perfect ignorance of the other, was an obscenity surpassed only by the obscenity of the war itself (Morris, 2015, p. 5).

It is this divide between the two worlds that is described as making it so difficult for soldiers to reintegrate into society, to “turn the civilian

side of me back on” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 181). They have lost time at home while children and family members have changed, leaving them reconciling with “time away from you, time I can never get back” (Blum, 2017, p. 131). At the same time, they are trying to integrate the ways in which they have changed as a result of their military service. As such, soldiers often described attempting to exist in the present at home while continually living in the past: “withdrawing from the world and feeling like part of you is always on patrol in a sort of adrenalized present” (Morris, 2015, p. 57). This state of being is reinforced by feelings of guilt, as “enjoying life after war somehow feels wrong” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 80).

I had only been gone three months, but it felt like years had passed. A silence came over my life, one I didn’t know how to break (Morris, 2015, p. 271).

The Marine Corps forced me to come back from war. It’s up to me to allow myself to come home (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 256).

Confronting American obliviousness

Reinforcing the sense that civilians are incapable of understanding the soldiers’ experiences is the realization—through conversations upon returning home and in gauging survival against the ordinary and seemingly shallow priorities of those who haven’t served—that Americans by and large do not want to understand what it is like to be at war. This is described in the source texts as a kind of “practiced oblivion” (Morris, 2015, p. 3) that emanates from a desire to maintain American innocence. As such, returning with a “sense of urgency to confirm” that their military service “did indeed have a purpose” (Sites, 2013, p. 119), soldiers instead experienced themselves as holding knowledge that was a threat to others.

The America I came home to was different, not because America had changed, but because I had. When I overheard average Americans having a conversation, I was often annoyed...most people I encountered seemed oblivious to what was happening elsewhere in the world. It seemed like no one knew there was a war going on. Or worse, they didn’t care (Smith, 2016, p. 128).

Civilians might have curiosity, but deep down they don’t really care or don’t really want to know (Sites, 2013, p. 270).

This confrontation with obliviousness can lead to disillusionment, either with the American ideals that soldiers believed they were protecting, or with the way soldiers come to view other people.

I have learned to trust America less (Morris, 2015, p. 129).

My whole world-view has changed to one of utter disgust of the human kind (Sites, 2013, p. 119).

I wanted to be a part of the military as the country rallied behind its armed forces...I got lost in this fantasy often, not realizing it was just that: a fantasy. The United States doesn’t have an identifiable enemy anymore. It isn’t fighting a nation led by a mustached tyrant or a communist oppressor (Blum, 2017, p. 36).

I wonder what the fuck America’s wars are really about...the longer I sit with it, the less I can accept the claim of “mission accomplished” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 200).

Addicted to combat

The difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life is linked in the texts to a strong desire to return to the battlefield, one that can lead soldiers to reenlist for another tour. Despite yearning to be home while away, the authors described a difficulty reconnecting with family and challenges negotiating interpersonal relationships. Instead, they often

ended up longing for “the simplicity of a deployment” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 136) in which the combat zone feels more familiar than the family home. The desire to not “stand on the sidelines watching other boys and men fight this war” (Sites, 2013, p. 114) can even lead to convincing doctors and therapists that their wounds have healed in order to return to active duty.

Even though I had a great time [visiting home], I knew it was fake. My real world was back in Iraq...It was where I belonged (Smith, 2016, p. 129).

You will deploy to Iraq and redeploy to Iraq and then volunteer to deploy to Iraq a third time to keep from facing your family, your fiancée, and reality (Young, 2018, p. 4).

Finding danger in the ordinary

After living in conditions requiring constant vigilance, soldiers frequently brought that level of awareness home with them. As described in several of the source texts, in war zones things that appear ordinary can be lethal. As such, darkness and silence came to represent both protection and threat. For helicopter pilots, objects like power lines, telephone wires, and kites could bring down their planes. But the most pervasive source of fear was improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which were often hidden on roadsides, in potholes, under parked cars, and attached to telephone poles. As Brennan and O’Reilly (2017) described, in discussing the IED, “It takes a toll on the human mind through the mere possibility of its presence” (p. 65). Upon returning home, the authors recounted reacting to ordinary objects as ongoing threats.

