



Beyond pride and prejudices: An empirical investigation of German Armed Forces soldiers' personality traits



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ABSTRACT

The construct of the “Rescue Personality” as claimed by Mitchell (1983) in the course of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) was investigated in a sample of 235 German soldiers. As hypothesized, soldiers scored lower on neuroticism, openness and agreeableness but higher on extraversion, conscientiousness, risk and competition seeking as well as resilience compared to a norm sample. Cluster analyses revealed two distinct personality subtypes within the military sample that differed significantly regarding gender ratio and resilience. Male soldiers scored lower on neuroticism and agreeableness but higher on risk and competition seeking and resilience than female soldiers. Military students and military medical personnel differed only in openness. Duration of military service was not associated with personality except for extraversion. The results indicate considerable personality differences between soldiers and the norm population that are largely consistent with the “Rescue Personality” concept. Implications of these personality differences and the existence of the two military personality subtypes for prevention, intervention and personnel selection are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Being a soldier is one of the oldest professions in the world and almost inevitably linked with attributes like bravery, strength and courage. Current trends like more soldiers being female or laying open their vulnerability in books about deployment experiences might evoke doubts concerning the stereotype of the “typical” soldier. Somewhere in between soldierly pride and civilian prejudices lies the truth about soldiers' personalities that science failed to unveil yet.

Since International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops have been operating in Afghanistan, media as well as the general public became increasingly interested in the well-being of deployed soldiers. Especially the occurrence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of deployment has led to many political discussions. But even though personality has been considered an important vulnerability factor in the development of PTSD (Butollo, Rosner, & Wentzel, 1999), not much attention has been paid to it yet. In Germany, not one single study systematically addressing military personality has been carried out so far while in English speaking countries research interests mainly

seemed to evolve around pilots and their personality as to predict suitability for flying and job performance (Ashman & Telfer, 1983; Retzlaff & Gibertini, 1987).

1.1. Pilot personality

Most of the early studies using clinical personality inventories found pilots to be more hysteric, aggressive, self-confident and ambitious, but less hypochondriac, fearful, schizoid and antisocial than the norm population (Culpepper, Jennings, & Perry, 1972; Fine & Hartmann, 1968). Retzlaff and Gibertini (1987) found pilots to seek risk and competition and exhibit histrionic and narcissistic character traits. They identified three pilot sub-clusters that failed to prove criterion validity regarding training success and duration of service in a ten-year follow-up (Retzlaff, King, & Callister, 1995). Picano (1991) found three similar clusters among U.S. Army pilots and added to the empirical evidence of a distinct “pilot personality”.

A considerable weakness of these studies is the inappropriateness of the employed measures that have been developed for clinical diagnosis and are not considered suitable for investigating personality traits in non-clinical samples. Moreover, most data have been collected in the course of military selection procedures/training sessions and did not only serve scientific interests but mainly as a basis for career decisions which might have biased results toward social desirability.

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1.2. Military personality

In general, the military is believed to be composed of mainly healthy and effective individuals (Russell & Marrero, 2000) as dysfunctional personality types are weeded out at the early stages of a military career. Russell and Marrero (2000) argue, that the military consists of two fundamentally different personality types that are promoted by either war or peacetime (cluster B: slightly antisocial, narcissistic; cluster C: obsessive–compulsive, dependent). Besides their individual weaknesses, both clusters also feature specific strengths (cluster B: high risk and competition seeking; cluster C: high conscientiousness) that are adaptive within the military context but unfortunately, Russell and Marrero (2000) provide no empirical evidence to support their theoretical considerations.

DeVries and Wijnans (2013) believe individuals choosing a military vocation to exhibit certain similar personality traits and to differ from the norm population but warn researchers that an oversimplification does not seem appropriate. Especially adventuresomeness and seeking stimulation are regarded as defining components of the military personality (DeVries & Wijnans, 2013).

Even though there are convincing arguments for investigating the military personality against the background of the five-factor-model (Campbell, Moore, Poythress, & Kennedy, 2009), only very few studies implement these recommendations. Callister, King, Retzlaff, and Marsh (1999) compared the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) profiles of 1301 U.S. Air Force training pilots to the norm population, finding male pilots to score higher on extraversion and lower on agreeableness. Using the same personality test, Campbell et al. (2009) found American military pilots to score lower on neuroticism and agreeableness but higher on extraversion, openness and conscientiousness than the norm population. In the Big Five Inventory, Canadian Forces officer candidates scored high on agreeableness and conscientiousness, medium on extraversion and low on neuroticism (Skomorovsky & Lee, 2012). The only available German study investigating soldier personality showed that young men with low scores on neuroticism, openness and agreeableness (on the NEO-FFI) significantly more often fulfilled military service instead of alternative civilian service (Jackson, Thoemmes, Jonkmann, Lüdtko, & Trautwein, 2012).

