AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Aims: The authors of the article, as specialists in the field of military forensic expertise and mental health, present their study on the construct of aggression, as applied to soldiers who show aggressive behaviour towards civilians in conflict situations. This research seeks to establish if there is some correlation between aggression and self-esteem in the abovementioned military subgroup. The hypothesis of the study is that unrealistically elevated self-esteem, combined with low self-criticism, linked to a "sense of untouchability" due to its military rank and title, form the basis for the aggressive behaviour of soldiers towards civilians. Material and Methods: For this work, all eleven cases of such aggression reported from 2017 to 2018 have been examined. To accomplish the objectives of the present study, theoretical and empirical studies of the construct of aggression were carried out using various methodologies: psychiatric examination, psychological tests and interview, study of the collected medical and occupational data of the investigated individuals. Results: The results indicate that the surveyed individuals are sensitive to the reactions of others towards them and tend to perceive other’s behaviour and actions as aggressive. The individuals surveyed have shown to possess a higher /unrealistic/ level of self-esteem, which, in combination with their comparatively lower levels of self-criticism, is in correlation with the tendency for aggressive behaviour. Conclusions: The results and conclusions of the current study are of great importance for military mental health professionals who work directly and regularly with soldiers and who look for ways to resolve problems as soon as they occur, as well as improve the efficiency of their training.

KEYWORDS hostility, soldiers, civilians, conflict, social situations, self-esteem

Introduction

In modern society, aggression between specific groups of individuals, mostly based on racial, ethnic, or other differences, has long been observed and debated. However, we would like to analyze the aggressive behaviour of soldiers towards civilians in particular.

In everyday life, the term "aggression" has many different meanings - ranging from a criminal’s destructive behaviour to ethnic enmity and physical violence during wartimes, to verbal aggression: threats, insults, ridicule, family feuds, and so on. The reasons for the occurrence of outbursts of aggression may be different, too - economic, political, religious, familial, racial, everyday situations, lack of good social skills, etc.

A broader scope on "aggression" is that the aggressive action is not just a reaction to a situation, but that there is a specific motivational aspect that reveals the incentives for action and the possible consequences of said actions.

According to various definitions in the literature, aggression is a behaviour that aims to cause loss or harm to another living being, which in return seeks to avoid such attitude toward itself. According to the Frustration-aggression (Drive) hypothesis of J.

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Dollard, L. Doob, N. Miller et al., aggressive behaviour always implies the presence of frustration - and vice versa, the presence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression. However, later, L. Berkowitz proves that hostility is not necessarily related to frustration and vice versa. He introduces two intermediate variables – anger (the motivational component) and triggering factors (aggression-facilitating cues). Anger here is the result of the impossibility of the goal’s achievement, but in order for aggression to existing, a triggering factor is needed, too – one directly or indirectly linked to the source of the anger, as well as frustration. A. Bandura, considers aggression a form of learned social behaviour – a natural yet not inevitable consequence of frustration. Through social learning, non-aggressive responses to frustration might also be adopted. Anger is not a necessary and sufficient condition for an instance of aggression to occur; it is only a primary state of excitement. Causes of aggression can be insults and threats, as well as any other negative emotion.

In turn, aggressive behaviour is influenced by the level of self-esteem, which is a basic structural component of self-consciousness and reflects the attitude of the individual towards oneself and is a necessary prerequisite for proper orientation in social relationships. Self-esteem is related to the formation of a certain level of expectations and claims, reflecting the pursuit of excellence. At the beginning of the 20th century, American psychologist William James proposed a formula for determining self-esteem, according to which self-esteem is directly proportional to the successes and inversely proportional to the expectations and claims of a person.

Self-esteem exists in two basic forms – adequate and inadequate. Adequate self-assessment reflects the correspondence between the ambitions of the person and the possibilities for their achievement. Failure leads to a critical attitude towards personal failures, adjustment of future goals, and planning new measures to solve the current problem or situation. Said inadequate self-esteem might be higher or lower. Decreased self-esteem is associated with setting goals below the capabilities of a person and leads to uncertainty, increased anxiety, reserved attitudes towards the positive assessment of others, depression and feelings of inferiority. High self-esteem is related to the awareness of one’s worth and dignity; inadequately elevated self-esteem leads to the overestimation of one’s abilities and setting goals that the individual can not accomplish.

Properly developed self-esteem is considered a source of self-assessment, self-respect, satisfaction, emotional well-being and self-confidence. People with low self-esteem are more sensitive to failures than to successes and tend to feel like losers. High self-esteem is related to certain disorders in mental equilibrium and behaviour. These people have an increased level of self-confidence and always seek recognition no matter if they deserve it or not. They often create conflicts in their social group because of being distrustful, critical and suspicious.

This study aims to find the relation between the level of self-esteem and the displays of aggression reported among military personnel against civilians in social situations. The assumption is that an inadequate and unrealistically high level of self-esteem corresponds to higher levels of aggressive behaviour. The authors suggest that one of the reasons for physical and verbal aggression is the insufficient social skills of the individuals studied, along with their distorted self-image. One approach to the problem is the development of measures to help build up skills to cope on a behavioural level and to form a sustainable, adequate level of self-esteem.

