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THE MILITARY CARRIER COUNSELLING AND PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY. STUDY CASE ON MILITARY CADETS PROFESSIONAL PROFILE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. The present study has been conducted within the framework of Human Capital Operation Program Project 133334 „Advanced Cybersecurity. Let’s Protect Better our Future”. The research is mainly focused on assessment methodology applied in case of carrier counselling and guidance for the assessment of the subjective perception military environment, using cadets perception variables and the investigation technique of the questionnaire-based survey method. In the research were used difference descriptors drawn from the variable that may influence, facilitate or inhibit, the perception and evaluation of stress and functional factors, depending on the specific conditions of life and activity at sea, as the specificity of military activities and missions. In the focus group military cadets have been selected, as main beneficiary and target group participants in the above nominated project.

Key words: *organization management, military stress, subjective perception, operational stress, military operations, vocational counseling, carrier guidance*

1. Introduction

Within the POCU 133334 Advanced Cybersecurity Project framework, with the general objective of “creating sustainable skills and jobs”, the counselling and career guidance activity focuses on the exemplary fulfilment of its main objective, namely “increasing the students’ motivation for the development of a professional career, toward a successful integration on the labour market”. From this perspective, the operationalization of the generous assertions proposed by the Project for counselling services, has been materialized in the development of beneficiary-cantered solutions, directed on three directions of action as following:

a. Vocational counselling activities, consisting in: informing students about the specifics of the professions / specializations they can opt for after completing their studies; understanding the ways to access a profession, the options regarding the professional path to follow after graduation, the jobs they can access; awareness of the process of transition from school to the labor market; training the ability to define professional objectives, realistic and achievable; training skills to define and express professional interests, in relation to the personal expectations; training and/or practicing the skills of elaborating a CV in a professional format, connected with a letter of intent and a career plan; and learning and practicing personal presentation techniques.

b. Personal development activities, consisting in: stimulating self-confidence, openness and cognitive curiosity; stimulating skills and attitudes that contribute to effective learning; stimulating

creativity and innovation in thinking; optimizing communication skills; stimulating a positive attitude regarding the carrier perspectives; increasing the level of confidence in one's own abilities and skills; training skills to identify and implement proactive evolutionary strategies; stimulating the motivation for personal and professional success; teamwork, collaboration, involvement; and training proactive coping skills in solving critical situations.

c. Information and mentoring activities, consisting in: information on the counselling process and possible benefits; information and guidance regarding own professional potential; information on access to tools and sources of support for labour market integration in the field of ICT; advising students on the possible difficulties and psychological blockages they face in starting their own career; supporting students to follow the optimum career; capitalizing on the previous experiences of the beneficiaries in order to prepare them for new professional experiences; guiding the beneficiaries to clarify their own motivations, aspirations and interests; guiding towards the development of one's own skills and abilities, towards increasing the degree of motivation for the development of a professional career.

Short research in literature illustrates the close relationship between the choice of profession, respectively career performance and personality traits of the individual, self-image, axiological and professional interests and values and motivations, in perspective with the whole personological system "hypercomplex, probabilistic, dynamic and open", constantly adapted and readapted to the external sociocultural environment conditions. (Golu, apud. Zlate, 2007)

In this framework, our descriptive-methodological approach, in regard of the vocational counselling, has been based on the adapted development and of working tools that would facilitate better exploration and a more realistic self-knowledge for the students, by estimating some attributes of the personological types, interests, skills, abilities, values, beliefs, motivational determinants, considered to be indicators and predictors for career decision making process.

As the nominated project is mainly targeting the military cadets assessment, in order to increase the objectivity of empirical research and to understand more deeply the obtained results, the authors have considered that a particularly important aspect to be taken into account in guiding the explanatory hypotheses are as following: the specific conditions of specific military activities on board the ships or ashore, the characteristics of the military higher education organization of the navy - trainers of future naval officers, missions and combat exercises with NATO allied military forces.

