

## CADETS' PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING DURING TRAINING PERIOD AT MILITARY INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Summary

This empirical study describes factors that facilitate/impede the psychological well-being of cadets studying at Ukrainian military institutions of higher education. The preference was given to the psycholinguistic method of research, namely the free associative experiment. We argue that the most important factor for cadets' psychological well-being is self-acceptance. When cadets correlate their self-image with professional military activity they develop healthy self-esteem and they are characterized by positive emotional states. Cadets' failure to identify themselves with professional military activity leads to the predominance of negative emotional states. Factors such as some opportunities for personal growth and the increases the probabilities of achievement of the vital purposes are characterized by their correlation with positive aspects of cadets' psychological well-being. A favorable psychological atmosphere in collective is another factor of cadet's psychological well-being. The exceptions are those cadets who have inflated demands and expectations, or cadets with victim mentality. Factors such as autonomy and environmental management are characterized by their correlation with negative aspects of cadets' psychological well-being. The high-risk category is cadets who enter the military institutions having ideal vision about military service that does not accord with reality, cadets for whom the decision to study in some military institution is made by their parents against their will, and cadets who join the army under pressure of life circumstances. The lack of personal autonomy and the inability to independently control one's life can result in health disorders, as indicated by cadet's emotional states of weariness, despondency, melancholy, hopelessness.

**Keywords:** associative experiment, military, psychological well-being, emotions, higher education.

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### 1. Introduction

Recently, many countries have taken into account the psychological well-being of military personnel in the framing of defense policy as it is one of the decisive factors in maintaining the combat readiness of the army at the appropriate level. Psychological well-being (PW) is not solely related to the personal characteristics of the individual, but also to the conditions of professional activity of servicemen (high intensity of physical, moral and emotional stress and effects; the rules of conduct regulating relations; irregular schedule of service and work on weekends, etc.), which inevitably threaten the mental / physical health and well-being of the person, potentially preventing his professional activity and development (Hoge et al., 2004). Due to the individual features of different people a wide range of reactions is possible. At the same time some servicemen adapt quickly and maintain a high level of

performance while others find it difficult to cope with difficulties (*Hernández-Varas, Labrador & Méndez, 2019*). One way to achieve the psychological well-being of service members is development and implementation of policy that helps to identify potential difficulties faced by military men during the service and to eliminate conflict zones where difficulties may arise. This approach is relevant not only for military personnel at active service units but also for cadets during their period of training at military educational institutions since a high level of PW can promote creative thinking, problem solving, professional achievement (*Warr, 2013*), individuals with high levels of psychological well-being usually are better at decision-making tasks in terms of accuracy, clerical error checking, anagram problem solving, and original and flexible thinking (*Diener & Seligman, 2004*) and as a result have a higher rate of academic performance. Furthermore, PW brings out the best in people, makes them more communicative, moral, and motivated (*Diener et al., 2009*). The period of training at military educational institutions plays a vital role for the physical, mental, psychological and spiritual health of future officers and sergeants of the armed forces, and PW is not only an indicator of mental stability, transitional states of adaptation-disadaptation and stress-resistance resources but it is also critical for improving the processes of general and professional socialization, assistance in psychotherapeutic practice and applied research (*Caroli & Sagone, 2016*).

## 2. The theoretical and methodological framework of the study

The theoretical and conceptual framework within which this study was conducted is outlined in works that analyze the relationship between psychological well-being and various aspects of human life (*Dush, Taylor & Kroeger, 2008; Frone, 2000; Ruggeri, 2020; Gerstorf, 2016*). The term “psychological well-being” defines an internal emotional state arising as a psychological response to the environment (*Nierenberg et al., 2010*); it can be viewed as a feeling of happiness or lack of psychological distress (*Grossi et al., 2006*). PW can be associated with such positive psychological traits, which improve well-being, as self-acceptance, satisfaction, optimism (*Ryff & Singer, 1996; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000*). However, PW is a complex and integral concept, which includes not only feelings of happiness and satisfaction (*Khumalo, Temane & Wissing, 2012*), it is more comprehensive than just well-being and enables to assess the subjective aspects of mental health (*Grossi et al., 2006*), it can be described by both positive and negative aspects such as optimism, pleasure, endurance, self-control, depression, anxiety, general health and vitality (*Uher & Goodman, 2010; Grossi et al., 2006, Hallberg, Hallberg & Kramer, 2008*). In this study, psychological well-being is defined as self-representation of intrapersonal affective or emotional states reflecting a sense of subjective well-being or distress (*Dupuy, 1984; Evans, Carney & Wilkinson, 2013*).