Taken together, the studies outlined so far found soldiers to score low on neuroticism and agreeableness, but high on extraversion, conscientiousness and risk and competition seeking. Except for openness, this personality pattern exactly corresponds to Klee and Renner's (2013) empirical results on the "Rescue Personality" typology that has been introduced by Mitchell (1983) and Mitchell and Bray (1990). Particularly the elements of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) are specific to the "Rescue Personality" and will only be successful in persons exhibiting this profile (Mitchell & Bray, 1990). Even though the military regularly use CISD interventions (Zimmermann, Biesold, Hahne, & Lanczik, 2010), it has never been investigated whether this is the case in soldiers. Therefore, the following hypotheses are to be tested in this study:

- (1) Soldiers score lower on neuroticism, openness and agreeableness than the norm population.
- (2) Soldiers score higher on extraversion, conscientiousness and risk and competition seeking than the norm population.

Even though resilience is not part of the "Rescue Personality" profile it seems to be of crucial relevance for the military personality as it is trainable (Seligman, 1990), associated with better health of soldiers (Snyder, 2002) and weakens the association between severity of combat experiences and severity of PTSD (Caska & Renshaw, 2013). In line with Sinclair, Waitsman, Oliver, and Deese (2013) and the American Psychological Association (2010, p. 21) we define resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress." Sinclair et al. (2013) argue that most

soldiers having been exposed to traumatic events during deployment report no severe psychiatric problems and conclude that a substantial amount of military personnel seem to be resilient. Zimmermann et al. (2014) used the short form of the resilience scale (RS-11) by Schumacher, Leppert, Gunzelmann, Strauß, and Brähler (2005) in German soldiers returning from Afghanistan. Soldiers not needing psychological treatment had resilience scores considerably above, soldiers undergoing psychological treatment considerably below the mean of the norm population (Zimmermann et al., 2014).

Thus, we decided to include resilience to help distinguish and validate different sub-groups of soldier personality and added the following hypotheses:

- (3) Soldiers score higher on resilience than the norm population.
- (4) Using the Big Five and risk and competition seeking as classification variables, cluster analyses will reveal distinct military personality types resembling Russell and Marrero's (2000) assumptions that differ significantly in resilience.

2. Materials and method

2.1. Participants and procedure

235 soldiers (143 men, 92 women) either undergoing military medical training or studying at a military university participated in this study ($M_{age} = 24.1$ years, $SD = 4.0$, age range: 17–41 years). Duration of military service ranged from 0.5 to 12.5 years ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 3.1$). The distribution of military ranks from lowest to highest was: 46.6% men, 34.5% sergeants, 4.3% lieutenants, 10.6% captains and 4.3% field officers. The majority of participants (91.5%) had never been deployed, 6.8% had been deployed one time and 1.7% had been deployed two or more times. Academic degrees ranged from Certificates of Secondary Education to general qualifications for university entrance.

Prior to data collection the authors applied for an official permission of the Defense Ministry where the study is operated under the registration number 2/05/14. All soldiers participated voluntarily and signed an informed consent. Anonymity was guaranteed by using code numbers on the questionnaires. At the medical academy a stratified random sample was drawn, whereas at the military university a snowball-sampling method was applied. At both places, the first author attended lectures where she presented the study to soldiers and directly carried it out with those willing to participate.

2.2. Measures

Age, gender, duration of service, military rank and deployments were assessed using a self-conceptualized demographic questionnaire. Personality traits were assessed with the short form of the Hamburg Personality Inventory (HPI-K) by Andresen (2002). The HPI-K measures the Big Five personality traits (N = nervousness, sensitivity and emotional instability; E = extraversion, liveliness and sociability; O = openness to experiences; C = controlledness and norm-orientation; A = altruism, solicitousness and helpfulness) plus risk and competition seeking (Andresen, 2002). Each dimension is assessed with 14 items (response format ranging from 1 = "completely inapplicable" to 4 = "completely applicable"). Andresen (2002) reports Cronbach's alphas above .80 for each scale; quite similar high internal consistencies were obtained in this study except for openness and resilience (see Table 1). Retest reliability ranges between .82 and .89 (Andresen, 2002). The six-factor structure of the HPI-K and its convergent and discriminant validity could be supported in several studies and norms are based on a sample of 1665 subjects between 16 and 75 years (Andresen, 2002).

Resilience was assessed with the German version of the resilience scale (RS-25) by Schumacher et al. (2005) that consists of 25 items to be rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "No"/"I don't agree"; 7 =

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