Subsequently the authors have added some methodological guidelines illustrated by constructing non-standard questionnaires to assess psychologically the next variables: the impact of subjective perception of stress, time management ability and the presence of team spirit, which has been estimated to be correlated evaluations of behavioural predictors in a military context. A brief summary of the specific variables mentioned, with emphasis on assessing the subjective perception of stress factors in military cadets will be presented in the following chapters.

2. The definition of „stress” concept

The literature review illustrates the use, most often, in a non-discriminatory, heterogenous but ambiguous manner of the „stress” notion. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why there are a multitude of different approaches to the concept of stress, each of which emphasizes one or another of the studied aspects. We could therefore say that the notion of stress is a complex, multifaceted, polyvalent notion, which has not met over time a scientific consensus of unitary definition in the literature.

It is the merit of the Romanian psychologist M. Zlate (2007, p. 568) to have developed a systematization of the theoretical meanings of the concept of stress, synthesizing the following paradigms of defining and explaining it [6]:

- the paradigm of stress as a stimulus (as a potentially harmful stressor);
- the paradigm of stress as a reaction (as a physiological / psychological response of the body);
- the stress paradigm as a relationship between stimulus and reaction (consequence of the relationship between stressful stimulus and stress response);
- the paradigm of stress as a transaction between the organism (person) and the environment (systemic, dynamic perspective, between the organism and the environment developed transactions that would generate adaptive reactions).

From the perspective of the first paradigm, stress is considered to be an external stimulus that aggresses the body, the empirical research being focused exclusively on the characteristics of the external situation generating stress. Johns (2002, p. 434) states that "stress factors are environmental events or conditions that have the potential to induce stress." [3] In this logic of practice, the human being cannot be considered a simple variable captive to the situational characteristics, without reacting and resignedly accepting an inexorable datum. Man, as a "bio-psycho-socio-cultural" entity, is a producer and a generator of situations, he is always able to react, to restructure, to build new aspects of a given stressful situation in order to control it, to master it and to transform it for his benefit in support of humanity progress.

The first paradigm considered by many researchers has been the reductionist paradigm, research on the issue of stress focused on the second paradigm, namely that in which the stress stimulus determines a physiological / psychological response of the body. In this framework, Selye elaborates several definitions of stress, among which we mention: "stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any request" (H. Selye, 1976) or stress is "the set of reactions of the human body to external action of causal agents (physical, chemical, biological and mental) consisting of morpho-functional changes, most often endocrine. If the stress factor has a long-lasting action, we are talking about the general adaptation syndrome which involves a gradual evolution. " [5]

Therefore, H. Selye calls the body's reaction to stress "general adaptation syndrome" and describes the stages through which it takes place as the "alarm phase" in which the body meets the stimulus and makes physiological changes, the "resistance phase" experienced as a strong distress and performed somatically as a fight against the stressful aggressor, with an imperative tendency to adapt and the "exhaustion phase" in which the coping mechanisms were achieved in different degrees and rates, depending on certain physiological parameters. [5]

G. Johns (p. 435) considers that "reactions to stress are the behavioural, psychological and physiological consequences of stress" and makes an interesting correlation between type A and B personality, the locus of control and the action of stress factors. The author's conclusions shows that people with internal control locus better manage stressful situations by facing the stress factor, tending to control the situation, while people with external control locus live higher anxiety thresholds because they fully experience the inability to control what happens to them. Regarding the correlation between stress and personality type, the author concludes that "type A personality model that includes aggression, ambition, competition, hostility, impatience and the feeling that time is pressing imperiously" shows many more physiological reactions response to stress-generating sources compared to the type B personality model which expresses a higher rate of diminished manifestations. [3]

Approaching stress as an interactional relationship between the body and its work and life environment is illustrated by Lazarus and Folkman (p. 19) by the following definition: "Psychological stress is a certain

relationship between person and environment that is assessed by the person as a burden or something that it exceeds resources and endangers its health.” [4] This approach can be considered as a premise for the more current and more applicable eclectic paradigm in empirical research, this time focusing on complex transactions between the stressful environment and the human psychological system.

From this perspective, we could say that the stress stimulus acquires personalized meanings, following the work of cognitive-emotional processing in the psychological sphere, which leads to fine adjustments and readjustments in order to restore the inner balance, thus elaborating in a gradual, effective and sophisticated way a coping mechanism.