The methodological basis of the study consists of scientific works performed in the framework of the socio-psychological approach, in which attention is focused on the factors of the FW, which are especially sensitive during the service in the ranks of the armed forces. Limbert (2004) analyzed the extent to which such factors as perceived social support and coping strategies affect psychological well-being and job satisfaction of military men serving outside their home country. Fadaei, Torkaman, Farokhzadian (2020) paid attention to the correlation between spiritual well-being and psychological well-being of soldiers performing military service in Iran. Their study showed that PW not only improves soldiers’ physical, psychological, mental health but also increases their dedication, productivity, and effectiveness. Likewise, the problem of the correlation between variables of psychological capital, job

satisfaction, self-perception of health, and psychological well-being was studied using a cohort of Spanish soldiers (Hernández-Varas, Labrador & Méndez, 2019). Factors of influence of stress upon PW and military service effectiveness as well as such protective factors as personal characteristics and social support were analyzed in the context of military medical service (Yarnell, Barry & Grunberg, 2019). From the perspective of the approach to understanding PW as a multidimensional concept, which is defined as a continuous process of integration of dimensions (level of happiness, meaning and/or satisfaction) in three areas – work, life and work-life (Bowles, 2017), studies were conducted on the correlation between military personnel's PW and their quality of life (Schwerin, 2006), and also on PW of servicemen and members of their families in the sphere of work and life (Bowles, 2017). Our paper describes the study of psychological well-being as a multidimensional and discrete phenomenon in the context of Ukrainian military education.

The aim of this study is to identify factors that facilitate/impede the psychological well-being of cadets studying at Ukrainian military institutions of higher education.

### 3. Method

*Free associative experiment as an experimental technique of psycholinguistics.* It should be pointed out that army, above all, is a masculine institution, whose members are characterized by an unwillingness to show emotion or admit personal weaknesses. Real (Real, 2003) draws attention to the fact that it is often difficult for men to recognize and bring their feelings to the surface because of the suppression of vulnerability that occurs in early childhood, when boys are encouraged to develop their “assertive public self”. In adulthood expression of pain, suffering or unhappiness is seen as weakness and failure (Real, 2003) that makes collection reliable and accurate data in male environments a constant challenge (Harms et al., 2013). Therefore, the preference was given to the psycholinguistic method of research, namely the free associative experiment in order to obtain genuine, unfeigned responses. In the work association is defined as “a natural connection between two contents of consciousness (sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, etc.) arising in an individual's experience whereby this connection is evinced in the fact that the emergence in consciousness of one of the contents entails the emergence of the other” (Meshcheryakov & Zinchenko, 2003). We assume that the experimental techniques of psycholinguistics enable people to avoid fear of publicly expression their beliefs and opinions, fear of ridicule and condemnation if others find out about the respondent's feelings and thoughts. It is especially relevant in a masculine military environment. Also, the results obtained during the associative experiment correspond most closely to the real thoughts and feelings of the respondents. Kurganova (2019) notes that the association approach has great potential in terms of analysis both the living word and its meaning. This knowledge is incomprehensible to the respondent but it is structured, which “make it possible to speak of the identification of a stable core as a set of the most typical and regularly reproduced strategies, schemes and cognitive operations guiding society members' meaning-making activity” (Kurganova, 2019).

