



Feelings of guilt and shame after peacekeeping missions

Fact Sheet

Introduction

During a deployment, service personnel can be confronted with various dilemmas, including moral dilemmas. They may also witness the suffering of the civilian population concerned. It is not always possible to eliminate that suffering or prevent yet more people (civilians, but also fellow service personnel) from being affected by the horrors of war. Service personnel are well trained in performing their duties in the most complex circumstances and under threat of violence. Nevertheless, they may later, after having returned home, have doubts about the action they took, the decisions they made or the interventions they had to make. The experiences they had whilst on deployment can then lead to feelings of guilt or shame.

Guilt and shame

The terms guilt and shame are both based on a number of preconditions:

- People having standards or understanding the difference between good and evil.
- People accepting that they bear a certain degree of personal responsibility.
- People being capable of self-reflection and open to self-criticism.
- People possessing the empathy to enable them to put themselves in someone else's shoes.

There are also some differences between the two terms:

- In the case of guilt, you judge your own behaviour, and you think you should have acted, felt or thought differently.
- In the case of shame, you judge your own character, and you feel you have not met the ideal image you have of yourself.

Feelings of guilt and shame among veterans

The first studies on feelings of guilt after having been confronted with war and violence were conducted among Holocaust survivors and Vietnam veterans. Those studies resulted in distinctions being made as regards the various forms of guilt.

Survivor guilt. People feel guilty because they have survived and others, often loved ones or people close to them, have not. Examples include:

- A person missing a flight on an aeroplane that later crashes.
- A serviceman changing places or duties with a colleague who subsequently dies.

Perpetrator guilt. People feel guilty about something they have done. Examples include:

- Service personnel who have done something out of revenge or in a rage over what was done to them.
- Service personnel who kill someone else, e.g. a woman or child, by accident during an operation.

Bystander guilt. People feel guilty about something they omitted to do. Examples include:

- Failing to intervene in crimes against humanity.
- You were unable to warn your comrade in time.

People often use thinking strategies to explain why they feel guilty. These explanations are an attempt to understand what happened. However, because this happens after the event, these explanations strengthen the feelings of guilt. Two well-known thinking strategies are:

- The “what-if” line of reasoning: What would have happened if I had left later or earlier? What if I had been paying more attention or if I hadn’t been distracted?
- The “I should have known” line of reasoning. By reconstructing the course of events subsequently, people look for and find signs they should have noticed and which could have caused them to avert the disaster.

Study in the Netherlands

In 2009, Natasja Rietveld was studying for a doctorate at Tilburg University based on a study into feelings of guilt and shame among Dutch veterans. In collaboration with the Veterans' Institute, she examined a random sample of 3,800 veterans who had taken part in one or more peacekeeping missions in a UN or NATO context. More than 1,100 veterans returned a completed questionnaire (31%).

Characteristics of the respondents

92% of the participants in the study were men and the average age was 44. Most of the respondents had been deployed once (58%), 26% twice, and 16% three times or more. Nearly 80% of the respondents were professional servicemen or servicewomen during the deployment and more than 15% were conscripts. During the deployment, 50% of the respondents held the rank of private or corporal.

