Meaning as a mission: A review of empirical studies on appraisals of war and peacekeeping experiences

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to review the scientific literature on making sense of war and peacekeeping experiences, and it includes an analysis of empirical studies that examine appraisals of military deployment experiences among veterans. Veterans reported more positive than negative effects in the studies of this review. Furthermore, construing positive meaning from war and peacekeeping experiences, especially related to combat exposure or high perceived threat, is associated with better psychological adjustment. More insight on “normal” psychological processing of stressful and traumatic experiences is obtained when the concept of meaning is used in research. This perspective emphasizes the perception of individuals and focuses on beliefs and attitudes in making sense of threatening events instead of pathologizing the response to trauma.

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Keywords: Meaning; Appraisals; Veterans

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It has frequently been assumed that assigning meaning plays a crucial role in adaptation to stressful and threatening events (Frankl, 1984; Horowitz, 1976/1977). Cognitive approaches to trauma (Brewin & Holmes, 2003; Joseph & Linley, 2005) state that successful processing occurs if new information is assimilated into existing structures or existing models of the world are accommodated to this information. Unsuccessful processing occurs when individuals are incapable of integrating trauma-related information into existing beliefs about self, others and the world, or when individuals are incapable of changing their view of the world. The specific meaning that individuals assign to their stressful and threatening experiences may prove to be essential in the process of adaptation. Certain beliefs about self, others and the world are expected to be more adaptive, and may facilitate successful integration of the threatening experience, especially if these beliefs relate to inner safety and trust (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

According to Park and Folkman (1997), there is a great diversity in the conceptual and operational approaches of meaning used in the context of coping and adjustment to stressful life events and conditions. They demonstrated that the concept of meaning referred to several perspectives, such as a general life orientation, personal significance, the process of making causal attributions about why an event occurred, finding redeeming or transcendent features in the event, and as an outcome of the process of adjustment to trauma. These various perspectives on meaning are reflected in diverse operational definitions (Park & Folkman, 1997). For instance, meaning has been assessed in terms of re-evaluating an event as positive, answering the question as to why an event occurred or the question: “Why me?”. It has also been operationalized as enumerating ways in which life changed because of the event, and stating the extent to which one has “made sense of” the event.

Research has indicated that the processes of making sense of the extreme event and finding benefits in the traumatic experience play independent roles in adjustment (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1998; Taylor, 1983). According to Taylor (1983), the attempt to find meaning discloses itself in two ways: a causal explanation that provides an answer to the question why it happened and a rethinking of one’s attitudes and priorities to restructure one’s life along more satisfying lines, changes that are prompted by and attributed to the event. When positive meaning can be construed from the threatening experience, Taylor (1983) found that it produces significantly better psychological adjustment among cancer patients. Davis et al. (1998) analyzed the two processes of making sense of the event and finding benefits following the loss of a family member. The results of their prospective and longitudinal study showed that making sense of the loss was associated with less distress only in the first year after the event happened, whereas benefit-finding was most strongly associated with adjustment at 13 and 18 months after loss. These findings point to two independent pathways following each other in the construction of meaning as part of the psychological adjustment process to threatening experiences (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Joseph & Linley, 2005). Firstly, one has to make sense of the event by answering the questions: what happened, how and why. Secondly, one has to find personal significance in the event or gain from the experience for one’s present live.

The concept of meaning in terms of comprehensibility and personal significance is relevant to veterans being exposed to threatening and traumatic events during war and peacekeeping operations, such as combat exposure, bombardment and witnessing death and destruction. This perspective broadens the scope to normal psychological adaptation instead of pathologizing the response to trauma. The concept of meaning fits very well into a broader view on trauma in which resilience plays a major role, especially because empirical studies have repeatedly shown that only a minority (although sometimes considerable) will develop mental disorders after traumatic experiences and that the majority of affected people will recover after a short period (Bonanno, 2004; Kleber & Brom, 1992). Furthermore, the focus on meaning emphasizes a more subjective perspective. By asking veterans how they look back on their military mission, we can get more insight on coping mechanisms from a personal point of view and find out more about positive and negative outcomes related to stressful and threatening events. Focusing on psychopathological consequences limits our understanding of ‘normal’ adaptation to threatening events.