*Procedure.* Participation in the experiment was entirely voluntary. All respondents were verbally informed of their rights, and complete anonymity was ensured. The associative experiment in the framework of pilot study was conducted in October 2021. A group of 83 of 1-4 courses cadets studying at the Military Institute of Telecommunication and Information (age 17-25 years) participated in the experiment. During the free associative experiment respondents were given the following instruction: “Look at the proposed stimulus word and

quickly, without thinking, write down on the answer sheet any word that first came to mind. The time for the associative experiment is limited to five minutes". The results of the associative experiment were subjected to a cognitive interpretation, which "enables to draw presumptive conclusions about the features of the thinking of the people or a particular group of people, to describe native speakers' mental processes manifested and reflected in associative experiments" (Sternin, 2020). Certainly, as we embark on PW it is necessary to determine the desired scope of the PW construct. The broadest scope is entire life, "context-free" well-being embedded in such concepts as life satisfaction, happiness at the global level, etc. The medium scope focuses on one segment of life such as work, family, health, leisure or one's self. And, finally, a limited PW reflects one particular aspect such as satisfaction with the amount of money earned (Warr, 2013). In our opinion, a cogent and comprehensive conceptual definition of PW of cadets studying at military institutions of higher education should have a wide range, and therefore it is preferably to include both positive and negative elements (Warr, 2013). Therefore, as a word-stimulus was chosen "army". This word-stimulus enabled to obtain an array of associations in which the positive and negative variables are clearly distinguished in conceptual terms and reflect the multidimensional aspects of the respondents' FW. It should be noted that "associations form the basis for the development of connotation" (Vrublevskaya, 2019), which essentially involves "comprehension of meaning and purpose of objects and phenomena of the surrounding reality, as well as words denoting them" (Burukina, 2011) due to "establishing a whole set of connections, which are both involuntary probabilistic and fixed in the individual's consciousness and include not only associations but also, above all, emotions, feelings, connotative ideas and many other elements evoked in the individual's mind by the word he perceives" (Burukina, 2011). So, the associations obtained in the course of the experiment were divided according to positive, negative and neutral connotation, which we define as "emotional and evaluative additions to the basic (denotative and significative) components of the word's lexical meaning" (Mescheryakov & Zinchenko, 2004), "concept's inessential but stable features expressed by connotation, which embodies an inherent in a particular linguistic collective an evaluation of the corresponding object or fact of reality" (Apresyan, 1995).

In addition to evaluative differentiation, the associations obtained in the course of the experiment were divided into thematic groups, the contents of which enable to give an indication of the following aspects of psychological functioning: 1) positive evaluation of self and results of previous performance (self-acceptance); 2) constant process of self-improvement, personal development (personal growth); 3) awareness of the values for which people put before themselves the purposes and find ways for their achievement (purpose in life); 4) need for positive emotional relations with others (positive emotional relations); 5) skills to effectively manage their own lives, the ability to react to the outside world properly (environmental management); 6) the need for self-determination (autonomy), the urge to be a producer of their own actions (Ryff, 2014).

*Limitations.* First of all, the limitation is associated with the weaknesses of the associative experiment as a method of research. It should be noted that any interpretation, including interpretation of psycholinguistic experiment results inherently has a subjective character, can differ and demonstrate inconsistent findings in various scientific approaches whereas the same material is studied (Sternin, 2020).

#### 4. Results and discussions

The results of the association experiment are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

##### Thematic and evaluative differentiation of the associations obtained in the course of the experiment

Thematic groups	Associations	
	with positive or neutral connotation	with negative connotation
Life goals	Abundance (1), career (2), defense (5), money (2), military salary (1), dream (1)	Inadequate salary (1)
Autonomy	Freedom (1), choice (1)	Conservatism (1), orders (8), herd (1), prison (1), necessity (1), pact with the devil (1), bondage (1), restriction (1), politics (1)
Personal growth	Sports activities (1), different world view (1), study (5), victory (1), decency (1), lyceum (1), physical fitness (1), education (1), career development (1), future (1), perspective (4)	Drudge (1), outdated view (2), workhorse (1)
Environmental management	Always fed (1), stability in both service and payment (1), food (1), pleasure (1)	Groundhog Day (1), lack of sleep (3), exhaustion (2), noisy (1), barracks (1), stress (1), hell (1), tasteless food (1), difficult (1), stepping outside of comfort zone (1)
Relationships with colleagues	Unity (1), fraternity (1), brotherhood (1), fun company (1), bliss (1), lots of acquaintances (1), comrades (3), kindred soul (1)	Mistreatment (1)
Self-acceptance	Discipline (8), subordination (3), uniforms (11), work (3), war (7), courage (5), service (12), self-sacrifice (1), duty (3), precision (2), courage (2), honor (11), safety (2), Homeland (1), weapons (2), fortitude (3), risk (1), determination (1), commanders (1), group responsibility (2), commitment (2), patriotism (3), bravery (7), strength (4), struggle (2), danger (1), structure (1), power (1), orderliness (1), endurance (1), military regulations (2) combat (1), routines (1), logic (1), formation (1), duty (6), gratitude (1), life (1), formation (1), aircraft (1), tank (1), parade ground (1), patriotism (4)	Turmoil (3), gap between expectations and reality (1), work 24/7 (1), lots of clerical work (1), incompetence (1), frustration (2), joyless (1), monotony (4), lack of freedom (1), separation (1), reprimand (2), discouragement (1)

