

The Graying of Trauma: Revisiting Vietnam's POWs

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The Vietnam War was still raw in the collective American memory when the award-winning 1978 film *The Deer Hunter* brought home the horror of the POW experience. The film tells the story of three young men from Pennsylvania—Mike, Nick and Steven—who ship off as patriotic and gung-ho soldiers. They are captured during a firefight and endure physical deprivation and chilling psychological torture at the hands of the enemy. With the war's end, they try to pick up the pieces of their lives, but all three are psychologically damaged.

This is not surprising, given the ordeal they survived—the brutality, the threats, the intimidation and uncertainty. Nick never makes it home, and we are left wondering about the prognosis of the other two—and the real-life Vietnam vets they represent. These former POWs are mostly in their 60s today. How have they processed this extraordinary trauma? Is there any possibility of recovering a healthy state of mind following such overwhelming adversity?

This is unknown, but we're starting to get a peek into what these POWs' lives look like as they enter their retirement years three decades later, thanks to a long-term study being conducted at Boston University. There is some reason to believe that these servicemen may not have been irreparably crippled, indeed that some of them have been resilient in the aftermath of trauma, and may even have benefited in some ways from their toxic experiences. But this has yet to be sorted out definitively, by following POWs from captivity to their first repatriation and on into older age.

Psychological scientist Daniel King and a large team of colleagues have been doing just that. They developed a lifespan model to examine what factors might contribute to positive or negative adjustment in the long run. They mailed a survey to more than 500 former POWs in 2002, when they averaged 65 years of age. These vets—mostly from the Air Force but also the Army, Navy and Marines—had all been captured after 1964 and returned home in 1973. They were about 35 years old when they returned, having spent about five years in captivity.

The scientists plumbed these soldiers' records from 1973. All had been taken to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, and then later to various military hospitals for debriefing, evaluation and treatment. Clinicians had documented their captivity experiences at that time, including the nature of any torture they experienced. They had also assessed their mental health, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and other emotional problems. The Boston scientists organized all of this early data, along with basic demographics.

In 2002, the scientists gathered veterans' self-reports on other sources of stress later in life—things like personal injury or illness or the death of a spouse. They also asked all the participants to complete a subjective assessment of their retirement—or impending retirement—as a source of worry or distress. They also assessed the participants' social support networks—to see what personal resources they had to buffer life's stresses.

The scientists also did a variety of measures related to the former POWs' perspective on life. They wanted to know how these older veterans viewed their military experience all these years later: Did it teach them life skills, like how to get along? Did it increase their self-awareness and help them to grow as men? In general, did they benefit from their time of military service? The vets also answered other questions about quality of life, positive life adjustment and sense of control.

All of this information was crunched together and analyzed. The scientists had several predictions about what they would find in these men's later lives, and several were verified by the data. Here are some highlights, as detailed in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*:

An extraordinarily stressful experience, such as war captivity in early adulthood, can reverberate throughout a lifetime and influence later well-being, but many factors shape the outcome. For example, soldiers who were older and more educated at the time of capture were less distressed upon first returning home, which also meant that they were better adjusted three decades later. The scientists see age and education as personal resources that these men carried with them as they faced months and even years of imprisonment and hardship.

The findings concerning torture were mixed, and interesting. Being tortured did as expected have significant deleterious effects on these young men's mental health right after the war. But as the scientists predicted, physical maltreatment also led to positive appraisals of military experience later on. This is consistent with other findings on resilience and post-traumatic growth, and suggests that surviving physical torture might have salutary consequences that temper the trauma. These soldiers may use their torture experiences to make meaning out of their adversity. Notably, psychological torture had no such beneficial effect.

War was not the only experience in these men's lives, for good or bad. Indeed, stressful events later in life—unrelated to war or captivity—were directly connected to psychological health of these vets as they approached their retirement years. The more stress, the worse off they were. And saddest of all, retirement itself looms as a source of stress for many of these 65-year-olds. It appears that stressful events of later life stress are predisposing these men to see and experience their golden years with apprehension and anxiety, perhaps because of financial worries and dwindling emotional support of friends and family.

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