

Forschung – Tagungsbericht

The Importance of Human Factors in Military Training and Operations

Reporting of the “International Applied Military Psychology (IAMPS) 2023”



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From 5–8 June 2023, more than 50 military psychologists from 23 different nations met at the ETH in Zurich within the framework of the IAMPS. An intensive exchange of knowledge and experience took place. Once again it became clear how important it is for military organizations to address such topics as leadership compe-

tence, cognitive skills, resilience, morale and group psychology. The conference on “Human Factors in Military Training and Operations”, organized by the Military Psychology and Pedagogy Department of the Military Academy (MILAC) at ETH Zurich under Prof. Dr. Hubert Annen, was correspondingly profitable for all participants.



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Figure 1: Major General Germaine J.F. Seewer (Image: MILAC)

The scientific program began with greetings from the Commandant AFC, Maj Gen Germaine J.F. Seewer, the Commandant MILAC, Brig Gen Hugo Roux, and Prof. Dr. Hubert Annen. Maj Gen Seewer emphasized the primary importance of military psychology with regard to the well-being of individual members of the armed forces, especially in the Swiss militia armed forces, where young men are obliged to perform military service and a considerable proportion of them must be motivated to perform voluntary additional service and to assume leadership responsibilities as part of a militia career. She saw the conference as an opportunity to exchange information gained in personal practical experiences and to acquire knowledge often not found in books. Brigadier General Roux explained how essential such human factors as resilience, leadership and morale are in today's world, referring in particular to General Henri Dufour with respect to the latter, who placed great value on humanity and demonstrably put his convictions into practice. Prof. Annen further mentioned the special role of MILAC at the interface between research and practice, which makes it possible to apply the latest scientific findings directly to everyday military life, for example in the context of cadre selection or in the form of resilience training.

Presentations and workshops

The main element of the three-day conference was the contributions of the conference participants, who presented ongoing or completed research and practical projects in the form of shorter presentations and put them up for discussion. Also offered were two workshops in the area of resilience. Probably the most recent and impressive contribution was made by Prof. Ihor Prykhodko from Ukraine, who presented the "Psychology Recovery Program" in an online presentation. This is a project currently underway to evaluate the effectiveness of a seven-day psychological rehabilitation program for soldiers returning from deployment. So far, 2890 soldiers have participated in the program, and significant improvements in the well-being of participants have been noted. Other presentations included training in enhancing resilience, the role of military psychology, and relevant leadership skills. Also discussed were the challenges posed by complex systems, the so-called VUCA world, as well as structural changes in military organizations and how knowledge from psychology can be used to deal with them constructively.



Figure 2: Snapshot taken from the presentation by Prof. Ihor Prykhodko (Image: MILAC)

A special highlight of this year's program was certainly the contributions of the three keynote speakers on Tuesday and Wednesday morning.

John Alderdice

Lord John Alderdice is a British researcher, politician and psychiatrist who is primarily involved in the resolution of violent political conflicts. He was one of the key players in the Northern Ireland peace process in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, an effort for which he was awarded the title of Lord in 1996 and thus a seat in the British House of Lords. He teaches at the University of Oxford and the University of Wales, among other institutions, and acts as an advisor in violent political conflicts around the world. Lord John Alderdice has been awarded various honors and prizes, and recently received the "Royal College of Psychiatrists Lifetime Achievement Award".

The title of his presentation was "How can psychology help us address the challenges of war and peace?". A violent conflict or war represents a situation in which people often do not act in their own interest or rationally. They tend to make irrational decisions and therefore often not only destroy the enemy but also harm themselves. Lord John Alderdice tries to understand such unreasonable conduct and thus also to explain the trigger of a conflict. In his view, there are two factors that make up a military unit or individual: the biological structure and the psychological component. The biological structure, he says, remains more or less stable over time, whereas psychological factors can change significantly depending on the situation. Consequently, conventional psychological models and theories are often not applicable in conflict situations. One reason for this is that a large group of people develops a different dynamic than the individual, which



Figure 3: Lord John Alderdice (Image: MILAC)

can lead to irrational decisions. On the other hand, a strong threat situation can cause our brain to no longer function in the same way as in a normal everyday situation. Our thinking and actions are severely restricted and less differentiated under this strain and stress situation, which in turn can lead to non-rational decisions. However, the respective motive of the individual plays a decisive role here. It could be shown that the brain activity of soldiers who had to perform a mission and soldiers who fought voluntarily differed. Intrinsically motivated soldiers tend to behave more rationally than involuntary combatants. Furthermore, Lord John Alderdice emphasized how cultural differences and emotional aspects are also relevant when trying to understand conflict. He said that it is more important to understand and accept other cultures rather than trying to compare them with one's own or even trying to convert them. According to him, psychological factors explain more than 70% of today's conflicts. Consequently, there is no getting around them if one wants to understand such situations and develop possible solutions.

