

# DEVELOPING RESILIENCE IN MILITARY STUDENT GROUPS

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**Abstract:** Individual resilience supposes the acquisition and development of mental, emotional and physical abilities that allow a person to obtain optimal performances in the activities he or she develops. Acquiring individual or group resilience techniques and strategies begins ever since the special preparation in the military academies. This paper presents the results of a study whose aim is to identify the main methods used by the military instructors and direct commanders of the students in the Land Forces Academy in Sibiu in order to develop the resilience of the military student groups.

**Keywords:** resilience developing methods, military student groups

Few are the professions that need individual or group resilience at a level as high as the military profession. The military must preserve

themselves in an adequate mental and physical condition in order to accomplish their missions at any moment. Developing resilience is part of the military culture and is imposed by the nature of activities and stress specific to profession. This stress may have a multitude of consequences in both the physical health plan and the mental one.

Psychological resilience is as important as the physical one. It supposes that the military has a psychological, social and spiritual equilibrium and that he is capable of going back to that equilibrium after stressful or traumatizing events such as combat missions, for example. However, the knowledge of resilience strategies is necessary not only for such extreme missions, but also for all those aspects of the military's life and professional activities that may induce a stressful state to them.

Meredith, Sherbourne, Gaillot, Hansell, Ritschard, Parker and Wrenn (2011, p. 20, 77-84) classified the definitions of resilience along a continuum of three main types of definitions:

1. **basic**—definitions that describe resilience as a process or capacity that develops over time. Examples:

- “A style of behavior with identifiable patterns of thinking, perceiving, and decision making across different types of situations” Agaibi and Wilson (2005);
- “the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium” Bonanno (2004);
- “[Resilience] is more than just a personality trait; it is the product of the person, his or her past experiences, and current life context.” Lepore and Revenson (2006)

2. **adaptation**—definitions that incorporate the concept of “bouncing back,” adapting, or returning to a baseline after experiencing adversity or trauma.

Examples:

2. "the ability to maintain a state of normal equilibrium in the face of extremely unfavorable circumstances" Ahmed (2007);
3. "the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or sustained life stress" Allison et al. (2003);
4. "Positive outcomes in the face of adversity". Alriksson-Schmidt (2007)

3. **growth**—definitions that additionally involve growth after experiencing adversity or trauma. Examples:

- "Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. Resilience requires exposure to significant risks, overcoming risks or adversity, and success that is beyond predicted expectations." Barton (2003);
- "the ability to thrive in the face of obstacles or adverse circumstances" Condly (2006);
- "[Resilience involves] a developmental progression such that new vulnerabilities and/or strengths often emerge with changing life circumstances." Luthar et al. (2000)

Individual resilience supposes the acquisition and development of some mental, emotional and physical abilities that allow a person to obtain optimal performances in the activities he/she develops. These abilities are built and maintain by constant training.

In order for a group to be resilient, each of his members must dispose of a set of minimum specific skills and abilities. The existence of a group member that lacks them imposes a supplementary effort from the part of the others so that this lack might be compensated; in this case, the group's capacity for maintaining an adequate performance level

decreases. This thing is obvious especially in the military groups whose activity has a high specialization and specificity degree.

In what military groups are concerned, there are three main factors that significantly influence their resilience level: the positive command environment, teamwork and unit cohesion.

*The command climate* may be defined as a state or condition of the military group, created by feelings and perceptions shared among the military with reference to the group, the leaders and the programs and policies of the group they belong to. The climate is created by the commander and his commanding chain, by his vision and his leadership style and is maintained by communicating and involving himself into it. The indicators of a positive command environment are: trust in the existent leaders, teamwork, correct attitudes of members to one another (fair-play), information-sharing, open communication, work satisfaction, social activities accomplished together. In what the unit resilience development is concerned, Bartone (2006, pp.131) clearly expresses the following truth: 'highly effective leaders can increase hard resilient responses to stressful circumstances within their units'.