**Method**

To accomplish the objectives of this study, both theoretical research and an empirical survey of the construct of aggression were performed using various methods – using the detailed data of the medical and occupational characteristics of the studied individuals, their psychological interviews and psychiatric examinations. Two standard psychological questionnaires were used:

- **Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory.** This scale is a reliable method for psychosocial evaluation. It is designed to measure hostility and aggression. It consists of 75 questions allowing the differentiation of 9 subscales, each of which characterizes different type of hostility: physical hostility [BH]; verbal hostility [VH]; indirect hostility [IH]; opposing behaviour [OB]; hostile irritability [AI]; hostile distrust [AD]; jealousy and hatred [JH]; post-hostility guilt [GH]; and lying. The studied individuals are instructed to answer quickly and truthfully to the questions, highlighting the “yes” or “no” answer respectively. For each subscale of hostility percentage of positive responses is separately calculated. A percentage>50% is considered to represent the presence of hostility and aggression.

- **Rosenberg self-esteem scale.** The self-esteem scale of Morris Rosenberg (1965) is one of the most widely used methods of studying self-esteem by evaluating self-reported statements. It includes statements such as the following: “I can do things, as well as other people, can”, “I am generally satisfied with myself”, “I think I have nothing to be proud of” and so on. All ten items are evaluated with a 4-degree scale: “completely agree”, “agree”, “disagree” and “completely disagree”. The items characterize two factors – self-confidence (items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7) and self-criticism (items 3, 5, 8, 9, 10).

For this study, eleven cases of aggressive behaviour of soldiers from the period 2017-2018 were evaluated. Seven of the individuals studied received a psychiatric diagnosis by the end of the psychiatric examination: schizophrenic, acute polymorphic psychotic disorder, bipolar affective disorder. These individuals are excluded from the final analysis.

**Results**

Briefly presented are the results of the collected information on four report cases of soldiers who have shown verbal and physical aggression towards civilians and their property. According to the psychiatric and psychological expertise, all of them were found to be mentally healthy, able to understand the nature and importance of their actions and to manage their actions, could participate fully in pre-trial and trial proceedings. They have not suffered from mental illnesses and severe chronic illnesses, have no family history of mental illness and do not abuse alcohol and medications. In all four cases, there is a normal-psychological effect with some self-control and a recollection of events. All soldiers describe subsequent feelings of regret and concern, dictated to a great extent by the harsh consequences in the form of penalties. All soldiers were examined using the methods described above, their medical and professional data thoroughly studied. The studied individuals were made aware of the importance of the research and tended to be more disingenuous than usual. Below we provide, in short, some information on the four cases.
Case 1

Senior sergeant B. A. (46-years old, male) shows hostile behaviour as a result of a street conflict with offensive gestures towards him by a car driver. The soldier describes feelings of irritation, anger and surprise because of the verbal and nonverbal communication between him and injured driver (a woman) and desire for revenge manifested by opening the window of the car, striking and breaking the side mirror of the other car with a personal knife placed in a pouch.

The psychological interview reveals that the soldier in question tends to underestimate the importance of situations and has an unrealistic (higher) level of self-esteem, along with hypersensitivity to the reactions of other people and a tendency towards irritability and anger that quickly dissipates. The pattern of thinking is non-original and stereotypical. Existing data show good abilities for self-realization and respect and recognition from other people.

Case 2

Senior Sergeant S. S. (38-years old, male) provokes a conflict with a woman who takes care of stray dogs in the neighbourhood where he lives. He attacks the woman verbally and physically (striking her face), threatening her with his gun. The soldier describes feelings of anger, fear and disgust brought on by the stray dogs and a desire to protect his mother (who was offended by the same woman the day before).

According to the psychological interview, Sergeant S. S. sees himself as rather calm and able to easily deal with situations, irritable on occasion, having high energetic potential, over-reactive to low stress due to increased sensitivity and distrust. He prefers to act instead of dream and think, and is generally active. The soldier in question can assert his position even if it’s different from the opinion of the majority; he is competitive and capable of creating and maintaining close emotional relationships.

Case 3

Private T. C. (21-years old, male) waits for his turn to use an ATM. He provokes a conflict with two women in the line by entering their personal space. The women ask him to step away, and he slaps and spits on one of the women.

The soldier describes feelings of anger and irritation because of the woman’s remarks. According to the psychological interview, the person has unrealistic self-esteem, the high energetic potential is easily excitable, over-responsive to low stress because of his higher sensitivity and distrust. He presents himself as a person with positive self-esteem, good self-confidence, and good abilities to gain respect and recognition from the environment.

Case 4

Sergeant P. A. (44-years-old, male) beats up his 17-years old son in the presence of his wife, his 10-years old daughter and his parents. The reason is his sons support of his wife asking for a divorce.