Stefano Brusoni

Prof. Dr. Stefano Brusoni has been Professor of Technology and Innovation Management at ETH Zurich since 2011. In addition, he has served as Vice Rector of Continuing Education at ETH since last year. He was chairman of the "Knowledge and Innovation Interest Group" of the "Strategic Management Society" as well as head of the "Technology and Innovation Management Division" of the "Academy of Management". His research interests are primarily focused on the innovation capabilities of organizations and individuals. Specifically, he is concerned with the question of why certain companies are innovative and thus more competitive than others in the long term. He also



Figure 4: Prof. Dr. Stefano Brusoni (Image: MILAC)

investigates whether and how his research can be explained using neuroscientific approaches, which was also the focus of his keynote address “Cognitive Flexibility: its value in business and military organizations”.

Prof. Dr. Stefano Brusoni emphasized that it is essential for a company or organization to be innovative in order to remain competitive and thus to survive in the long term. Often, companies miss the opportune moment to initiate change and do not survive a social transformation. One reason for this, he said, is that we humans tend to shy away from change. In a study, he was able to show that people tend to opt for what they already know rather than try something new. This could even be determined on the basis of brain activity. Change is always associated with risk and therefore anxiety, a condition that we as humans generally prefer to avoid. Nonetheless, there are still organizations that manage to innovate and adapt to change. So, what are the reasons why some managers find the courage to push through change despite considerable risks? According to Prof. Dr. Brusoni, one prerequisite is the ability to self-reflect. This is necessary in order to be able to decide when and whether the time for change has come. Self-reflection, in turn, requires cognitive flexibility. This ability can even be trained to a certain extent. A higher degree of cognitive flexibility leads a manager to pause, thereby allowing reflection to take place in the first place. Scientific studies have shown that a higher level of cognitive flexibility is actually positively related to leadership performance. This finding is also relevant for military organizations since leaders are often confronted with the unexpected or the unknown, which requires innovation and rapid adaptation. Prof. Brusoni sees the challenge in this context in not only training and improving such a capability in isolation, but in then transferring it to everyday life and applying it in large groups.

Naser Morina

Dr. Naser Morina is a senior researcher and lecturer at the University of Zurich and co-head of the Department for Victims of Torture and War at the University Hospital Zurich. He also leads the EU-funded project “STRENGTH” at the University Hospital. His research is particularly dedicated to different aspects of traumatic stress and trauma-related disorders in vulnerable people such as migrants, refugees and prison inmates. He is also working to develop and implement future psychological interventions for those affected. The title of his presentation at IAMPS 2023 was “Beyond the war: mental health consequences in civilian war survivors”.

At the beginning of his presentation, Dr. Morina illustrated with a few facts and figures the dramatic situation in which we currently find ourselves worldwide. Every minute 250 people are forced to leave their homes due to conflicts, human rights violations, violence or for other similar reasons. By the end of this year, the total number of people affected is estimated to be approx. 117 million. Many of them have to leave their country in the hope of a better life in a completely foreign environment. Leaving is usually not the only traumatic experience, as is often implicitly assumed. A flight from Ukraine to Switzerland, for example, takes several days and is associated with numerous other stressors and obstacles. According to Dr. Morina, once people have arrived in their new place, the so-called “post-migration phase” begins. This, he says, is particularly crucial in terms of the development of psychopathologies. Examples of stressors in this phase are loneliness or lack of language skills. A major prob-



Figure 5: Dr. Naser Morina (Image: MILAC)

“Overall, IAMPS 2023 helped to further stimulate structured and informal exchanges in key areas of military psychology among different nations, military organizations and cultures. Networks were cultivated and expanded, forming the basis for joint research projects or international cooperation at a higher level.”

lem currently is the lack of specialists required to provide psychological care to all those affected worldwide. Therefore, instead of weeks of intensive psychotherapy, the focus is on so-called “low-intensity interventions” to improve the situation of those affected. Dr. Morina identifies five key elements that are relevant after a traumatic event and that need to be strengthened during treatment: safety, relaxation, connectedness, hope and self-efficacy. Examples of proven interventions that address precisely these factors are “SPIRIT,” “Friendship Bench,” or “Self-help Plus.”

Additional program

The event started on Monday afternoon with a welcome aperitif on the Polyterrasse. The hard-core members of the IAMPS community were pleased to meet again after a four-year break due to the

pandemic. Newly attending participants were quickly made to feel welcomed. Once again, the pleasant ambience that characterizes the IAMPS culture was in evidence. The intensive and enriching discussions continued into the breaks. The conference came to a pleasant conclusion with a joint dinner at the “Haus zum Rüden” in Zurich’s old town. ♦



Figure 6: Group Photo of IAMPS 2023 (Image: MILAC)