*Teamwork* is a central element of military life and proves its importance especially in conditions of difficult tasks or in the case of combat missions. Unit readiness is dependent on teamwork in what communication and coordination are concerned as well as the group's capacity of adapting to the variety and complexity of tasks to be accomplished. In teamwork, personal competences are used in the group's service and the individual acquires new competences, whose target is to transform him in an efficient member of the group: it develops his capacity to motivate on his team partners, to offer support, to monitor

their activity, to self correct according to the group standards and to change his strategy when commanding.

*Unit cohesion* is an essential element in military missions. The special literature describes more dimensions of this concept that was studied from several perspectives, however, the two main dimensions are *social cohesion* and *task cohesion*. *Social cohesion* includes the totality of emotional ties that were created between the military group members (sympathy, affection, intimacy, good fellowship, etc.). *Task cohesion* refers to determining each member in part and the group as a whole to achieve objectives and solve tasks that involve group effort; this type of cohesion supposes that each member is sufficiently motivated and similarly, it supposes coordination, communication, and monitoring among group members.

Acquiring individual or group resilience techniques and strategies begins ever since the special preparation in the military academies and is realized both in formal and in informal contexts. Some of these resilience strategies are not explicitly taught by the military instructors. At graduation, students remain with a minimal knowledge about resilience and with a set of techniques and methods used for its development and maintenance, which they acquired along the specialized preparation unsystematically, under other designation or in learning contexts that have no connection with resilience development.

That is why we considered necessary to begin a study for identifying the main resilience development methods, used on military student groups by the military instructors and direct commanders of the students in the Land Forces Academy in Sibiu. During the first stage of research we identified, based on the literature and on a survey applied to the military instructors and company commanders, the main methods

used by them. After processing the results from this first stage, we drew up a second survey by which we asked the students to realize an evaluation regarding the effectiveness of these methods, from their point of view.

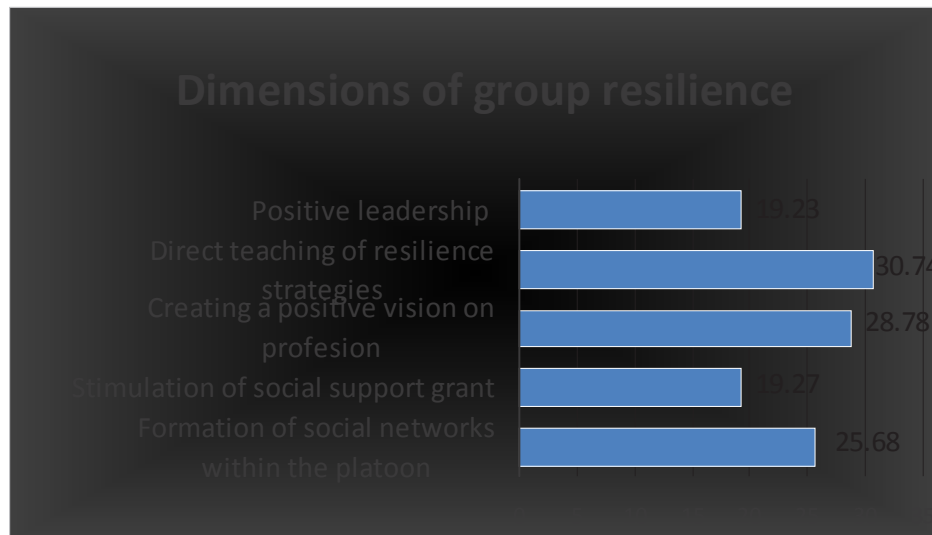
Another objective of our study was that of identifying perception differences of the investigated subjects on the effectiveness of the resilience development methods according to gender, year of study and high school graduation. We started from the presumption according to which this perception has been modified along time, once with experience acquired in the military environment. Similarly, we considered there will be perception differences about the efficiency of these methods between female and male students, as well as between military high school graduates and civil high school graduates.