The largest number of reactions to the word-stimulus “army” refers to the thematic group (TG) “Self-acceptance” (N145; 64%). Associations with positive connotations (N126; 56%) and predominance of cognitive component reveal cadets’ conviction of being highly regarded

by the people, the possession of a sense of self-worth, and indicate the correlation of the self-image with professional military activity. This fact, undoubtedly, demonstrates high level of cadets' FW. Cadets' self-image building "begins with the distinguishing of external, superficial properties and results in comparison, analysis and generalization, accentuation of the essence" (Mikhaylichenko, 2015): 1) the physical self (*military uniform, airplane, tank*); 2) the social and professional self, which is expressed in the identifying with the agent of certain professional duties, functions and roles (*war, danger, risk, duty*); 3) the psychological self, which incorporates the perception of one's own traits, dispositions, motives, needs (*commitment, courage, bravery*); 4) existential self, which reflects "the personal features of the highest, existential level, the features of not any specific personal structures but the general principles of a person's relations with the world around him" (Mikhaylichenko, 2015) (*patriotism, self-sacrifice*).

Associations with negative connotations (N19; 8%) are characterized by the dominance of the affective-evaluative components and indicate cadets' doubts about the correctness of their career choice in favor of military profession. An understanding of the erroneous of choice leads to their discontent with the chosen field of activity (*discouragement*), level of professional realization (*incompetence*), their psychological state (*confusion*).

The TG "Self-acceptance" reveals such cadets' positive emotional states correlating with PW as self-esteem, self-identification, self-assertion, satisfaction, exclusivity, pride, elitism, and their prevalence over negative ones – depression, despair, inferiority, and discouragement.

The TGs "Personal growth" (N22; 10%), "Life goals" (N13; 6%), and "Relationships with teammates" (N11; 5%) are characterized by their correlation with positive aspects of cadets' PW. The peculiarities of the cadets' life goals are 1) orientation on the image of a successful person (*money, career development*); 2) existential richness, which is manifested in life-giving meanings in the context of responsibility for the country's external security (*defense*).

The associations combined in the TG "Personal growth" indicate the importance of the existence of conditions (*sports activities, physical fitness*) that facilitate the achievements of cadets' vital goals in the context of the development of personal qualities or abilities that they want to possess, and bring them closer to the image of the person they would like to be consistent with (*victory, decency*). Moreover, positive emotional states of optimism and buoyancy based on the belief that their future at least to some extent is "manageable" (*career development, future, perspective*) dominate in cadets' emotions.

For the cadets' PW the nature of relations in the military collective, its dominant mood is of great importance. Associations of the TG "Relationships with colleagues" suggest such cadets' positive emotions as a feeling of happiness, fun, enjoyment, satisfaction (*fun company, bliss*) as well as psychological compatibility (*kindred soul*) and the willingness to support each other (*brotherhood, fraternity*). Single associations with negative connotations reveal emotional states of annoyance, irritation, vulnerability, which are typical for cadets with inflated demands and expectations (*inadequate salary*) or for cadets with the victim mentality when they prone to accuse others of unfair treatment, thereby justifying their failures (*mistreatment, drudge, workhorse*). The TGs "Autonomy" (N18; 8%) and "Environmental management" (N17; 7%) are characterized by their correlation with negative aspects of cadets' PW. This is due to 1) the discrepancy between the psychological orientation understood as the individual's dominant and sustainable needs and interests, his worldview, beliefs, ideals, and the specifics of the chosen profession. This discrepancy reveals in an unwillingness to conform to the organizational principles of military culture and in perception of unity of command, which in the armed forces is the basic principle of leadership, as external compulsively imposed system of subordination (*prison, necessity, bondage, restriction*); 2) lack of psychological preparedness to deal with