3. SOURCES GENERATING STRESS IN THE MILITARY MARINE ENVIRONMENT

The military profession is as beautiful as it is challenging, its analysis from the perspective of potential sources of occupational stress involve an extremely difficult approach due to the multitude of aspects that describe the dynamics of life and activities with military specifics. The authors do not intend to make an exhaustive list by inventory, but are pursuing to identify, as much as possible, the stress factors responsible for occupational stress in the military environment because we should assume that there is a cause-effect relationship between nature, frequency, intensity aggressor stimulus and military response or this has not been empirically demonstrated. Reality has shown that the same stress factors can produce different effects on the personalities of the servicemen in the same operational situation and vice versa.

On the other hand, many scientists agree with the idea of aggregating a diverse number of stressful stimuluses related to different aspects of life: professional, family, organizational, are acting cumulatively and systematically on the person in various work situations. In order to somehow systematize the inconsistent material offered by going through the specialized literature, the authors have set out to invoke a typology of occupational stress factors developed by Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, since 2001 [2]. The mentioned authors have classified stress factors in several categories, on which the authors have described in detail, the following relevant aspects to the naval military environment:

- stress factors relating exclusively to the characteristics of work on board military ships and ashore: ongoing changing hydrometeorological conditions (storm, fog), military activities carried out during the night, actual firing of weapons on board, dangerous factors such as the handling of ammunition, explosives, noise, vibration, noxious substances (especially in the Engine Department), temperature, lighting, humidity, atmospheric pressure, limitation of servicemen mobility on board, movement of the ship (roll and pitch) that can cause seasickness and psychological discomfort, routine activities, monotonous type, "hypnotic screens" requiring the maintenance of vigilance, shift work (guard and watchkeeping) with biorhythm disturbance, damage or failure on board, high level of risk and physical danger felt in combat missions, or training exercises;

- stress factors related with exercising the roles and statutes of the military organization: work tasks overloading that involve a larger number of tasks to be performed in a short time, subjective perception of the higher difficulty of tasks, roles related to representation of interface in relation to hierarchical superiors, allied forces, accurate communication in English using the correct technical language, taking responsibility for subordinates and for the fulfilment of the mission, decision making in conditions of risk, uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence and insecurity;

- stress factors related to work-specific interpersonal relationships (with superior, subordinated and similar positioning staff): diminished or lack of group cohesion, military camaraderie, post-traumatic stress, predominantly competitive interpersonal relationships with a high risk of degenerating into conflicts,

mobbing, role conflict by demanding the execution of orders in disagreement with the principles, values, beliefs of the subordinate, stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination in multicultural work teams;

- sources of stress regarding career development, access to senior command positions: diminished or lack of opportunities for promotion in the military career, perception of false meritocracy, promotion standards difficult to be achieved in relation to one's own potential, freedom of decision, career planning, intrinsic control;

- sources of stress that impact the structure, climate, organizational culture: the structure of the military authority and the specifics of the tasks, the type of norms, the pressure towards conformity and obedience, relatively unstable and generalized mental disposition at the level of group members, military morale to solve a certain tasks at the correct standard and problems they face to overcome the difficulties encountered, poor delegation of tasks, burnout, job dissatisfaction, distorted perception of self-efficacy or professional fulfilment;

- stress factors regarding the work and family relationships: personal dissatisfaction, inadvertences related to too short time left for the family, affected time management, role conflict or transposition of the role from the organizational military context in the family environment, discharge of professional stress in family privacy, apathy or indifference manifested in family relationships due to burnout.

In short, military activities generating stress can be formal, organized, structured by regulations, norms, military procedures or they can be just common, monotonous, banal activities. Also, the military environment met informal, unstructured situations, spontaneously produced by random variables or psychosocial elements, unforeseen situations involving risks and uncertainty, complex situations involving peacekeeping missions, humanitarian operations, participation in military combat operations in field of operations. In this sense, in the NATO document “*A Psychological Guide for Leaders Across the Deployment Cycle*” (2019), it is brought into the military specialists’ attention and not only, the fact that the active staff, in achieving modern operational objectives, is affected by the stress factors related to both the requirements of operational life and the perception of psychologically demanding experiences with high aggressive potential [7]. Even if the subjective perception of stress factors differs from one professional staff to another, being affected to varying degrees, the ability to concentrate, adjust, perform on normal mental functionality. These sources of operational stress, lead to decreased individual and group performance.