According to the psychological research, the personality of the soldier in question is characterized by a tendency to underestimate situations and an unrealistic level of self-esteem along with an over-sensibility to other’s people reactions, irritability and anger. The high energetic level increases the intensity of emotional experiences and adds anxiety and uneasy relaxation resulting in periods of exhaustion. The way of thinking is non-original and stereotypical, as is the way of solving problems. The weak tolerance to frustration along with the insufficient self-awareness, fear of rejection and fear of failure lead to rationalization and blaming others.

The test results for hostility and self-assessment of the studied individuals are presented in table 1. Because of the small number of subjects studied, the results have no statistical value. However, this does not deprive us of the obligation and opportunity to make a detailed qualitative analysis and to give the necessary and expected recommendations for action.

The hostility inventory shows moderate to slightly elevated values for almost all dimensions and all subjects surveyed. Regarding age, the youngest soldier has higher values. This is expected and probably reflects the specific characteristics of his age – insufficient experience in social situations, improper evaluation of the particular situation, etc.

As expected for males serving in the military, the higher values noted are in the dimensions for “physical hostility”, “hostile irritability” and “hostile distrust”, with the lowest values being “verbal hostility” and “indirect hostility”. Overall, “post-hostility guilt” has a lower value than other dimensions but remains within the average range, probably because of regretting what happened but also out of a feeling of personal righteousness and dignity.

It is interesting to mention that all acts of hostility in this study are directed towards indirectly related to females.

Regarding Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale, the results of the individuals studied are high on the scale of “self-confidence” (>50% for all). This is related to the higher need to demonstrate physical and mental strength and difficulties in experiencing failures due to the soldiers’ competitive nature and pursuit of victory.

On the self-criticism scale, results are noticeably lower and reflect a tendency towards unrealistic self-perception and self-presentation. The individuals studied demonstrate difficulties in accepting a different from their perspective of social situa-

Table 1 Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hostility type</th>
<th>Results (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sergeant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing behaviour</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile irritability</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile distrust</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy and hatred</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-hostility guilt</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lies</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Rosenberg self-esteem scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studied individuals</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Self-criticism</th>
<th>Global self-assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior sergeant B. A.</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant P. A.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior sergeant S. S.</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private T. C.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ditions and a lack of flexibility in their decision-making process. They possess a vague idea of their abilities. On the "global self-assessment" scale, the results are medium-high and confirm the results of the previously mentioned scales.

The results of the two tests are reliable.

Discussion

In summary, to accomplish the objectives of this study, theoretical research and empirical survey of the construct of aggression were performed in regards to soldiers that demonstrated aggressive behaviour towards civilians in social conflicts. All eleven cases reported in the period 2017-2018 were examined. The study excluded seven cases of soldiers with psychiatric disorders and alcohol and drug abuse, which could have provoked aggressive behaviour. Because of the small number of cases, the results have no statistical importance, but they have practical value and could help the military psychologists. The hypothesis of the study – namely that the aggressive behaviour of soldiers towards civilians is due to an inadequately high level of self-esteem along with lower self-criticism, has been confirmed. Based on the results of the current empirical study and data analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The studied individuals tend to show hostile behaviours in their relationships with other people when they feel their rights and dignity are violated.
- They are sensitive to other people's reactions towards them – they have an aggressive predisposition and tend to perceive the behaviour of other people as hostile.
- They are capable of feeling guilt after hostile behaviours towards other people, which means they could re-evaluate their past behaviour and correct it.

The higher (unrealistic) level of self-esteem of the individuals studied along with their lower level of self-criticism is in correlation with the tendency of hostile behaviour. Active individual and group work aimed at changing the level of self-understanding and self-awareness will probably contribute to lowering the propensity for aggressive events.

A serious opportunity to prevent and limit aggression is the regular implementation of social skills training as early as school-age children. The training in proactive behaviour leads to mature relationships in adulthood and self-awareness, and the knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses is a base for adequate positive self-esteem, emotional stability and good self-control. All these traits guarantee the persons' ability to defend and assert their rights, goals and ideas (self-realization) in an assertive manner without violating the rights of other people and tolerance to different points of view, realizing the full potential of interpersonal communication. Contemporary trends aimed at tackling aggressive behaviours from the earliest school age are aimed at prevention through the implementation of activities that develop or further develop children's social competence and social skills.

Through social skills training, social skills such as: non-aggressive conflict resolution (co-operation); communication skills; respecting and respecting the point of view of others; recognition of one's own emotions and those of others; asserting their own rights and privacy without violating the rights and boundaries of others; self-control; tolerance for differences; joint activities, etc. are further developed, which leads to a reduction in the outbursts of aggression.

Aggressive behaviour also depends on the individual's self-esteem as well as on the assessment of others (family, colleagues, superiors, friends and relatives), for which individual and group work is being done for correction and prevention. We agree with these in our recommendations to the specific services responsible for the prevention of aggressive acts in military service.

Competing Interests

The authors declared that this review was done independently without any conflict of interest of any organizations that would lead this review to bias.

References