The aim of this article is to review the scientific literature on making sense of war and peacekeeping experiences in relation to psychological adjustment. This review includes an analysis of empirical studies that examined appraisals of military deployment experiences among veterans. Based on theoretical approaches and empirical findings (Davis et al.,
it is expected that attributing positive meaning to war and peacekeeping experiences is associated with better psychological adjustment after deployment. This review will address conceptual issues such as conceptualizations of meaning, dimensions of meaning, domains of change, and meaning in relation to perceived threat and psychological adjustment. Furthermore, methodological issues with regard to research designs, population and response rates and instruments will be discussed.

1. Methods

For the purpose of this review relevant publications were searched with Webspirs (searches PsycINFO and Medline) and PILOTS using general terms such as veterans, soldiers in combination with meaning, appraisals. Additional specific search terms were used such as benefit finding, coping, change, effects, consequences. The search results were screened for their relevance to the review. Non-empirical (i.e. theoretical and literature reviews) publications were excluded. References of the identified publications were checked for relevance. This process was repeated until no new references arose. Seven empirical studies met our criteria of inclusion. Table 1 provides an overview of the included empirical studies.

2. Conceptual issues

The following issues will be discussed: the theoretical definitions of meaning, the dimensions of meaning, the domains of change, the perceived threat during war and peacekeeping, and psychological adjustment in relation to meaning.

2.1. Conceptualizations of meaning

The empirical studies under review showed a lack of clarity as far as the concept of meaning is concerned (see Park & Folkman, 1997). Several studies examined influences of military experience from a lifespan perspective (Aldwin et al., 1994; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Spiro et al., 1999). Some researchers used a more psychodynamic orientation (Dohrenwend et al., 2004; Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998). Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) used a more extended definition of psychological benefits and liabilities as being positive and negative changes regarding self-image, cognitions, feelings and behaviour. Dohrenwend et al. (2004) defined tertiary appraisals as “...ongoing evaluations, sometimes over many years, of the impact of an experience after it has occurred” (p. 417). Britt et al. (2001) based their research on the stress and coping paradigm and defined meaning “…in two different ways as (a) being engaged in important and relevant work during the operation and (b) experiencing events during the course of the deployment that put the deployment in a broader contextual framework” (p. 55). Mehlum (1995) examined positive and negative consequences of serving in a UN peacekeeping mission without clearly defining these consequences from a theoretical perspective. Overall, emphasis in the concept of meaning was placed on psychological changes after war and peacekeeping experiences reflecting a preference for meaning as personal significance.