4. ASSESSMENT OF STRESS PERCEPTION- QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED SURVEY METHOD

From the above, it is obvious the special and particular impact of the ubiquity of stressors on the military personnel involved in achieving the maximum and effective diversity of activities and objectives in military missions. After consulting the literature, the psychological premises arising from the specific context of life and activities in the naval military environment, require that the definition of the theoretical-conceptual framework for constructing an opinion questionnaire on the subjective assessment of stress response by military cadets to subsume the transactional paradigm of stress.

From the perspective of this paradigm as firstly conceptualized by Richard S. Lazarus, the psychological variables involved are: the stressor, respectively, the human personality, being considered methodological constructs in interrelation, mutually interdependent, describing a complex process permanently in dynamic development [3]. The authors have identified this approach as being the most appropriate to the specificity of Navy psychological framework, in which the subjects of our research have been selected in place the military cadets, because the transactional perspective of stress provides a systemic, holistic image, capturing adjustments and rebalancing among the personal resources and

variables, assessing the aggressiveness of stress in developing customized coping strategies, in order to successfully cope with the given situation. We can also mention the fact that, within the Romanian Naval Academy “Mircea cel Bătrân”, as a naval and maritime higher education institution, the instructive-educational process considers adaptively and effectively the personalities of the military cadets since the first year, offering them military and leadership models to refine, coping mechanisms to different stressors. In the permanent and complex process of maturity path and character formation traits congruent to the graduate profile, military students’ practice, become aware and clearly adopt in behaviour subtle mechanisms of adaptation to stress: acceptance (formal conformity), assimilation and integration into the system of norms, values, beliefs, tradition, specific to the culture of the military organization.

According to T. Constantin (p.70), the theoretical-conceptual variables essentially determine the construction and validation strategy of the opinion evaluation questionnaire, and further the operational definition of work [1]. From this perspective the stress can be considered “a particular relationship between person and environment, in which the person evaluates the environment as imposing demands that exceed their own resources and threatens their well-being, an evaluation that triggers coping processes, respectively cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to feedback received” [4]. Commenting on this paradigm, Zlate (p. 575) considers that “stimulus do not have the power to cause tensions, unless they are perceived by the individual as a threat to their well-being”, the reactions produced by stress being both somatic or physiological and psychological and behavioural [6].

Starting from these theoretical-explanatory assertions, the dimension targeted by the authors, namely the impact assessment of stress, being already theoretically conceptualized, they have proceeded to the methodological construction of the opinion questionnaire to be applied. Thus the physiological, psychological and behavioural variables were operationalized, subsumed to the integrative dimension investigated, by formulating an intercorrelated set of items (questions). The items formulation has been initiated in compliance with the models offered by similar questionnaires that are used in practice to measure the subjective feelings and perceptions, not directly observable but reflected in the consciousness of the subjects and related to the objective reality.

In the interrogative stage, the practical reasons for constructing the questionnaire were to clarify what has to be evaluated, what is the meaning the variables should shape, in such manner that the aimed results to be adaptively useful for military cadets in the current process of counselling and vocational guidance (i.e. as carried out as experiment within the project POCU 133334 Advanced Cybersecurity).

The methodological construction approach aimed at creating a simple, non-standardized opinion-based questionnaire, partially validated by its experts’ pre-testing, verifying the extent to which the questions addressed to investigate dimensions (stress), respectively the variables that define it paradigmatically. In this way, the authors were able to analyse the sets of 15 intercorrelated items related to the defined dimension of stress, each 5 items being allocated for each of the 3 relevant enabling dimensions for stress concept, namely the physiologic, psychologic and behavioural variables. In the theoretical modelling of the questionnaire, they aimed for the questions to be ordered logically and psychologically, for the proposed purpose, with a low degree of abstraction, being expressed briefly, simple and direct. Also, in this investigative technique, it more attention was paid to the way in which the wording of the questions didn’t induce a certain answer or distort the individual answer of the military cadets.