I hated driving. I was constantly on the lookout for IEDs on the roads. I cringed at every pothole, every piece of trash, every dead animal. Every parked car was a possible VBIED—vehicle-borne IED...It was a strange new form of torment (Smith, 2016, p. 129).

Likewise, some described superimposing scenes of war onto their everyday surroundings.

My mind transformed this knowledge into a series of visions: cars exploding on peaceful residential streets, IEDs welded to innocent light poles, helicopters losing power and crashing into suburban canyons...I would create my own daydreams of destruction. Surveying a bustling mall scene, I would call IEDs into existence, watching a fireball erupted into the air, eviscerating the shoppers... For reasons beyond my ken, when I looked at perfectly normal people, my mind would begin to subtract limbs from them (Morris, 2015, p. 11).

Teach you with pain

As an entry point to military service, all American soldiers must go through basic training, or boot camp, and then, depending on their branch of the military and position, might move on to more advanced levels of training including RIP (Ranger Indoctrination Program) or SERE (Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape) School. Stories of the extreme conditions endured during training are typical aspects of military films and writing. These programs are regarded as the first steps toward indoctrination, and they involve extreme physical challenges, harsh conditions, and physical brutality. Within them a trainee can be “pushed...beyond the endurance level of anything he had ever done before” (Sites, 2013, p. 94) in a setting that, particularly in the case of SERE, is “like a prison camp” (Percy, 2014, p. 19).

The texts offered various descriptions of these training programs, which included physical challenges like: running in the heat for long periods while wearing heavy body armor; crawling through swamps; being hit, kicked, and beaten; being engaged in hurting fellow trainees;

being locked in dark rooms and forced to watch rape scenes or listen to loud recordings of screams and static; not sitting for extreme periods of time; being deprived of food and forced to drink water past the point of vomiting; drinking swamp water; and so on. Soldiers who faltered were often screamed at and told that their weaknesses would lead to their fellow soldiers getting killed. At times, they were put in Catch-22 dilemmas by officers, pitting following individual orders against adhering to military regulations, in which either choice they made was wrong and led to retaliation. The impact on the trainee was one of coming to feel that they couldn’t think for themselves and a related dependence on their superiors. This was where several authors traced the beginnings of their own internal transformation.

From us the instructors demand perfection and endurance and fortitude and leadership and an inhuman ability to stay awake. They expect us to see in the dark, to anticipate the movement of our enemy, to act as magnanimous killing machines (Young, 2018, p. 39).

I had changed dramatically...I was brainwashed. When you arrive at Basic Training you are entirely isolated from the world and your entire life becomes the Army...During the fourth week I could literally feel my brain shutting down. I would no longer think “this is unfair” or “I don’t want to do this.” I no longer had an opinion...I was unable to understand emotions. I would feel scared before jumping and nervous while setting a door charge or waiting to enter a shoot house. I felt these emotions but could not understand why or what they meant (Blum, 2017, pp. 51–52).

Soldiers left training feeling the accomplishment of having survived, but also knowing the heavy consequences of making mistakes. It is this emphasis on strength that reinforces ideals of heroism and traditional masculinity, as illustrated by the next theme.

Caleb made it through SERE school, drugged and beaten within an inch of his life (Percy, 2014, p. 20).

Right then and there, I decided I was never going to be unprepared again (Smith, 2016, p. 47).

The ideal of hero/be a man

As discussed by several of the authors, the promise of heroism is a central motivator for joining the military. Whether in response to terrorist attacks on the US or looking to fulfill something that was unfulfilled in their lives up to that point, soldiers described being drawn to the promise that they might leave for war ordinary and return a hero. As such, they might prove their independence and “be freed forever from the trivial and the mundane” (Morris, 2015, p. 22). At the heart of this promise is the impact of stories imbued with bravery and adventure.

My imagination ran wild with the intense, thrilling stories from the pilots who had been to Iraq in 2003 (Smith, 2016, p. 75).

What I really wanted, as much as the adventure or experience of medals, was... to make other people envious...Envious of the stories I could tell...what I coveted more than anything was the power of a certain kind of silence, the silence that fell over a room when a veteran launched into a story that begin, “Back in the Mekong...” (Morris, 2015, p. 22).

