
Research in *In Extremis* Settings

Expanding the Critique of 'Why They Fight'

Thomas A. Kolditz
United States Military Academy

Previous work by the author that was based on data collected in combat has been criticized, based on its ability to generalize to research done in routine, peaceful settings. The idea that behavioral and social scientists may test the robustness of their theories by studying the same phenomenon across *in extremis* settings is explored. Research involving human participants conducted in safe, peaceful settings will not necessarily generalize to combat; combat findings may differ from those developed elsewhere. The appropriate scientific approach is to replicate and extend, in the combat context, findings already well established in peacetime work.

Keywords: *military sociology; in extremis; cohesion; leadership; combat motivation*

In April 2003, a small team consisting of two psychologists, a professor of Arabic languages, and a military specialist in urban combat deployed to the active war zone in Iraq to witness, record, and report on the human dimension of combat. Upon returning from the desert, the team published a monograph titled, "Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War."¹ The purpose of "Why They Fight" was to report some of our findings to a broad audience—and it included specific observations about the usefulness of the distinction between task and social cohesion in combat. On the basis of that report, a small group of political scientists have criticized the publicly released portion of the team's work as "unscientific."² In addition, they characterize our findings as inconsistent with some earlier noncombat studies. Their criticism opens a broader issue about the validity of research conducted in noncombat settings, when the outcome of such research is intended to inform an understanding of men and women in battle. My purpose in this note is to discuss that broader issue.

The project charter issued jointly by the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Manpower and Reserve Affairs and the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff (G1) on April 10, 2003, ordered our research team to deploy to Iraq "when victory was assured" but prior to

Author's Note: The views expressed by the author are his alone and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Defense, the United States Army, the United States Military Academy, or the personal or professional views of the coauthors of "Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War."

the cessation of hostilities.³ Our mission was “an analysis of the *human dimension of the conflict* [emphasis added].” Our purpose was not to conduct research to advance the study of human behavior, using combat as the research setting. Instead, it was to analyze and quickly report to senior Department of the Army officials how soldiers were interacting with peers and leaders in this particular, and ongoing, war. Our mission was time sensitive and inherently empirical—to understand social phenomena among soldiers through direct observation in combat.

Much of the criticism directed at the methods used in our work focuses on the inability to compare the team’s work with existing laboratory or field studies or to generalize the team’s findings across a number of settings. Of course, in every scientific endeavor, sample characteristics result in unwanted variance in the findings and may limit the ability to generalize across samples or populations. Consider the experiences and circumstances of the soldiers and marines that we interviewed in our study. Interviews were conducted in the active combat zone with infantry soldiers who were fully armed and prepared to engage the enemy without notice. Owing to the rapid advance to Baghdad and beyond, no one in the sample had eaten hot food, showered, or received mail in the thirty days prior. Each soldier or marine interviewed had at least one member of his organization wounded or killed in the preceding thirty days—several uniforms still bore bloodstains left by the evacuation of comrades—dark blotches over the chalky-white salt from daily living in 112 degree heat. Each soldier and marine had spent time contemplating the likelihood of his own death. All of us were exhausted yet hypervigilant. The subject population was unique, and readers should indeed be cautious about comparing the study to others using profoundly different subjects and techniques or applying the findings to other populations.

The team’s experience was representative of the human condition in combat. Some of our observations with respect to task versus social cohesion do not align with previous work. One way to interpret our experience is to argue that our field methodology was flawed or that the monograph should have been written more formally and aimed at a scientific audience. Another approach might be to ask if it is scientifically appropriate to assume that the extensive work done in peaceful settings will necessarily generalize to combat. Raising such a question does not devalue social science research but instead raises healthy skepticism about the application of research findings from one context (peacetime) to another, profoundly different context (combat). An appropriate and typical scientific response would be for other researchers to attempt to replicate and extend, in the combat context, findings already well established in peacetime work.

The idea that behavioral and social scientists may test the robustness of their theories by studying the same phenomenon across noncombat and combat settings is not new. True combat settings carry with them the threat of death and, therefore, have a powerful and unique influence on human behavior. In their study of soldiers during World War II, Stouffer and his colleagues found that when the fear of death among inexperienced soldiers was strongest, they became desperate for almost any type of leader—in short, they simply looked for someone to help them through the difficult experience.⁴ In psychological terms, an individual’s enhanced awareness of death has

been labeled “mortality salience.” Experimenters have manipulated mortality salience in controlled studies by asking subjects to imagine, in detail, the circumstances of their physical death.⁵ This simple manipulation has successfully caused changes in the characteristics that followers desire in a leader during periods of increased stress and anxiety. Subjects high in mortality salience demonstrated a preference for charismatic, task-oriented, and relationship-oriented leader communications.⁶ Specifically, subjects were more influenced by charismatic leader messages when recently focused on their own death. When coupled with messages about specific events, mortality salience may directly influence political beliefs as well as voting behavior.⁷ It is certainly possible, then, that the circumstances of actual combat might encourage the development and exercise of specific patterns of task or social cohesion or even that the distinction between task and social cohesion may hold less utility in actual combat than in training settings that artificially approximate the physical, but not the psychological, rigors of combat.