The investigation carried out in the preamble of the questionnaire have underlined the sincere expression of the intensity of the agreement or disagreement with each statement, as it fits the assessment of the respondent. The authors have opted for a system for evaluating questions with multiple choice

answers, on a 5-step scale with the possibility to nuance the answers as close as possible to the perception assessed individually, where 1 = never; 2 = rare; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often and 5 = very often.

In this approach, the authors have performed in a non-standard manner the recording of the military students' opinions in order to collect the data to be interpreted for each of the 3 approached dimensions. The recorded scores have been framed in three response intervals corresponding to the optimal stress level OSL (Optimum Stress Level) which facilitates performance with maximum efficiency in both personal, social and professional domain. Then an area "at the limit of normal" has been defined, by predisposition to reduce the ability to cope with stressful situations and, by the impairment of the ability to overcome stressful situations, consequently recording a serious discrepancy between the intensity of external demands and personal adaptability, which requires additional clarification and specialized recommendations.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS INTERPRETATION

The research focus group contains 184 subjects, military cadets from Romanian Naval Academy with their ages between 19 and 22 years old, 63,8% of them being males and 36,2 being female cadets.

The analysis and the study result interpretation have been following the modern theory of Lazarus about the emotions and adaptation (Lazarus, 2011, p.11). Based on this paradigm the stress, and especially the subjective perspective of aggression stressing factors in relation with intra-psycho resources, is approached as a dynamic process, connected to the negative or positive tone of emotional perceptions and personality vector as adapting variable.

a. The **physiological dimension** includes 5 relevant items for the psychosomatic expression of specific individual emotional feelings in various situations of self-stress and / or distress. In other words, under the conditions of the constraints of the external environment, stress generates emotions in the form of first psychological response reactions that later have a somatic repercussion, manifesting themselves as neurovegetative reactions, subjectively evaluated by military cadets. Although indicative, unanimously negative responses to psychosomatic manifestations of military cadets prove a very good brain control, as Pavlov thinks, a good balance between excitability and cortical inhibition, translated by the manifestation of sleep difficulties (59% opted for never, 29% for rarely, 6% for sometimes), addictive behaviours (84% never, 14% rarely), physical or mental exhaustion (62% never, 26% rarely, 6% sometimes), respiratory, brain and concentration comfort active attention span. (90% never, 7% rarely).

b. The **psychological dimension** lies in a cohesive set of 5 items that operationalize fundamental notions for well-being, namely: self-esteem, perception of personal self-efficacy, tone and emotional intensity with emphasis on feelings specific to sadness, anxiety, lack of control, apathy, social isolation. The subjects' answers to the items of psychological significance proposed by the questionnaire, highlighting the way in which they evaluate the type and characteristics of the relationship with the external environment (military organization) where they must function optimally. Thus, they will develop nuanced assessments of this interaction as a faulty or functional interaction. Because psychological software is governed by cognition and emotions are only psychic energy that supports resolving processes, reasoning will make adaptive adjustments and re-adjustments either by modifying the dysfunctional relationship or by re-evaluating its characteristics through what the literature calls emotional awareness as part of emotional intelligence.

And at the level of this dimension, we observe the homogeneity of the responses collected from the subjects that invalidate the hypothesis of the manifestations associated with stress as a psychological response, with an activating role in the permanent transactions with the stressors. The analysis of the obtained results shows that 65% of military students never felt that "*they would be less capable and valuable compared to other people*" and only 30% of them rarely admitted such negative emotions. This correlates

positively with the statements of 64% of respondents that they have never "*been convinced that they are not coping with the problems they face*", while 34% of them confirm this as a rare occurrence, a percentage close to the previous one. Military cadets' responses to subjective perceptions of assessed dysfunctional emotions disprove highly positive percentages that "*they had times when their future seemed insecure and hopeless*" (55% never and 34% rarely) or that "*they might say they are the kind who worry about everything, often for no reason*" (59% never, 29% rarely) and "*feel lonely, misunderstood, even if they are surrounded by friends*" (70% never, 22% rarely).