Indeed, many found aspects of combat did fulfill the promise of adventure.

Anytime I get shot at in a firefight, it’s the sexiest feeling there is...It was a front seat to the greatest movie I’ve ever seen in my life (Finkel, 2013, p. 5).

War is more than just terror. War is an adventure. War is history in fast forward (Morris, 2015, p. 130).

However, for others, what lingered was how their experience of combat did not fulfill the ideal they had imagined, either due to lack of action that lends itself to a hero narrative, or due to their being injured and discharged from active duty. As such, some authors described lying to others back home about their experiences.

None of that happens. You'll feel so ashamed that none of it happens that you'll lie and say we did do that stuff. You'll lie for a long time, and you'll lie so much that you'll start to believe the lies (Young, 2018, p. 238).

Tied to the ideal of Hero were messages that the writers described receiving, both explicitly and implicitly, about there being no place in the military for weakness. Soldiers who displayed feelings, who showed vulnerability, or who needed help were regarded, and came to regard themselves, as fitting a series of derogatory identities: "coward" (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 69), "weak...a pussy...a piece of shit" (Finkel, 2013, p. 12), "malingerers...pariahs" (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 131), "bitch-ass...punk" (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 69), "like a girl" (Percy, 2014, p. 19). These messages informed a tendency to cover up one's struggles, to avoid mental health treatment, and to downplay injuries in order to return to duty.

Admitting I was afraid or didn't want to do something seemed like the ultimate shame when I was in the army (Blum, 2017, p. 382).

The military has no place for broken gear. It gets destroyed or left behind (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 132).

For a female soldier, they also reinforced similar demonstrations of strength.

I felt like a new calf surrounded by a pack of wolves waiting for me to fall behind so they could pounce. They were looking for weakness, and I was doing my best not to show any...Being able to stand up for myself as one of the few women in a predominantly male unit and knowing when to tell my guys to fuck off when they'd crossed a line was an intricate part of survival (Smith, 2016, p. 120).

Male intimacy/belonging

Across the texts, the authors provided descriptions of the camaraderie that develops between soldiers who live in close quarters and who endure difficult conditions as well as excessive downtime together. This cohesive team is described repeatedly as a "new family" (Young, 2018, p. 71) and, depending on the circumstances from which the soldier came, as "the family he never had" (Sites, 2013, p. 70), offering community, shared goals, and alternative father figures. Even if these new relationships were fraught, there was always the promise of loyalty.

These men will berate you and beat you and break you, but they won't leave you (Young, 2018, p. 4).

Within this new family, "the family that he believes has given him his true place in the world" (Sites, 2013, p. 73), soldiers found belonging and "unconditional love" (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 26), a love on which, it is described, survival depends.

The truth of the war is that it's always about loving the guy next to you (Finkel, 2013, p. 148).

In the military, characterized as "a world of testosterone and violence, a world where there is little room for love and tenderness" (Young, 2018, p. 185), there is nevertheless an intimacy that develops, one that is often discussed in terms typically reserved for romantic

relationships. This intimacy is described by many of the authors as transcending masculine norms, offering a closeness with other men that was unfamiliar and that fulfilled a need within them.

The cherry privates were as comfortable with each other's bodies as lovers. This came in part from all the fighting (Blum, 2017, p. 71).

To be a soldier in combat was to fall in love constantly (Finkel, 2013, p. 86).

As soldiers continued in deployment, their new family frequently became more important than relationships back home.

In combat, your circle shrinks to those who are there with you. Nobody else matters (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 269)

It was this closeness that is often what men longed for when they returned from deployment.

Holding a gun, and being with a group of guys. It probably sounds really homosexual, but...I miss that (Finkel, 2013, p. 139).

Years later we are spread across the United States. Phone calls and text messages are great...but they cannot replace the antics and kinship between bored, disgruntled men on the battlefield. I'm still looking for my grunt bromance (Brennan & O'Reilly, 2017, p. 253).