Without mortality salience and absent any physical threat, even research conducted in military organizations or with deployed (or recently redeployed) units may not generalize to combat settings. Research on military personnel is most often accomplished in nonoperational venues, such as basic training or field maneuvers. The majority of soldiers who deploy to overseas areas never engage in direct combat. Furthermore, in the rare instances where researchers are given access to deployed troops, noncombatant civilian scientists are usually treated as elites, well cared for, and confined to relatively safe rear areas and after-the-fact research methods.

Empirical work relevant to combat should ideally be conducted *in situ*, under circumstances where death must be actively avoided. Leadership researchers have referred to such situations with a unique term, *in extremis*, or “at the point of death.”⁸ *In extremis* leadership is defined as giving purpose, motivation, and direction to people when there is eminent physical danger and where followers believe that leader behavior will influence their physical well-being or survival.⁹ Soldiers, law-enforcement personnel, mountain-climbing guides, firemen, and extreme-sport coaches live and work in *in extremis* settings—circumstances where outcomes mean more than mere success or failure at task performance but instead involve life or death. Using Authentic Leadership Theory as the conceptual starting point, researchers continue to develop methods that enable scientific inquiry of *in extremis* contexts such as ground combat.¹⁰ Although such research is methodologically challenging, physically demanding, and sometimes dangerous for researchers, it is an invaluable tool to help describe or explain behavior that occurs in such settings.

“Why They Fight” may hold implications that reach far beyond a focus on the causal relationship between social cohesion and performance in combat or even on the usefulness of the theoretical distinction between task and social cohesion. It may be that in going forward, the standards for scientific inquiry on issues that bear on soldier performance in combat place both methodological and contextual demands on the researcher.

Notes

1. Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Ray Millen, and Terence Potter, "Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War" (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, 2003).
2. Robert J. MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat: An Old Question with an Old Answer," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (2006): 646-654.
3. Department of the Army Memorandum, April 10, 2003, "Prospective Strategic Analysis of the Human Dimension of War in Iraq" (Author's professional files).
4. Samuel A. Stouffer, Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star, and Robin M. Williams Jr., *The American Soldier: Adjustment during Army Life*, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).
5. Anthony Rosenblatt, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and D. Lyon, "Evidence for Terror Management Theory I: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions of Those who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (1989): 681-90.
6. Florette Cohen, Sheldon Solomon, Molly Maxfield, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg, "The Effects of Mortality Salience on Evaluations of Charismatic, Task-oriented, and Relationship-oriented Leaders," *Psychological Science* 15 (2004): 846-51.
7. Mark. J. Landau, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Florette Cohen, Tom Pyszczynski, Jamie Arndt, Claude H. Miller, Daniel M. Ogilvie, and Alison Cook, "Deliver Us from Evil: The Effects of Mortality Salience and Reminders of 9/11 on Support for President George Bush," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30 (2004): 1-14.
8. Thomas A. Kolditz, "The *In Extremis* Leader," in *Leader to Leader* (New York: John Wiley, 2005), 6-18.
9. Thomas A. Kolditz, Steven Ruth, and Bernard B. Banks, "Defining In Extremis Leadership" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, New Orleans, LA, August 11, 2004).
10. Thomas A. Kolditz and Donna M. Brazil, "Authentic Leadership in *In Extremis* Settings: A Concept for Extraordinary Leaders in Exceptional Situations," in *Monographs in Leadership and Management, Volume 3: Authentic Leadership Theory and Practice: Origins, Effects and Development*, ed. William Gardner, Bruce Avolio, and Fred Walumba (Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 2005), 345-56.

Thomas A. Kolditz is a professor and the head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy. He holds a BA in psychology and sociology from Vanderbilt University and a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Missouri. His work establishing the in extremis leadership context has been published and presented in both scholarly and popular venues. *Address for correspondence*: Colonel Tom Kolditz, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY 10996; e-mail: thomas.kolditz@usma.edu.