2.2. Dimensions of meaning

In most reviewed studies an emphasis on a positive and a negative dimension in the meaning of war and peacekeeping experiences was found, except in the case of the study by Britt et al. (2001). For example, World War II and Korean veterans attributed both negative and positive influences to their combat experience in later life (Elder & Clipp, 1989). Between 60% and 70% of these veterans reported positive aspects, such as having learned to cope with adversity, having developed self-discipline, a feeling of greater independence, and a broader perspective on life. Undesirable influences, reported by these veterans with less frequency, were, among others: disrupted life, pain of separation from loved ones, and delayed career development. These outcomes were confirmed by the study of Aldwin et al. (1994). The mean rating for the desirable aspects of military service among World War II, Korea and Vietnam veterans was much higher than that given to undesirable aspects. They found no correlation between the negative and positive appraisals which indicates independent dimensions of meaning. In the study of Spiro et al. (1999), combat exposure among World War II and Korea veterans was also associated with positive and negative outcomes that were independent of one another.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors (year)</th>
<th>Research design</th>
<th>Population (year)</th>
<th>Sample size (response)</th>
<th>Measures of meaning</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elder &amp; Clipp (1989)</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>World War II and Korea veterans</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>Appraisal of the effects of military service (28 items) divided between desirable and undesirable items.</td>
<td>Effects of military service were negative and positive, reflecting the capacity to experience pain and growth from the same event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldwin, Levenson &amp; Spiro (1994)</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>World War II, Korea, Vietnam and World War I veterans</td>
<td>1287 (83%)</td>
<td>Appraisal of the effects of military service (28 items) divided between desirable (α = .91) and undesirable items (α = .62).</td>
<td>Lifelong negative consequences of combat exposure were observed, perceiving positive benefits from stressful experience mitigated the effect. Positive and negative effects of military experience constitute independent pathways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehlum (1995)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>UNIFIL personnel serving from 1978–1991/repatriated group/matched control group</td>
<td>724 (68%) / 456 (72%)</td>
<td>Positive and negative consequences of the service either by use of questionnaires and or personal interviews.</td>
<td>In spite of the stressful events and traumatic experiences that many faced, the vast majority of subjects had a predominantly positive main impression of the service (increasing self-confidence, (military) qualifications, stress-tolerance and expanding horizons).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fontana &amp; Rosenheck (1998)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Vietnam Theater veterans</td>
<td>1198</td>
<td>Psychological benefits were coded dichotomously in three categories: affirmation of patriotic beliefs, self-improvement and solidarity with others. Psychological liabilities were coded into three corresponding dichotomous categories: disillusionment of patriotic beliefs, self-impoverishment, and alienation from others.</td>
<td>Psychological benefits counteracted and psychological liabilities passed through the effects of traumatic exposure on PTSD. The psychological benefit of self-improvement moderated the effects of the psychological liability of self-impoverishment on PTSD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiro, Schnurr &amp; Aldwin (1999)</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>World War II and Korea veterans</td>
<td>1263 (83%)</td>
<td>Appraisal of the effects of military service (28 items) divided between desirable and undesirable items.</td>
<td>Combat exposure was associated with both positive and negative outcomes, and heavy combat exposure was particularly associated with positive outcomes. The two appraisals were independent and opposite mediators of the effect of combat exposure on PTSD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brit, Adler &amp; Bartone (2001)</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>U.S. soldiers participating in Bosnia peacekeeping mission</td>
<td>161 (16%)</td>
<td>Mid-Deployment Assessment at 6-month point in Bosnia: Job Importance (α = .88), Job Engagement (α = .91) and Peacekeeper Identity (α = .84). Post-deployment assessment at 4-5 months on perceived benefits (α = .84)</td>
<td>The tendency to find meaning in work during the mission was prospectively related to reporting benefits from the deployment (e.g. increased personal experience and increased ability to deal with stress) months after the deployment was over. Exposure to stressful events among U.S. peacekeeping Bosnia soldiers is positively related to construing benefits. Almost 71% of the U.S. male veterans who served in Vietnam perceived the impact of their wartime experiences on their present lives as mainly positive. Over 40% of the veterans felt the war’s influence was still highly important in their lives. Theater veterans made tertiary appraisals that are both more positive and more salient than those of era veterans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dohrenwend et al., (2004)</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Vietnam Theater and Era veterans</td>
<td>1183 (83%) / 412 (76%)</td>
<td>Measures of salience and valence were developed from the NVVRS survey. Salience (2 items): current importance of the Vietnam War in the veteran’s life. Valence (2 items): whether the effects of military service and the war were positive or negative. Open-ended questions were used about the content of the appraisals.</td>
<td>The findings are that the war’s influence was still highly important in their lives. Theater veterans made tertiary appraisals that are both more positive and more salient than those of era veterans.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More than 70% of UN peacekeepers who served in Lebanon (Mehlum, 1995) had a predominantly positive main impression of the service. They reported that it expanded their horizons, increased their stress-tolerance and self-confidence, as well as enhancing their skills in military disciplines. Negative consequences as reported by less than 20% of the peacekeepers in this study, included posttraumatic stress symptoms, increased alcohol intake and suicide attempts.

Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) found in their study among Vietnam veterans that psychological benefits and liabilities were largely independent of one another. They concluded “…that people are quite capable of having both positive and negative reactions to the same set of circumstances” (p. 501).

Finally, in the study of Dohrenwend et al. (2004) the majority of Vietnam veterans (70.9%) appraised the impact of their service in Vietnam on their present lives as mainly positive. Moreover, over 40% of the veterans felt the war’s influence was still highly important in their lives. The authors concluded that, for veterans who have been highly exposed to war-zone stressors, concurrent negative and positive tertiary appraisals were mostly adaptive in reflecting the reality of the experience as well as providing a cognitive context for growth. From this perspective the balance between a positive and a negative meaning of war and peacekeeping experiences is expected to be critical.

2.3. Domains of change

The reported changes or benefits as a result of war or peacekeeping experiences can be categorized in three domains of change, reflecting changes in self-image, in social relationships and in personal growth and priorities in life.

With regard to changes in self-image, World War II and Korea veterans reported aspects such as broadening their perspectives, enhancing coping skills, increasing self-discipline and independence (Aldwin et al., 1994; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Spiro et al., 1999). Vietnam veterans described changes for better or worse in self-worth, assertiveness, maturity, responsibility and personal skills (Dohrenwend et al., 2004; Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998). UNIFIL personnel serving in Lebanon reported increased self-confidence and stress-tolerance (Mehlum, 1995). They felt that the experiences expanded their horizons and increased their military skills. Perceived benefits among Bosnian peacekeepers in relation to self-concept consisted in dealing better with stress, more awareness of problems in the world, and not taking things for granted (Britt et al., 2001). Examples of reported changes in social relationships were having learned to cooperate and finding life-long friends (Aldwin et al., 1994; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Spiro et al., 1999), becoming more tolerant, less prejudiced, and more compassionate, and feeling closer to other people and getting along with different people and people from other cultures (Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998). Changes in personal growth and life priorities that were mentioned in the included studies were valuing life more, appreciation of peace (Elder & Clipp, 1989; Spiro et al., 1999), realizing the importance of family, and strengthening of faith/spirituality (Britt et al., 2001).

2.4. Meaning in relation to perceived threat

Veterans who were exposed to higher perceived threat reported more positive outcomes. The findings of Elder and Clipp (1989) show that men who fought in heavy combat were more likely to value human life than others who were less exposed to war’s atrocities. Furthermore, veterans who suffered personal losses on the battlefield reported more enduring ties to combat comrades. Veterans reported more positive development outcomes when they were exposed to more intense combat (Aldwin et al., 1994; Spiro et al., 1999). Psychological benefits as measured by Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) were associated with most types of traumatic exposure in the war zone such as fighting, killing, perceived threat and death of others, except for atrocities. Britt et al. (2001) showed that Bosnian peacekeepers were more likely to report benefits as a result of deployment when they had at least some exposure to the damage caused by the war. Dohrenwend et al. (2004) found among Vietnam war veterans that mainly positive tertiary appraisals, referring to ongoing evaluations of the impact of an experience, were associated to a greater extent with higher war zone exposure. Unfortunately, the association between perceived threat and positive outcomes was not addressed in study of Mehlum (1995). The association of perceived threat and positive meaning will be addressed later in more detail.