Old me, new me

Military indoctrination and entering combat resulted in the development of a new identity tied to being a soldier. In a theme that cuts across all the texts, writers described a point in which an old identity corresponding to the world of home was replaced with a new one that corresponded to war. Like the tarmac across which they stepped to leave for service, the soldiers identified a similar demarcation during war in which parts of the old self ("Past-me"; Young, 2018, p. 45), including innocence, are lost and seem irretrievable. Where the theme Two Worlds was reflective of the difference between two environments, this theme captures the psychological shift soldiers described that occurred internally, in which a new identity state replaced an old one that they will not inhabit again.

To me this is where I lost my old self (Finkel, 2013, p. 56).

The man that was James before everything—was motivated, naïve, full of hope, and had innocence. I just feel like that man died over there and I am stuck with an existence that does not feel (Sites, 2013, p. 115).

The twenty-three-year-old who had set out on her first deployment was gone...My outlook on life had changed completely (Smith, 2016, p. 157).

I've been dead ever since I left Iraq (Percy, 2014, p. 54).

There are indications that this new identity provided a way to disengage from past naiveté in order to cope with having to commit violent acts, an aspect that will be explored further in a subsequent theme.

We created a person-thing. It looks like us and sounds like us, but it is not us. The person-thing is a by-product—like nuclear waste or babies. The person-thing cannot be uncreated. It is a part of us forever. Because the person-thing is not human its foremost prerequisite to existence is that we lose not only our own humanity but remove that of our enemy as well (Young, 2018, p. 96).

By contrast, in one rare description, the two selves are integrated within one officer, a balance that he reports "lets him be the officer that his men can respect but also the human being to whom they can relate" (Sites, 2013, p. 230). It is notable, however, that this officer literally referred to these two identities by different names—Mo and Morris—as

a means of maintaining “the firewall...between the soldier and the man” (Sites, 2013, p. 227).

Morris is the guy that is out bass fishing and gut-hooks a fish or hits a squirrel and feels bad. Morris is the guy who’s really sensitive. But when I’m operational I’m Mo. Mo makes decisions based on fact (Sites, 2013, p. 230).

Monster

Acts of combat, particularly killing, were reported to be central to the sense of a new self that emerged for soldiers. The killing of others in a war zone, particularly in moments of survival, was described as procedural, and there often wasn’t time to focus on the resultant feelings.

Out there, it’s so big and so traumatic that you don’t even have time to deal with it, you can’t process it (Percy, 2014, pp. 59–60).

Marines have to keep doing their jobs when their friends get hurt or killed. Grief is not an emotion to be indulged on the battlefield (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 43).

I don’t have time to think about that shit...It’s just what you’ve got to do (Sites, 2013, p. 37).

However, upon coming home, the soldiers often began to reflect on what they’d done and witnessed. Many of them described not being able to tell friends or family members these memories, out of either a desire to protect them from having to hear it, because of shame, or because of feeling that these civilians would not understand. Instead, the service members carried the memories internally, masking the tumult of emotions they were experiencing, leading to further shame and alienation. Several soldiers identified feeling like monsters as a result. In particular, the realization of having been cavalier about death or enjoying the power of taking someone’s life informed their seeing themselves as monstrous.

Knowing that I killed people—men, children, teenagers—is sickening...I had to rationalize that another person should die. Because I wanted them to. That power over life becomes addicting...When I pulled the trigger, I was God (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 254).

I had a hard drive that I destroyed. Pictures and stuff like that, next to dead bodies, shit like that...Us hanging out with dead bodies. At the time, I mean we were rockin’ and rollin’, we were mean killing machines. Now I look back and I’m like, God, what were we doing? What were we thinking? (Finkel, 2013, p. 62).

I don’t want her to know that her husband, the person she married, has nightmares about killing people. It just makes me feel like a monster...What kind of person has dreams like that? (Finkel, 2013, p. 65).

For others, it was the lack of killing and their disappointment with that which made them feel monstrous.

I want to say I am not damaged. I want to say I am not a monster. But instead I say, I didn’t even get to kill anyone (Young, 2018, p. 230).