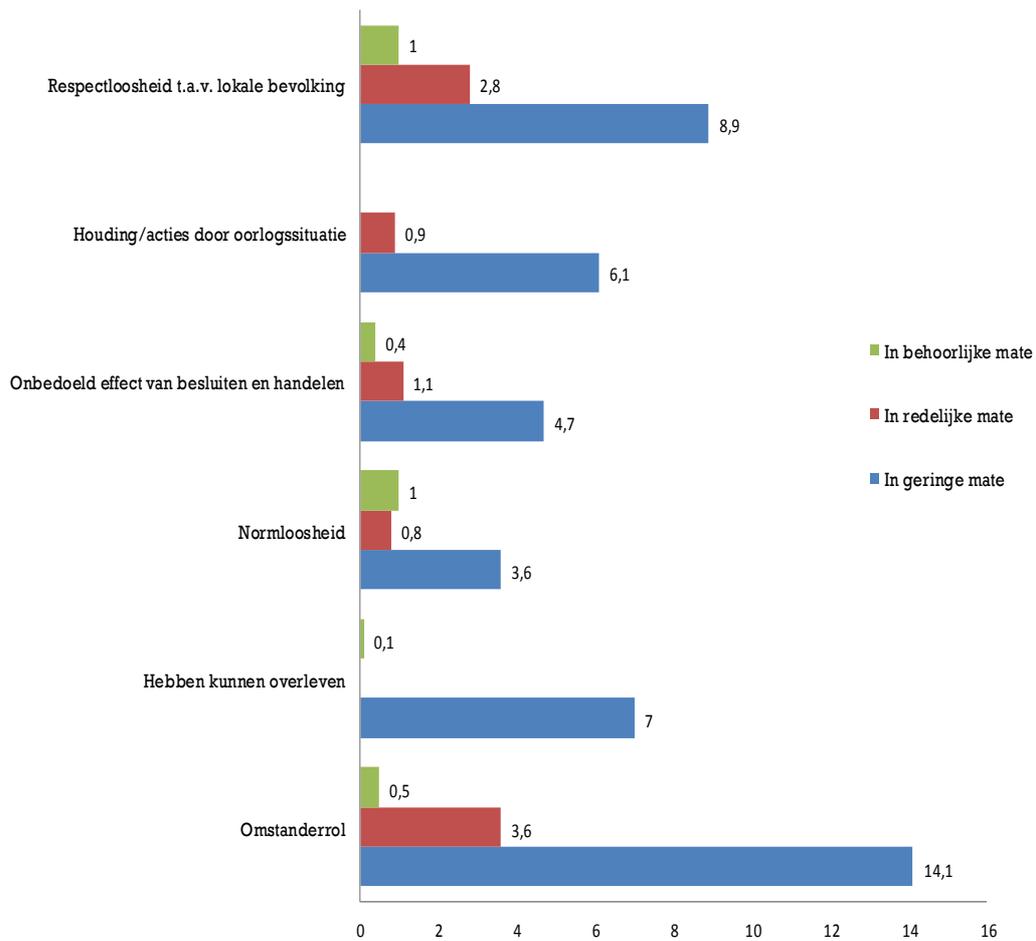
A majority of the respondents (59%) had taken part in missions in the former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR, IFOR/SFOR), 12% had been deployed to Iraq (SFIR) and the other respondents had taken part in peacekeeping missions in the Middle East, Angola, Goma (Zaire/Rwanda), Cambodia, Kosovo or Afghanistan.

Feelings of guilt and shame among the respondents

More than a quarter of the respondents had feelings of guilt as a result of deployment experiences; of that group, 4% felt guilty on a regular to frequent basis. One in five veterans (22%) felt ashamed about specific deployment experiences and 5% felt ashamed on a regular to frequent basis.

This study identified six types of situations and experiences which preceded the feelings of guilt (Figure 1). The main reason the veterans gave for feeling guilty was their inability to intervene to prevent violence and the feeling of having fallen short (bystander role). However, a condescending and disrespectful attitude towards the culture and values of the population in the mission zone was also a major source of their feelings of guilt.

Figure 1: Dimensions of feelings of guilt. (% of n = 440)



Translation of the figure (top down):

- Disrespect for the local population
- Attitude/actions taken as a result of the war situation
- Unintended effect of decisions and actions
- Amorality
- Surviving
- Bystanders rol

- To a significant extent (green)
- To a reasonable extend (red)
- To a small extent (blue)

Veterans named the feeling of having fallen short and failed during their deployment as the main cause of their shame. They were also ashamed of the powerlessness they felt in the (former) conflict zone. A large group of veterans (59%) felt powerless during a deployment, with 28% stating they felt very powerless.

In 33% of veterans with feelings of guilt and shame as a result of deployment experiences those feelings cause problems in everyday life, with 3% experiencing substantial problems. Shame over experiences during a deployment prevent 2% of the respondents from seeking help to cope with those experiences.

Further information

This fact sheet provides general information. For further information on the study discussed (Rietveld, N., *De gewetensvolle veteraan. Schuld- en schaamtebeleving bij veteranen van vredesmissies*. [The conscientious veteran: Feelings of guilt and shame among veterans of peacekeeping missions] Oisterwijk: Boxpress 2009) go to the website www.veteraneninstituut.nl, or contact us by telephone (088 - 334 00 50) or by email (info@veteraneninstituut.nl).

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