2.5. Meaning in relation to psychological adjustment

Longitudinal data reveals that veterans who were engaged in heavy combat during World War II and the Korean War became significantly less helpless and more resilient between adolescence and mid-life, but that they were not
necessarily symptom free in terms of emotional distress and impairment (Elder & Clipp, 1989). Furthermore, the association between combat exposure in early adulthood among World War II and Korea veterans and PTSD symptoms in later life was partially mediated by appraisals of the desirable and undesirable effects of military service (Aldwin et al., 1994). In this latter study, the perception of undesirable effects, such as losses in career and relationships, and experiencing negative affective states, was moderately and positively related to PTSD symptoms, whereas the perception of positive effects, such as the development of coping resources, was negatively related to PTSD symptom levels. The appraisal of negative effects as well as depression also moderated the relationship between combat stress and PTSD symptoms by exacerbating the stress effects slightly. Moreover, in the study of Spiro et al. (1999) path analyses demonstrated that positive and negative appraisals are opposite mediators of the effect of combat exposure on PTSD, even after controlling for depressive symptoms or response style. A significant part of the effects of combat exposure on PTSD was mediated through the appraisals.

Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) found that psychological benefits among Vietnam veterans, in particular self-improvement, played a mediational role by counteracting the effects of traumatic exposure on PTSD. According to the authors, the results suggest that the sense that one coped successfully with the trauma appears to be the best insulation against developing PTSD from the exposure. On the other hand, they found that psychological liabilities, in particular alienation from others, mediate between traumatic exposure and PTSD in the opposite direction. Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) also found evidence for a moderating role of psychological benefits on psychological liabilities, especially when the benefits are self-improvement and the liabilities are self-impoverishment. This finding again confirms that the individual sense of success and failure in coping appears to be a highly influential set of reactions for the development of PTSD.

Using the same data set, Dohrenwend et al. (2004) found that Vietnam veterans who reported mainly negative effects of military service and judged their Vietnam war experiences as highly salient were by far the most likely ones to suffer from current PTSD when controlling for level of exposure to war-zone stressors and compared to other subgroups. Furthermore, they found that in the subgroup of veterans with high exposure and current PTSD, those who reported mainly positive effects of military service and highly salient appraisals showed better wartime and post-war functioning than those who reported mainly negative effects and high salience appraisals. The authors concluded that these results are consistent with the hypothesis that positive tertiary appraisals are affirmations of successful wartime and post-war adaptation rather than defensive denials related to maladaptive outcomes. Unfortunately, the two studies on peacekeepers (Britt et al., 2001; Mehlum, 1995) reported no results on meaning in relation to psychological adjustment.

3. Methodological issues

In this paragraph methodological issues with regard to the empirical studies under review are discussed. These issues concern the following three subjects: the research designs that were used, the populations and response rates, and the instruments used to measure meaning or appraisals of the experience.

3.1. Research designs

Unfortunately, all assessments of meaning or appraisals related to war and peacekeeping experiences were only conducted once, although several studies were longitudinal (see Table 1). In most cases meaning was not the central issue in the study, but part of a larger study design. Based on the findings in these studies it is not clear if meaning changes over time.

Furthermore, the time of measurement varies among the empirical studies. For example, the studies conducted among the older generation of veterans (World War I, World War II, and the Korean war) took place approximately forty years after service. The Vietnam War veterans were contacted 11 to 12 years after the end of the war. For the more recently deployed veterans research was conducted on average 6 to 7 years after service for UNIFIL personnel (Lebanon) and 4 to 5 months post deployment for the Bosnian peacekeepers. Different moments of measurement make it difficult to compare results of the studies due to differences in age, life phase and other major life events that influence the meaning making process.

Another issue concerns the absence of a control group in almost all the empirical studies under review. The inclusion of control groups consisting of former military men who were not deployed or who were deployed during another
military operation with a lower degree of stressful events or combat, could demonstrate whether the psychological effects or changes were indeed a result of exposure to combat or stressful events during military service or deployment. The studies of Dohrenwend et al. (2004) and Mehlum (1995) mentioned the use of a control group in the method section, but results on meaning or cognitive appraisals for the control group were not reported in the results section. Most studies made comparisons of meaning or cognitive appraisals within the sample based on degree of combat exposure (none, moderate or high).