In some instances, soldiers coped with feeling like a monster by viewing themselves as needing punishment, even seeing therapy itself as a form of “penance” (Morris, 2015, p. 181). For many, the shutting-down of feelings that became routine in combat extended to their relationships back home, where they found numbness taking over in situations in which they used to feel connection: “I go through the motions, but hugs and kisses feel hollow. Smiles have no feeling and my tears bear no sadness” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 157). “Tears had become something beyond my ability” (Morris, 2015, p. 10). Those with head injuries also experienced a loss of emotional memories

related to important family moments from before their service, which became “like Polaroid pictures developing in reverse, fading to blackness instead of sharpening to capture a moment in time” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 271).

Some soldiers described being unable to access love for their family members anymore.

Sperry says he no longer feels love, not for his wife, nor...his beautiful blond-haired daughter...“I felt love before...but now I just feel numb” (Sites, 2013, pp. 111–112).

I know I love my daughter but I can’t feel it. I can’t feel anything (Morris, 2015, p. 175).

The inevitability of death

Another prominent theme across all of the texts, located as the quintessential experience of combat, is the soldier’s confrontation with mortality, both their own and that of others. Several authors described having to internalize the inevitability that they or someone they knew would die, as time in a war zone is marked by having to “challenge death day after day” (Morris, 2015, p. 27).

Every time we went out, we got hit. I thought it was just a matter of time before I got killed (Sites, 2013, p. 88).

Survival. That’s all that passes through your mind when you make it home from each flight mission...somehow, you have lived to see another day (Smith, 2016, p. xv).

This ongoing vigilance around survival, as well as the arbitrary and random nature of war, in which one could die from being in a particular place at a precise moment, weighed on soldiers. In the face of mortality, they described recognizing their own smallness and humanness as they confronted the realization that “nothing stops death—not body armor, or belief, or bravado” (Young, 2018, p. 131). Some found themselves wishing for the seemingly inevitable to happen.

I wanted it to happen. Bottom line—I wanted it over as soon as possible, whether they did it or I did it (Finkel, 2013, p. 5).

He lay on his back, his vest open, his most fragile organs exposed, waiting, even hoping, for a round to find him through the darkness. It never did (Sites, 2013, p. 87).

One author described becoming immune to the fear of death through acceptance that circumstances were beyond her control. On the other side, she found a new relationship with mortality: “the thrill of dancing with death” (Smith, 2016, p. xv).

For most of the soldiers, confrontation with death followed them home, leading to repeated thoughts about what their family members’ lives would be like if they had died, as well as imagining the deaths of those family members, sometimes leading to their “standing guard over the people I have left to love” (Sites, 2013, p. 82). Likewise, it led to their finding the everyday concerns of life back home futile: “What place did reason have in this world really, after you’d seen what war could do to it?” (Morris, 2015, pp. 4–5). Ultimately, it was this confrontation with death that seemed to shape a permanent internal shift: “When most people tell someone, ‘See you tomorrow,’ they believe that they will. I no longer take such things for granted” (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017, p. 199).

Haunted

While confrontation with the possibility of one’s own death had a strong impact for soldiers, as described by the authors, it was the deaths of fellow soldiers that left them feeling locked in the past after coming home from war. Several soldiers identified having rescue fantasies, wishing for “a chance at revision...a time-out, a do-over” (Young, 2018,

p. 105), or revenge fantasies (“I’m so sick of ‘em tearin’ up my buddies, I just wanna kill ‘em all”; Sites, 2013, p. 38) in response to these deaths. They reported having intrusive imagery of the faces of people they killed or whose deaths they had witnessed, with the recognition that seeing those dead bodies did not register with the same gravity at the time that it did when they returned home.

But a more pointed topic, discussed in three of the texts, was of literally being haunted by the past. These soldiers described being haunted by friends who had died as well as people they’d killed.

Sometimes Tausolo sees Harrelson in the daytime, too, just for an instant. Sometimes he sees him from a distance. Sometimes he sees him close up. ‘Why didn’t you save me?’ Harrelson is always asking as he burns (Finkel, 2013, p. 49).

Last night I was sitting in bed and looked across the room to a chair in my room and there was a young girl covered in blood...This is not the first time I have seen dead bodies. For a while I used to find dead Iraqis floating in my bathtub (Finkel, 2013, pp. 56–57).