From this perspective, the authors have captured the development of psychological strategies in which emotions intellectualizations take place under the auspices of cognitive control that facilitate learning skills and rational decision-making. In this way, feelings of security, balance, emotional-sympathetic interpersonal relationships, interpersonal gratification are generated.

c. The **behavioural dimension** includes 5 relevant items that capture the way of pragmatic action due to the organizing or disruptive effect of the emotions felt by the subjects. The authors have interpreted psychologically the students' action behaviour as a final product modelled by thinking, supported by motivation based on individual interests and adaptive demands of the lived experience, in the particular way in which each student assigns a personalized meaning to that context.

As expected, taking into account the previous inferences, negative perceptions and statistically significant perceptions were received in the answers to all 5 interrelated items of this expressive dimension. Thus, the investigated subjects state that they do not have compulsive behaviours: 75% of them never "*get used to biting their nails or gnashing their teeth*", and 15% have rarely experienced such behaviour; for 90% of them they never "*shook their hands hard enough not to be able to control the situation no matter how hard they tried*" and only 8% rarely felt such expressions. The same self-control is evident in the answers related to the current emotions as: 73% of cadets say that they have never "*recently enjoyed any of the things or activities they used to enjoy*" and 22% confirm that they have known this way of emotional dispositions but rarely. For the question of "*do you often complain and complain because things don't go the way you want them to?*" 86% of the subjects' answer "never" and 10% give affirmative answers. Diffuse states with variable intensity and non-specific duration are experienced by only 33% of the military while 58% respond "never" to the item: "*do you have bouts of nervousness such as: irritation, tone of voice, frustration, mental tension?*".

The analysis and interpretation of the results of the study with Navy military cadets suggests a complex picture in which there are observed multidimensional interrelationships between individual variables that determine the perception of stressors and evaluation of their own emotions and variables characteristic of the military academic environment in which students work.

Although military students have taken the risk of being sincere during the self-knowledge exercise, the homogeneity of their responses as a military group entitles the authors to advance the idea of their characteristic emotional patterns that essentially reflect the shaping influence of military culture (in terms of beliefs, values, norms and symbols), under an internalized manner and further transformed into specific socio-cultural standards.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study has sought to briefly capture the systemic, indissoluble relationship that is established between various factors, involved in two directions of theoretical and practical-applied approach. The first approach treats the stress as a pervasive phenomenon related to: the subjective evaluative perception of stressors that determine the development of coping mechanisms to objective reality and maintaining psychological balance, methodological ways of objectively evaluating variables subsumed by stress and efficient use of counselling results as the professional orientation of military cadets. The second perspective focuses on the

general characteristics especially, the specific characteristics of military activities and missions, aligned to the cultural context of the military organization.

Analysing under holistically manner these intercorrelated factors, it has been deduced the usefulness of the theoretical-methodological approach, facilitating the formulation of several subsequent practical-applicative and formative proposals as following:

- it is needed to further disseminate the results of the nominated research project in order to improve the vocational counselling activity within the Naval Academy Career Counselling and Guidance Centre of (CCOC-ANMB), considering that the vocational and military career path is a continuous and flexible process that takes place throughout our carrier lifetime, offering various opportunities in the professional evolution and specializations on the labour market;

- it is essential to achieve effective training by conducting applied training in self-knowledge, awareness of positive values and limits of the cadet's personality and practice underlying the concept of positive self-esteem, the prestigious feeling that they belong to an elite military organization, crystallization of professional identity, as forth facilitating the optimal decision making process regarding the vocational path;

- it is recommended to organize various workshops for military cadets in the topic of psychological training for combat, using structured assessments of scenic climate and positive morale, to increase the cohesion and camaraderie of the military personnel, integration, flexibility and adaptability in multicultural military activities and missions.

- it is valuable to include in modern operational training exercises various training scenarios to provide military leaders with information and practical guidance on developing realistic and personalized strategies for managing the effects of stress, coping and providing psychological support in developing stress designed management programs for military cadets.

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