3.2. Populations and response rates

The samples of the studies were quite diverse and consisted of war and peacekeeping veterans. Most studies focused on veterans with war experiences such as World War II, the Korean and Vietnam war. The younger generation veterans were somewhat underrepresented.

Research among Vietnam War veterans published by Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) and by Dohrenwend et al. (2004) used prior collected data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study. In fact they used the same data but with a different approach in coding the qualitative data.

The studies included in this review reported different response rates ranging from 74% among World War II and Korea veterans (Aldwin et al., 1994; Spiro et al., 1999), 83% and 76% for Vietnam Theater and Era veterans (Dohrenwend et al., 2004), 68% among UNIFIL soldiers (Mehlum, 1995) to 16% for Bosnian soldiers (Britt et al., 2001). Therefore, it is unknown if, for example, veterans with problems were underrepresented or overrepresented in the sample. Furthermore, it is unclear if the samples in these studies were representative for the entire population.

3.3. Instruments measuring meaning

The use of different instruments to measure meaning or appraisals of war and peacekeeping experiences makes it difficult to compare results. Most studies used self-constructed instruments based on empirically gathered information (Aldwin et al., 1994; Britt et al., 2001; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Spiro et al., 1999), or coded qualitative data for statistical analyses (Dohrenwend et al., 2004; Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998). The assessment of the consequences of service in the study of Mehlum (1995) was not clear; the data was either collected by use of questionnaires and/or by personal interviews.

The instrument developed by Elder and Clipp (1998) was used among the veterans serving in World War II and Korea (Aldwin et al., 1994; Spiro et al., 1999). Based on literature and intensive interviews, the authors constructed a list of 13 positive and 14 negative influences of military service. All veterans were asked to select the three most and three least desirable aspects of their experience. Aldwin et al. (1994) were the only ones who reported on the psychometric properties of this instrument; internal reliability was higher for desirable (α = .91) than undesirable effects (α = .62).

Britt et al. (2001) measured engagement in meaningful work during the deployment with two questionnaires called Job Importance and Soldier Engagement, and 4 to 5 months after deployment soldiers completed two measures called Perceived Benefits and Contextual Experiences to assess experiencing events that put the deployment in a broader contextual framework. The Cronbach Alpha’s for these scales ranged from .84 to .91 indicating good reliability.

4. Discussion

Veterans reported more positive than negative effects in the studies of this review (Aldwin et al., 1994; Dohrenwend and colleagues, 2004; Elder and Clipp, 1989; Mehlum, 1995; Spiro et al., 1999). Positive and negative meanings of war and peacekeeping experiences reflected independent dimensions and were found to co-exist. Furthermore, findings indicate a mediating effect of perceived benefits from (highly) stressful experiences on psychological adjustment. These findings clearly illustrate the importance of the individual’s perception of positive and negative changes related to the psychological processing of war and peacekeeping experiences. However, the directionality of this association has to be interpreted with caution because in all the reviewed studies the measurement of meaning was cross-sectional.

The concept of meaning in terms of personal significance was well-addressed in the studies in this review, although diverse but overlapping conceptualizations were used. There appears to be consensus about a positive and negative dimension of meaning that reflects independent positive and negative psychological changes as a result of military
service or deployment. In relation to positive adaptation, it is expected that the balance between positive and negative appraisals is critical in order to integrate the reality of the experience and to provide a context for personal growth. Therefore, it is important to assess meaning from a positive as well as from a negative perspective, since these two forms constitute independent pathways. In this regard, the concept of posttraumatic growth emphasizes a more positive dimension of psychological change as a result of coping with a major loss or trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001), and lacks the negative dimension of meaning making.