Percy’s (2014) book focuses on a soldier who feels himself haunted by *The Black Thing*, a demonic presence. He goes on to facilitate exorcisms for other soldiers as well. He registers this presence not as imagery but as a literal entity: “He said it’s not a metaphor... It was shadow. It was death. It was the gathered souls of all his dead friends” (Percy, 2014, p. 63).

Discussion

Percy (2014), an author of one of the source texts, shared the following motivation for writing her book:

I wanted to talk to veterans and the families of veterans for the same reason that many were telling me I could not talk to them. That as soon as we say words like *PTSD* or *trauma* we have permission to ignore the problem because we think we understand it. It wasn’t so much that the familiar narratives weren’t working, it was there appeared to be no narrative at all. (p. 57)

In her reflection, she points out that knowledge of trauma does not necessarily equate to knowledge of war trauma. The themes generated in this study suggest that military service members share some qualities with other traumatized populations, as well as having experiences that are distinct. The focus of this discussion will be on how soldiers’ stories can be particularly informative for therapists treating those with other forms of trauma.

The first theme, **Two Worlds (Away and Home)**, captures a unique characteristic of American soldiers. The United States has not had compulsory military service since the Vietnam War, which means that American service members are placed in war zones because of their choice to enlist in the military. Unlike most traumatized populations, the traumatic exposure of soldiers is a chosen one, which occurs in a separate place where the rules and environment are distinct. In recent years, technology has made it possible for soldiers to remain increasingly connected to life back home. However, Marlantes (2011) argued that this has been a disservice, in that the blurring of the two worlds has actually made it more difficult for soldiers to allow themselves to leave war behind psychologically.

While the chosen nature of their trauma and the literal separation between the trauma environment and everyday life is distinct, what soldiers share with other traumatized people is a sense that, because of their exposure to violence and **the Inevitability of Death**, they understand things that people who haven’t had these experiences do not. Many trauma patients, from young children to adults, describe a similar dynamic, in which the past taints present events, even ostensibly happy ones. Coming to know the random cruelty of life renders it difficult for them to connect with the everyday problems of their non-traumatized peers, contributing to disillusionment and isolation (Haen, 2017). In

this way, soldiers can teach us about why trust and hope are such hard-won achievements within trauma recovery.

The themes **Teach you with Pain** and **The Ideal of Hero/ Be a Man** both illustrate the ways in which an emphasis on personal invulnerability is detrimental to psychological coping. In particular, they highlight the impact of stigma surrounding being unable to fulfill the unrealistic role of “Hero.” Such stigma has been noted to be the “most important and damaging barrier to mental health care for soldiers” (Kugel et al., 2017, p. 403) and has been found to be connected in part to soldiers’ attempts to fulfill their own unrealistic standards of what a man should be (Gilbar, Dekel, Spector-Mersel, & Levi, 2018). Stigma is also a significant obstacle to healing across traumatized populations, particularly for those who perceive trauma as weakness, such as males who adhere to traditional gender roles (Kimerling, Weitlauf, Iverson, Karpenko, & Jain, 2014).

It is important to note that the focus of this research was war writing by and about American soldiers. Kleinreesink (2016), who studied 54 published autobiographies written by those who were deployed to Afghanistan, found that books written by American soldiers had a disproportionately negative focus compared to those written by soldiers from other countries. She speculated that the American military may promote heroism more than other militias, a phenomenon that “fits the strategic narrative in which the US sees itself as a fighter of evil” (p. 288). She highlighted how trying to be a hero also correlates with expecting a hero’s reception upon arriving home which, as the data illustrates, often doesn’t happen. Unlike in Israel, where nationwide compulsory military service creates a shared meaning of war that allows soldiers to have their losses understood and acknowledged by society (Junger, 2016), American troops are left grappling with their own personal meanings. They often become disillusioned as they come to see their initial expectations of glory as a false promise, leading to a lack of trust in powerful systems (Harari, 2008). As such, Kleinreesink (2016) concluded, “Unfulfilled expectations’ could sum up most of the US Afghanistan memoirs” (p. 288).