For this, we drew up a survey made of 39 items, each item referring to a resilience development method in the military student group. For marking the answers, a Likert type scale with answers from 1 to 5 was used. An initial statement started the survey: *I consider that military instructors and our commanders managed to realize the following things within our group.....* Item samples: “to form strong bonds between the group members”; “to encourage giving emotional support to their platoon colleagues”, etc.

The survey was drawn up on five dimensions we considered defining for building the military student group resilience: creating social networks within the platoon, offering social support, creating a positive vision, effectively learning resilience strategies and positive leadership.

455 students within the Land Forces Academy answered this survey during March – October 2013. Among these, 102 students were females and 203 were civil high school graduates.

As it may be observed from the graph below, the hierarchy realized by students, regarding the effectiveness of the resilience development methods in the military students groups, used by their commanders and military instructors is the following: direct teaching of resilience strategies, creation of a positive vision on life, formation of social networks within the platoon, stimulation of social support grant and positive leadership.

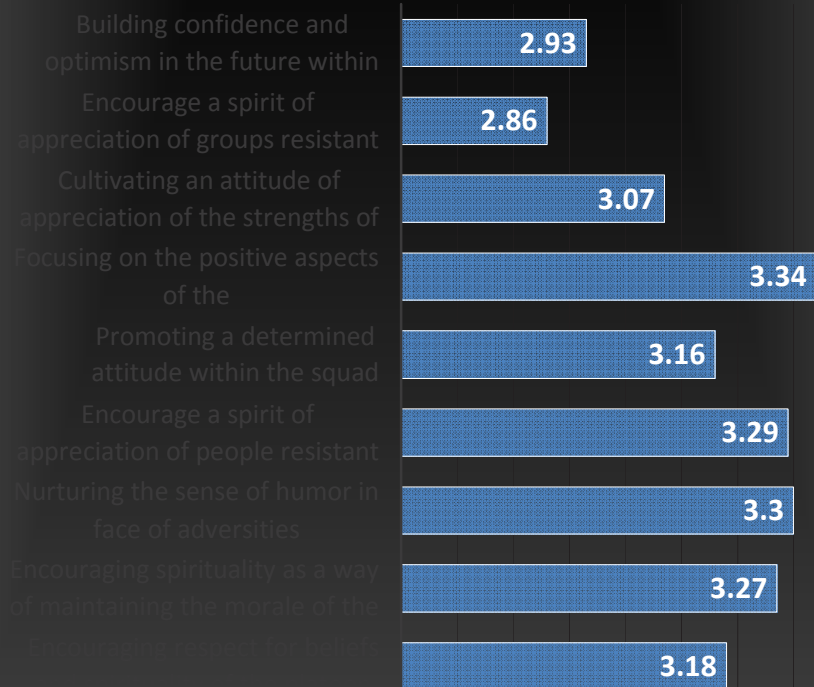


In the graphs to follow, we presented the averages obtained by the investigated sample for each item of the survey; the items are grouped in the five dimensions of the resilience presented above.

