Soldier Resilience: Lessons Learned from the Assessment and Selection of High-Risk Operational Personnel

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What is Resilience?

• One construct, many definitions (resilience as capacity, process, outcome)
  
  • the potential for an individual to tolerate high levels of stress without significant psychological, physical, or performance decrements, as well as bounce back quickly after adversity or challenge

  • “the process of coping with or overcoming exposure to adversity or stress” (Meredith, Sherbourne, Gaillot, Hansell, Ritschard, Parker, & Wrenn, 2011, p. 1).

  • the individual’s demonstration of positive adaptation in response to significant adversity (Britt, Sinclair, and McFadden (2013))
Resource Models of Resilience

• Propose that those endowed with more resources are more resilient in the face of adversity
  
  • more capable of solving problems inherent in stressful circumstances
  
  • more able to withstand the depletion of resources that occurs in stressful conditions (Hofball, 2002).

• Resources that bolster resilience include those intrinsic to the individual (e.g., coping resources, optimism, spirituality), as well as those resources involving others such as the family, organization, and community (e.g., social support)
Physically and psychologically demanding missions involving critical and sensitive national security concerns under conditions of extreme threat with no or very limited logistical and tactical support, and carry dire consequences for failure

- Demands people with high stress tolerance and resilience

Personnel who perform high risk operational missions typically undergo stringent assessment and selection procedures

- Designed to assess special skills, aptitude and trainability, and performance under stress using methods with high fidelity to the operational environment

- Physically and psychologically depleting

- Provides an ideal environment to study factors that underlie individual resilience
Assessment Center Model for the Selection of High-Risk Military Personnel

- **Reception Station**
  - Human Resources
  - Medical/Physical
  - Security Review
  - Psychological Testing and Interview

- **Assessment Course**
  - Extended evaluation of physical and psychological attributes using role plays, scenarios, and simulation exercises under high stress conditions
  - Standards Elimination
  - Medical Elimination
  - Self Elimination

- **Selection Board**
  - Comprehensive review of psychological and performance data
  - Select
  - Non-Select ("select-in")
Assessment and Selection Programs for High-Risk Operational Personnel

- A&S programs involve multiple methods and procedures
  - Interviews
  - Psychological tests
  - Physical tests
  - Military skills tests
  - Scenario-based role plays and simulation tasks

- Attrition rates are high (greater than 50%)
  - Almost by definition, those who complete these rigorous A&S courses can be said to have demonstrated “positive adaptation to significant adversity” (resilience)
Predictors of success in A&S programs for High Risk Operational Personnel

- **Consistent Predictors**
  - Physical Ability
  - Cognitive Ability
    - A proxy measure of brain or cognitive reserve capacity
    - Ability to compensate for the performance depleting effects of such conditions as stress, fatigue, and other environmental conditions
  - Age (in our assessment center)

- **Inconsistent Predictors**
  - Personality traits (Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability)
  - Hardiness and Grit emerging as better predictors
Hardiness and Grit Predict Completion of US Special Forces Assessment and Selection

• Grit - the sustained and passionate pursuit of a given interest or goal (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007)
  • Consistency of interests
  • Perseverance of effort

• Predicts successful completion of SFAS (Eskeis-Winkler, Shulman, & Duckworth, 2014)

• Hardiness - a set of attitudes or beliefs that provides the existential courage and motivation needed for enhanced performance in stressful circumstances (Maddi, 2004, 2007)
  • Commitment (vs. Alienation) - the capacity to feel deeply involved or engaged in activities of life
  • Control (vs. Powerlessness) - confidence in one’s ability to control events and influence outcomes
  • Challenge (vs. Threat) - perceiving variety and change as a chance to learn and grow

• Predicts successful completion of SFAS (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008)
Predictors of Success in A&S programs for High Risk Operational Personnel: Psychological Suitability

Psychological Suitability is the overall assessment of:

- Psychological fitness and emotional health risks
- Training potential
- Job performance potential
- Risk for personal misconduct
- Counterproductive work behaviors

Rated from the results of a suitability interview:

- Military (Job) Fitness
- Motivation
- Trainability
- Psychosocial Stability
- Personality Competence
Interview Suitability Ratings
Summary of Assessment Center Findings

• Suitability ratings derived from psychological interviews differentiate selection outcomes among candidates for high demand/high risk military missions

• Related to other predictors like cognitive ability, personality traits, physical fitness
  • Ratings capture variance independent from measures of intelligence and personality
  • Stronger predictor of selection than either cognitive ability or self-report personality measures

• One factor underlies the 5 components assessed:

  “An estimate of the total potentialities of candidates for meeting the challenges of life... (OSS Assessment Staff, 1948)
A Biological Fitness Model of Individual Resilience

- We may be tapping a latent construct, biological fitness, or $F$
- Intelligence, personality competence, and physical ability are “fitness indicators”
- May define the upper boundaries of individual resilience

Adapted from Sefcek & Figueredo, 2010. FA = Fluctuating Asymmetry, indexed as the deviation from perfect symmetry in bilateral traits that are symmetrical at the population level (e.g., facial asymmetry). $g = $ general cognitive ability, $GFP = $ General Factor of Personality
Some Conclusions from our Findings from High-Risk Operational Personnel

- Not all soldiers can become “super soldiers”
  - May need to deliberately recruit and select for resilience

- Resilience is a limited resource for all military personnel (some more than others)
  - Resilience must be conserved and sustained for optimal functioning

- Resilience may be enhanced by external factors and directed interventions