The disillusionment of soldiers can inform us about how a focus on heroism and strength can be profoundly discordant for traumatized people. The dynamics surrounding unfulfilled expectations align with the concept of *institutional betrayal* illustrated by the research of Smith and Freyd (2017). Institutional betrayal occurs when a larger system fails to protect one of its members or responds negatively to their disclosure of trauma. It is manifested by behaviors such as denying the traumatic event happened, punishing the person for coming forward or seeking help, or making them feel devalued or ostracized following their disclosure. Preliminary evidence suggests that institutional betrayal correlates with increases in both health problems and dissociation. While the military has a known history of engaging in practices related to institutional betrayal (Russell, Schaubel, & Figley, 2018), linked strongly to Shay’s (2014) conception of *moral injury*, they are not the only system that does so. As such, the stories of soldiers might inform us about the role of schools, religious communities, workplaces, and larger societies in exacerbating trauma and effecting a long-term lack of trust in hierarchical entities.

By contrast, this study highlighted the importance of **Male Intimacy and Belonging** as central to the military. On the one hand, this bonding could serve as a protective factor as illustrated by Nevarez, Yee, and Waldinger (2017), who studied relationship quality among soldiers as a moderator in a small sample ($N = 101$) of American soldiers who served in World War II. Those who reported better relationships with peers during the war tended to exhibit fewer trauma symptoms on post-deployment measures. However, those soldiers also tended to be ones who reported having better peer relationships prior to the war. On the other hand, as noted by Ali and Wolfert (2016), the cohesion that develops among units is an intentional result of military indoctrination and serves to increase soldiers’ tendency to place themselves in danger in order to protect others. As such, these strong relationships can inform us about the ways that people who endure

trauma together, particularly life threat, form intense connections to one another that create closed cultures with “an ‘us’ and ‘them’ perception of reality” (Cates, Zeller, & Faircloth, 2017, p. 2) that is resistant to outside intervention.

The theme **Old Me, New Me**, reflects the ways that soldiers are changed by war, losing some parts of who they were prior to combat. This bifurcation of the self into pre- and post-trauma states has been witnessed in other populations who have been exposed to mass trauma and interpersonal violence, as has a splitting of the self into separate states, one traumatized and another untouched by the trauma (Danylchuk & Connors, 2017). This theme also captures how shutting off feelings can function as a coping mechanism for soldiers living in an environment of ongoing threat.

In his ethnographic research on the role of sound in wartime Iraq, Daughtry (2015) noted a corollary in the way that soldiers habituate and cease to register distant sounds of battle, such as far-off gunfire and explosions, after some time in a combat zone. He labeled this auditory zone the *audible inaudible*. This adaptation has survival value. For example, Pickman, Greene, and Gelkopf, (2017) found that, while there is typically a dose-response relationship between level of exposure and post-traumatic stress symptoms, soldiers’ subjective sense of threat in combat can mediate this relationship, suggesting that how they appraise events in the moment has ramifications for long-term symptom trajectory.

Shutting down feelings, like the audible inaudible, is a survival strategy that allows many soldiers to focus on their mission while in a war zone. However, as noted in the data, when they return home soldiers often remain numb long after doing so is necessary for survival. Alternatively, the emotions that had previously been dissociated surface. Having learned to “not feel,” they are left without ways to regulate these emotions, often fluctuating between extremes of hyper- and hypo-arousal or placing themselves in risky situations that simulate the adrenaline rush of combat (Danylchuk & Connors, 2017). As such, soldiers can teach us about how emotions can become fraught for people who are exposed to chronic trauma, and how symptoms result from the adaptations people make in order to survive. Such an understanding, when conveyed to the traumatized person through psychoeducation, can help to reduce powerful shame dynamics within treatment (Fisher, 2017).

Finally, the subtheme of **Monster** informs us about how aspects of traumatic experience that cannot be integrated continue to haunt a person. While soldiers described both sadness and fear related to combat, they also recounted the rush of excitement and adrenal charge that can come from evading danger, conquering enemies, and being at war. This part, “the deep savage joy in destruction” (Marlantes, 2011, p. 63), is often difficult for veterans to talk about back home for fear of how others might perceive it. Perhaps the element that makes the experiences of military unique from other traumatized populations, apart from law enforcement officers, is the aspect of killing. Kugel et al. (2017) asserted that addressing the psychological sequelae related to having committed violent acts is necessary if one is to work with soldiers around other trauma-related emotions tied to grief or depression.