## Positive Leadership

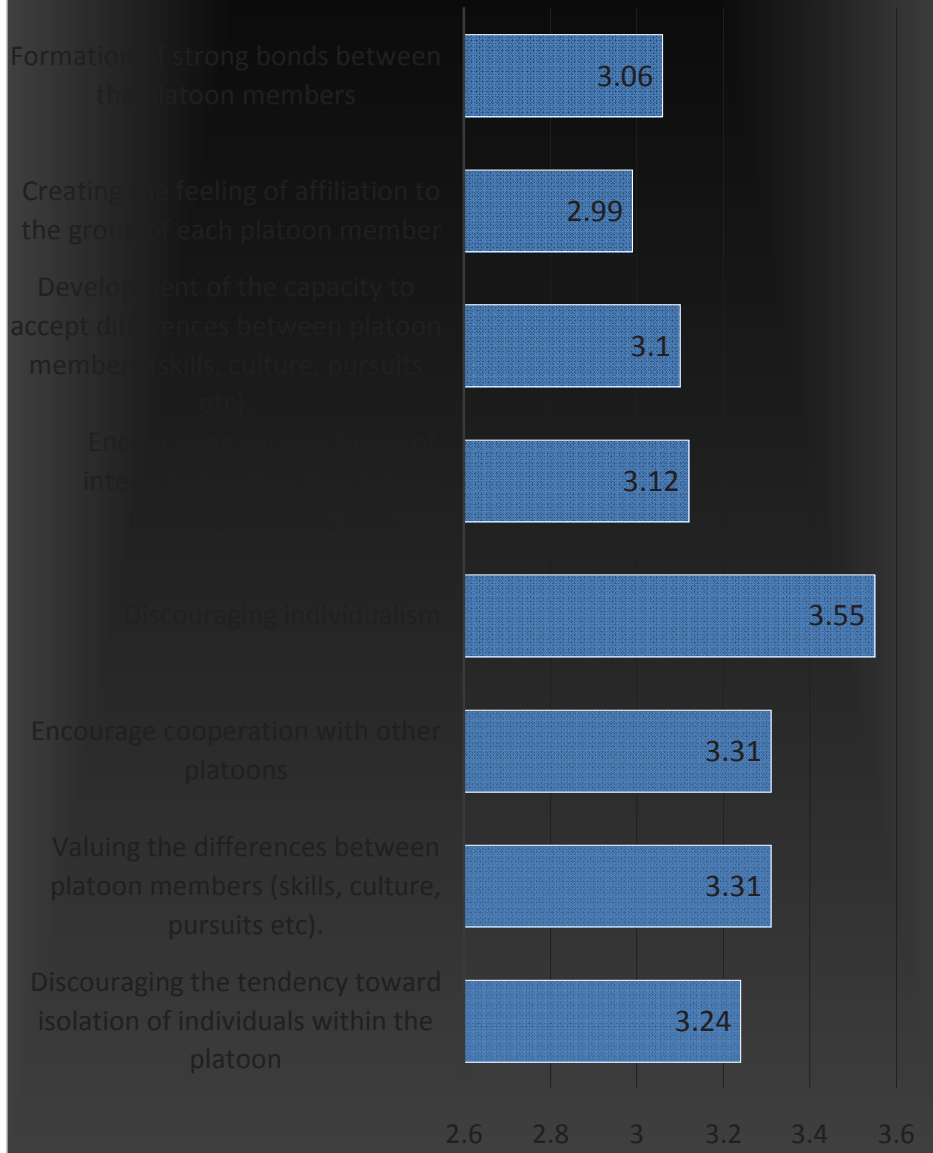


## Creating a Positive Vision on Life

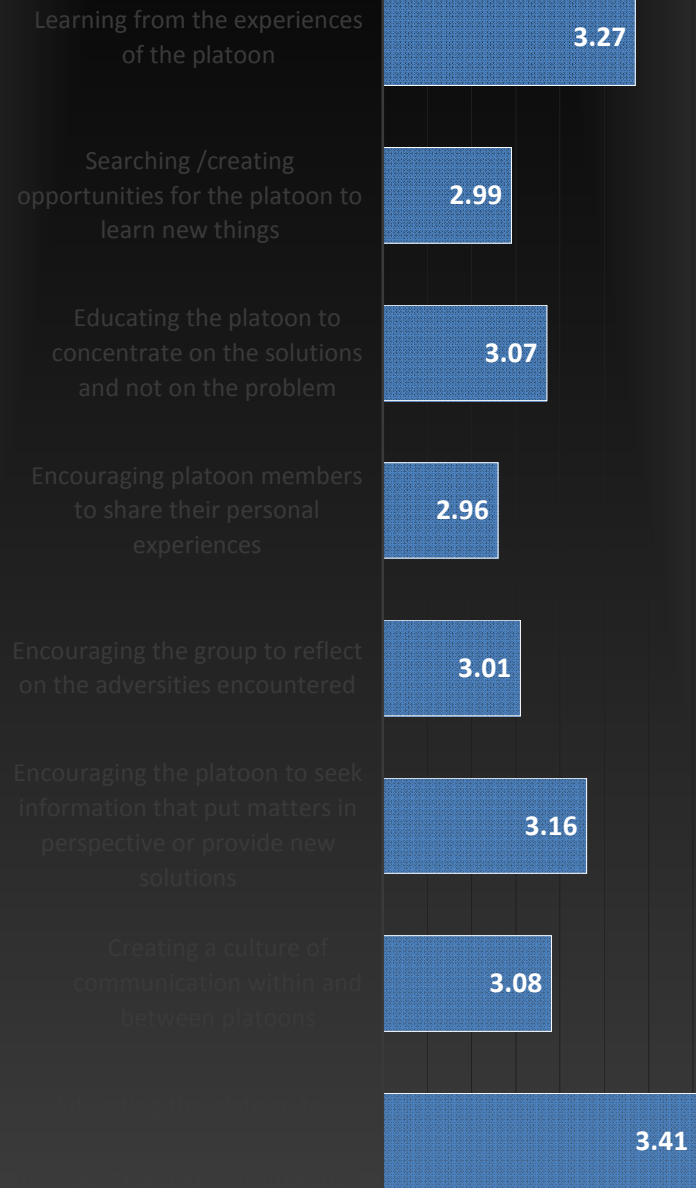


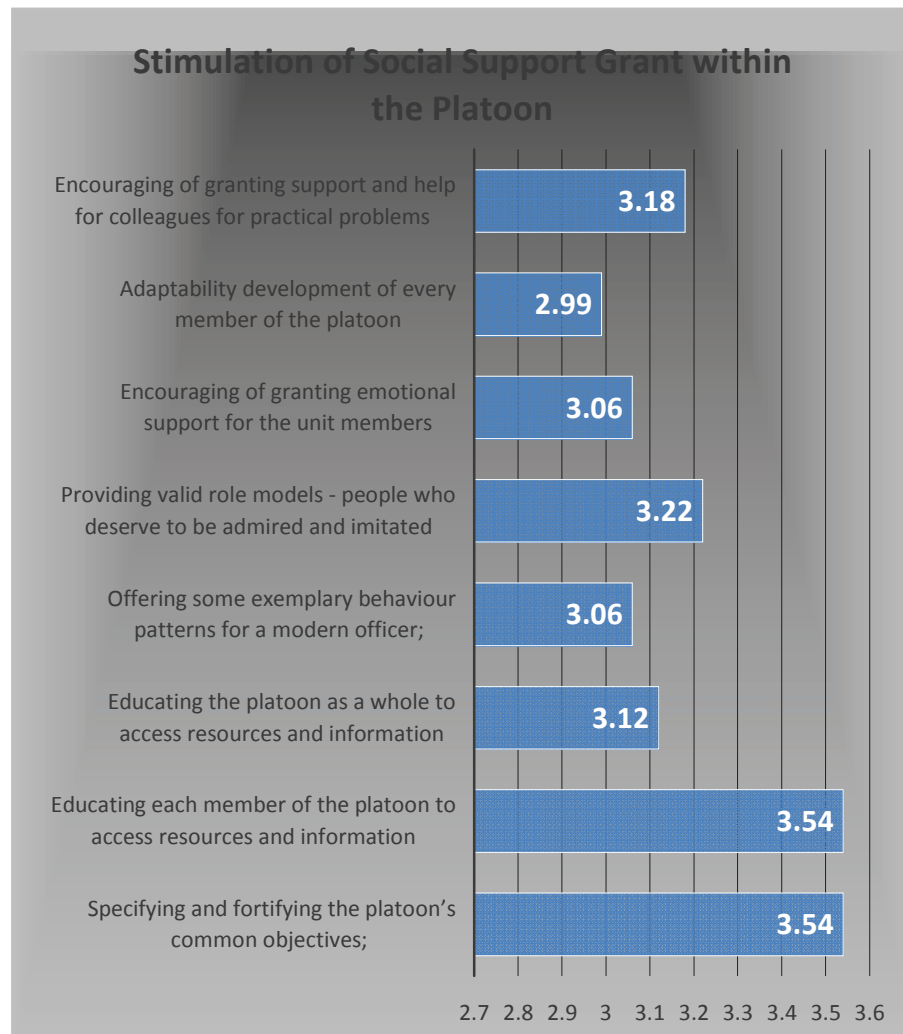


## Creation of Social Network within the Platoon



## Direct Teaching of Resilience Methods





In order to evidence perception differences on the method effectiveness presented above, we applied a T test for independent samples. Result interpretation indicated the following:

- There are no gender differences regarding perception on resilience development methods efficiency in the military groups; this thing owes also to the low number of female students in the sample - the academy receives at the moment a considerably less number of girls compared to the number of boys;

- There are differences in student evaluation on the efficiency of these methods according to the graduated high school; for example, students who have graduated from military school consider the following methods are more effective:

- Providing valid role models - people who deserve to be admired and imitated;
- Inspiring passion for the military profession;
- Stimulating the involvement of the entire platoon to fulfill various objectives;
- Creating a sense of belonging to the group for each member of the platoon.

The analysis of results in the One-way ANOVA test for testing the perception differences on the effectiveness of the resilience development methods in the three years of study evidences the following:

