

Women in Combat: A Perspective from Affective Science By David McCarthy

Recently, the Department of Defense has revisited its policy regarding women holding combat roles in the military, opting to allow fewer restrictions on women being assigned to combat units. The majority of the discussion on this issue has been around physical standards: examining women's ability to meet the challenging requirements of rucking, running, and lifting that were originally set for men. Surprisingly absent from this discussion are the psychological and emotional elements of combat and its implications for women in combat. The conclusions of recent studies in emotion science suggest that women may thrive in combat and offer a valuable addition to their male counterparts.

Anyone with any knowledge of past and present conflicts recognizes that combat is changing. No longer will the U.S. face an enemy dressed in uniform in neat, organized rows. Warfare is messier; civilians and combatants intertwine in urban areas. The battle is over hearts and minds, not territory. Smart insurgents avoid sustained, direct contact with well-equipped infantry units, choosing instead to ambush supply lines and mission support elements where women often serve.

Two implications should be drawn from this changing nature of combat. First, the U.S. has responded to these changes, adopting counterinsurgency strategies that make the days of the "Rambo" shoot-at-anything-that-moves soldier a thing of the past. Second, women are increasingly facing combat. A 2012 Congressional Research Report indicated that since 2002, more than 130 women have died and over 800 have been wounded in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It's time for the DOD to ask, can women "handle" the psychological stresses of combat? Moreover, what gender differences exist that could help to inform the DOD's policy on women in combat? In searching for answers, affective science yields great insights.

Women are commonly considered more vulnerable to negative psychological states following traumatic events than men. As such, one would expect women to be more prone than men to PTSD after combat. However, a 2011 study by Dawne Vogt and colleagues at the National Center for PTSD proves otherwise. Examining over 500 men and women after experiencing combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, the authors' analysis finds that interactions between combat-related stressors and gender were unable to predict PTSD, mental health functioning, or depression. This indicates that female military members were equally as resilient as males, and suggests that the traditional view of women being more "vulnerable" is incorrect.

Common knowledge also says that men and women have emotional differences – here, affective science resoundingly agrees. Yet the implications of this in combat are important to consider, especially in light of the changing nature of combat.

In a 2003 study by Jennifer Lerner and colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University, a nationally representative sample was utilized to determine how the risks of terrorism were perceived following the September 11th attacks. In examining the issue, the study found insightful gender differences: unsurprisingly, men on average self-report more anger and less fear than women. Yet the study went further, finding that anger triggers more optimistic risk assessments while fear causes more pessimistic ones. Men's angry responses to situations means they perceive fewer risks than women's fearful responses. In the midst of a firefight, perhaps men feel more control than women; there isn't enough evidence to conclude this definitively. Yet this study suggests that men could put themselves in more risky, dangerous situations than women in combat.

Men and women also respond differently to stress. Edelyn Verona and Jon Curtin, in a 2006 study at the University of Illinois, found that in stressful situations, men are more likely to resort to physically aggressive responses than women. In a controlled lab experiment, the authors told participants to administer varying intensity shocks to a subject (an actor) for incorrectly answering a puzzle. Men placed under simulated stress administered more intense shocks than men without stress or women in either the stress or no-stress conditions. The modern battlefield represents an extremely stressful situation where long periods of inaction are spotted with bursts of intense combat and the decision to pull the trigger or not is often difficult to determine. In modern combat where an unfired bullet is often more useful than a fired bullet, less aggressive behavior under stress may be more desirable.

As the DOD undergoes the process of expanding women's' abilities to hold combat positions, it must be attentive to affective science and the role of emotions in combat. While more research is required, preliminary findings suggest that women are able to handle combat, although they may perceive it emotionally different than men. However, with the changing nature of combat, perhaps there is a role for women in combat, one that would be a valued addition to the battlefield.