As therapists working with traumatized people, we must make space for pieces of the trauma narrative that are not about victimization. Children who have been sexually abused, for example, often have difficulty speaking about aspects of the experience that were connected to positive feelings, such as the attention paid to them by their abuser that might otherwise have been lacking in their life or the arousal they experienced during the abuse (Haen, 2007). These discordant elements can become sources of deep shame and isolation without safe spaces in which to express them.

The narratives of soldiers can also help therapists to better understand other populations where perpetration and violence are intertwined with survival, such as people living in violence-infused communities and homes. Therapists need some understanding of the psychology of perpetration in order to work successfully with trauma

victims on not sequestering parts of themselves outside of awareness. By contrast, working only with a traumatized person’s victimized parts might unwittingly reinforce their need to remain fragmented (Haen, 2017).

The potential of the arts

The themes of this qualitative study point to some of the challenges faced by soldiers returning home from combat, as well as indicating obstacles toward help-seeking. Arts-based treatment approaches may offer several potential benefits that make them promising practices for working with veterans. Given the significance of stigma for soldiers and their difficulty communicating what it has been like to be in a war zone, creative arts therapies may offer a more conducive treatment approach as veterans can participate without having to communicate their trauma experience in words. Likewise, because arts-based approaches do not resemble traditional talk therapy and often call upon the resilient and healthy parts of self, the arts may bypass the stigma associated with help-seeking and support feelings of competence (Murtagh & Lobban, 2018; Smyth & Nobel, 2018/2015) while experientially countering past acts of destruction through acts of creation.

By nature, the arts are collaborative endeavors, particularly those that involve improvisation and performance. By engaging in these approaches, veterans might be able to relocate themselves as part of a new community with a shared mission, thereby addressing the longed-for male intimacy that was left behind in combat. Soldiers might, in turn, be able to access difficult feelings through the safety of artistic creation. These ideas are consistent with veterans’ own descriptions of engaging in arts-based therapies (Palmer, Hill, Lobban, & Murphy, 2017; Quaglietti, 2018).

Sherman (2015), a psychoanalytically trained philosopher, suggested that a central part of healing veterans’ shame and guilt lies in the development of *self-empathy*, which entails a fair and equitable self-assessment that considers one’s past circumstances and is less subject to rigid standards of success and failure. Self-empathy, she suggested, may or may not involve self-forgiveness but encompasses the experience of “self-friendship” (p. 94) and fosters self-reintegration. As Sherman noted, a distanced perspective is necessary for self-empathy, one that involves feeling the affect of past events but being able to view them from a more objective place. Such distance is difficult for traumatized people to attain; yet, in giving trauma experiences form and representation through the arts, this distance might be possible as one can view the artistic creation as both creator and audience (Wise & Nash, 2013).

Finally, by engaging in performance, improvisation, writing or art-making, soldiers might be able to take ownership of their narratives through a creative product that communicates to others in a way that can be felt and understood, thus allowing them to bridge their Two Worlds. In the books that served as source material for this study, some soldiers described finding creative endeavors helpful to their healing. For example, one author reported that his writing allowed his wife to understand things he’d been unable to say in words (Brennan & O’Reilly, 2017).

Marlantes (2011), a Marine who served in the Vietnam War, considered how veterans might overcome their alienation from family and society upon returning home. He wrote about the necessity of soldiers being able to represent their experiences for others to witness. His assertion supports the growing research base, of which this Special Issue is an example, that indicated a vast potential for arts-based approaches to achieve reintegration of veterans into communities back home; bridging their Two Worlds, and integrating their pre- and post-trauma selves into a healthier afterwar identity.

Each and every one of us veterans must have a song to sing about our war before we can walk back into the community...Perhaps it is drawing pictures or reciting poetry about the war. Perhaps it is getting together with a small group of people and telling stories.

Perhaps it is dreaming about it and writing the dreams down and then telling people your dreams. But it isn't enough just to do the art in solitude and sing the song alone. You must sing it to other people. Those who are afraid or uneasy must hear it. They must see the art. They must lose their fear. (Marlantes, 2011, p. 207)

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