life's difficulties, problems in the period of adaptation (*lack of sleep, exhaustion, noisy, stress, hell, tasteless food*). This may involve certain contradictions between teenager's ideal conception of military service and reality that evolved, for example, under the influence of television programs and films (mostly Western) aimed to fuel some militaristic sentiments in society as well as to build up an idealized image of military man increasing the prestige of military service. Another reason is that career in the military could be a necessity for many teenagers. This happens when well-meaning parents without taking into consideration whether the chosen profession resonates with their child's dreams and desires for self-actualization, apply pressure on a child in order to force him/her to enter a certain educational institution. Or when the choice of profession was determined on the financial abilities of parents (lack of financial support, need to help parents financially, absence of own apartment, etc.). The lack of personal autonomy and control over own life can be a cause for psychological distress, and it is indicated by emotional states of lethargy, despondency, melancholy, feelings of doom and despair (*stress, hell, herd, prison, pact with the devil*).

The results of the cognitive interpretation were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

### Cognitive interpretation of the results of the associative experiment

Factors of psychological well-being	Associations		Dominant emotional states	Probable causes of dominant emotional states
	N	%		
Life goals	13	6	Optimism, buoyancy	Belief that their future at least to some extent is "manageable"
Autonomy	18	8	Lethargy, despondency, melancholy, despair	Difficulties in adaptation; discrepancy between the psychological orientation and the specifics of the chosen profession
Personal growth	22	10	Optimism, cheerfulness, moral satisfaction	The presence of conditions which facilitate to the achievement of life goals in the context of the development of personal qualities or abilities
Environmental management	17	7	Exhaustion, discouragement, melancholy, helplessness, despair, hopelessness	Lack of psychological preparedness to deal with life's difficulties
Relationships with colleagues	11	5	Happiness, enjoyment, cheerfulness, contentment Irritation, annoyance, vulnerability	Psychological group compatibility Extraordinarily high expectations and demands, victim mentality
Self-acceptance	45	64	Self-esteem, self-identification, self-assertion, pride Depression, hopelessness, despondence, melancholy	Correlation of the self-image with professional military activity Doubts about the correctness of a career choice

## 5. Conclusions

Associative experiment as an experimental method of psycholinguistics has proven its effectiveness to identify the factors that facilitate/impede the achievement of psychological well-being of cadets studying at military institutions of higher education. The most important factor for cadets' psychological well-being is self-acceptance. When cadets correlate their self-image with professional military activity they develop healthy self-esteem; they are characterized by such positive emotional states as confidence, self-identification, self-assertion, satisfaction, distinctiveness, pride. Cadets' failure to identify themselves with professional military activity leads to dissatisfaction with the chosen profession and level of career development, which results in the predominance of such negative emotional states as depression, hopelessness, despondence, melancholy. Factors such as some opportunities for personal growth and the increases the probabilities of achievement of the vital purposes are characterized by their correlation with positive aspects of cadets' psychological well-being in the event that the military institutions of higher education create conditions for the development of personal qualities or abilities desired by cadets, and bring them closer to the image of the person cadets would like to be consistent with. Then, positive emotional states of optimism and cheerfulness based on the certainty that the future at least to some extent is "manageable", dominate. A favorable psychological atmosphere among cadets, as another factor of psychological well-being, depends primarily not on the properly built relationships with commanders but on psychological compatibility in the collective. The exceptions are those cadets who have inflated demands and expectations, or cadets with victim mentality, having which they are prone to blame people around them for unfair treatment, thereby justifying their own failures. Factors such as autonomy and environmental management are characterized by their correlation with negative aspects of cadets' psychological well-being. The high-risk category is cadets who enter the military institutions having ideal vision about military service that does not accord with reality, cadets for whom the decision to study in some military institution is made by their parents against their will, and cadets who join the army under pressure of life circumstances. The lack of personal autonomy and the inability to independently control one's life can result in health disorders, as indicated by cadet's emotional states of weariness, despondency, melancholy, hopelessness.

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