- The first year students appreciate in a greater measure than their colleagues in the years of study II and III the efficiency of the following resilience building methods:

- Formation of strong bonds between the platoon members;
- Infusing passion for profession;
- Creating the feeling of affiliation to the group of each platoon member;
- Offering some exemplary behaviour patterns for a modern officer;
- Specifying and fortifying the platoon's common objectives;
- Creating a trustworthy and supporting environment within the platoon;

The second year students appreciate in a greater measure than their colleagues in the years of study I and III the efficiency of the following resilience building methods:

- Adaptability and flexibility development of every member of the platoon
- Educating the platoon to concentrate on the solutions and not on the problem
- Educating the platoon to respond in a resilient way to obstacles / challenges / difficulties

The only significant difference from a statistical point of view for the three years of study is the way in which the efficiency of the different resilience methods that are part of the positive leadership category is perceived: the first year students appreciate in a greater measure the efficiency of resilience development methods that are part of the positive leadership dimension.

## **Conclusions**

Building and developing resilience in the military environment supposes the projection and implementation of programs adapted to the specifics of activities and individual and group characteristics. The implementation of these programs needs a clear policy of distributing roles and responsibilities, of offering support and guidance in implementing specific programs, of adapting them to the cultural and professional context in which they are to be implemented. Similarly, there is a need to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and of a sustained informing activity towards the possible beneficiaries about objectives and content, so that these may take well informed decisions. However, for all of these to be

possible, there is a need of command structures involvement that should guide and supervise the development of the entire process, which would lead to a growth in trust and openness for this type of activities of people in the military system.

Resilience is a proactive process by which adversities are transformed in opportunities. In a possible program of psychological resilience development, the military could learn how to build strong relationships to base on in difficult situations, he could learn to accept help from family and friends, to communicate openly, to become flexible in thinking and in the manner of approaching problems that are a challenge, to take care of himself and the others in an efficient way. Similarly, he could form a positive vision on the world and on his own self and he could learn how to change the perspective on things so that he may reach his objectives easier, to adapt to exterior changes faster and adopt correct decisions with complete trust in himself.

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