Furthermore, three important and consistent domains of change were frequently described as part of meaning as significance: (1) self-concept, (2) social relationships, and (3) personal growth and priorities in life (see Updegraft & Taylor, 2000). In successful processing of highly stressful war and peacekeeping experiences it may well be that changes in relation to self-image, social relationships and world view are necessary to provide a sense of control and inner safety and trust (Taylor, 1983; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Moreover, it would be very useful to examine which domain of change has priority in time. For example, it may be that beliefs about the world as a safe place are necessary before someone develops stronger positive beliefs about social relationships and self-image. Insight on the order of these changes can be used to facilitate interventions for veterans with problems in processing their experiences, and it deepens our understanding of how a sense of control and inner safety can be re-established. Research that provides insight on the best order of these domains of change can be accomplished by using within-subjects and prospective research designs (Lazarus, 2000). This kind of research allows the identification of changes or processes over time and it helps us to understand the role and evolution of meaning in the psychological adjustment to threatening and stressful events.

The finding that veterans exposed to higher perceived threat report more positive outcomes is supported by several studies among former prisoners of war (Sledge, Boydstun & Rahe, 1980; Solomon, Waysman, Neria, Orhy, Schwarzwald, & Wiener, 1999). In line with Baumeister (1991), this can be explained by the fact that a higher perceived threat results in a higher need in attributing meaning to the experience. By attributing meaning to a threat, in this case highly stressful war and peacekeeping experiences, veterans may master the situation much better than would otherwise have been possible. Furthermore, this higher need in the search of meaning may also reflect a search of congruity as a result of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1979). Dissonance arises when behavior (such as the sacrifices made while engaged in combat) is inconsistent with beliefs or attitudes (i.e., holding the opinion or attitude that the sacrifices made were not made for a worthwhile cause), in effect, “I suffered and it was not for an important cause.” In such a case, the attitudes or beliefs are modified (to impute meaning to engaging in combat) in order to reduce cognitive dissonance. Then the sacrifices made as a result of exposure to combat and war zone stressors may not be in vain.

Some serious methodological limitations were observed in the reviewed studies. First, the time of measurement varied among the studies. Besides the influence of other major life events that influence the specific meaning of the military experiences, Walker, Skowronsli and Thompson (2003) showed that recollections of the past are positively biased. This implies that bad memories are more often forgotten than good memories. This would also indicate that looking back on the military deployment or service is more remembered for its positive events than for its negative events. A second limitation is the absence of a control group in the studies under review. A control group is needed to demonstrate the effects of military deployment on meaning making, especially when research is cross-sectional. Third, because it is not clear if the samples of the empirical studies in this review are representative, it is not certain if the conclusions are generalizable to the entire population. Fourth, the use of different instruments to measure meaning or appraisals of war and peacekeeping experiences makes it difficult to compare results. Most of these self-constructed measures were based on empirically gathered information or in some studies original data was re-analyzed. Instruments were not designed from a well-defined theoretical framework. Findings are therefore difficult to interpret within cognitive theories on trauma. Finally, cross-sectional data makes it difficult to draw conclusions about causality. It could be just as easily the other way round, indicating that veterans who experience posttraumatic stress reactions are more likely to assign a negative meaning to their war or peacekeeping experiences. Longitudinal designs are necessary to demonstrate the directionality of the associations between meaning and psychological adjustment (Lazarus, 2000).

More insight on “normal” psychological processing of stressful and traumatic experiences is obtained when the concept of meaning is more extensively used in research. This perspective emphasizes the personal interpretation of the traumatic situation and focuses on beliefs and attitudes in making sense of threatening events instead of pathologizing the response to trauma. In order to broaden the scope to normal adaptation, it is necessary to study individuals who successfully assimilate or accommodate negative experiences into existing meaning structures. Based on these findings, effective tools and guidelines for coping with stress and trauma can be developed.
Findings from this review show that construing positive meaning from war and peacekeeping experiences, especially related to combat exposure or high perceived threat, is associated with better psychological adjustment. However, the directionality of this association is unclear. Future research can clarify the relation between meaning and psychological adjustment by using longitudinal research designs and combining quantitative and qualitative methods in measuring meaning. By making meaning a mission we can expand our horizons on studying the response to trauma and make sense of normal psychological adaptation to threatening events.

References


