

PSYCHOSOCIAL CLIMATE SURVEY METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents application of comprehensive set of activities contained in psychosocial climate survey in the military.

Surveying unit psychosocial climate implies assessment, as well as maintenance and corrective activities oriented to some psycho-social factors within the military (e. g. personal psychological status, satisfaction with working conditions, interpersonal relationships, trust in commanders etc). Although primarily subjective in nature, these factors determine efficiency and activities outcome, which in the case of the military means combat readiness. A special issue in such a context are parameters concerning the command.

Psychosocial climate survey in units of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia is conducted periodically and using standardized methodology. Statistical analysis of the survey provides insight into the overall situation, tendencies and possible radical changes, and standardized reports are made to the responsables. Should critical changes be discerned, a corrective action plan is studied, which often requires additional psychosocial climate assessment measures in order to detect specific problems and their causes.

Based on results obtained a detailed analysis and report to the respective commander are made, pointing to specific elements in psychosocial climate in certain units, and proposing guidelines for improvement.

The reporting as described aims to enable the respective command to undertake measures within his responsibility, for instance enhanced and directed supervision over unit functioning, which can result in personnel and other organizational changes.

Military psychologist will undertake steps in his area of work, which usually include different counselling and educational activities (either group or individual), such as intensive theoretical and practical instruction in social perception and communication and psychological techniques of self-help.

This paper describes a process of the kind developed with a reconnaissance unit, where the command's intervention and a three-day psychological workshop helped to enhance psychological resistance and improved social skills.

The paper also discusses elements evaluating the effect of activities undertaken. Specific psychological training is followed by evaluation poll on the satisfaction of workshop attendees with their contribution and the usefulness of the training for their personal and professional development. Also, standardized indicators of psychological combat readiness obtained prior to and following the training are compared, with the emphasis on indicators of satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, on indicators of individual professional qualification and self-confidence, as well as on indicators of trust in commanders. If necessary, directed survey is conducted adjusted to specific conditions that called for the the intervention. Finally, different indicators serve to survey changes in formal and informal unit - command communication.

Systematic survey of psychological combat readiness of individuals, units and commands and subsequent reporting to superiors on the results to ensure appropriate corrective or maintenance steps makes one of principal military psychological assignments in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia.

Experience has shown general, global measures (such as prevention of incidents, maintaining or enhancing motivation and psychological combat readiness) unsatisfactory, and has recommended differential approach towards individuals and groups - depending upon the problems themselves, their sources and on specific elements of psychosocial climate in a group (whether unit or command).

In the 1.st Army Corps Command, survey of psychological combat readiness and of psychosocial climate has become a regular practice over the last 3 years, and is conducted through 4 stages:

1. Periodical administration of standardized Questionnaires of psychological combat readiness survey - the Questionnaires are administered semiannually at the Armed Forces level and on a stratified sample of minimally 10% personnel per unit examined.

The Psychological Combat Readiness Questionnaire is administered to determine psychological combat readiness in Armed Forces units. Respondents assess their satisfaction (with food, accomodation, pay etc), trainedness, information available on current issues, trust in commanders, concern (e.g. for personal or family but also wider problems), discipline and togetherness in their units on 5-point scales.

The KLIS Questionnaire is used to measure psychosocial climate at senior command levels (i.e. Army corps command), with respondents rating the competence of their respective commands, togetherness, interpersonal relationships, self-actualization opportunities, discipline, satisfaction and effectiveness of stimulation and reward measures). Two more scales have been added to the questionnaire to assess trainedness and burnout syndrome. Both Questionnaires, it should be noted, are administered anonymously.

The results obtained are reported to the commanders of the units surveyed, and forwarded to their respective superior units or corps commands; the findings are interpreted and maintenance or improvement measures are proposed. In the 1. Army Corps, staff officers and commanders of the units of the Corps attend the results analysis session to suggest more specified proposals for their respective domains and in accordance with specific goals and objective possibilities (in terms of means and personnel available), to decide on implementable and optimal measures.

2. In units where deviation from desired condition is detected, or abrupt decline in assessment compared to previous survey, complementary target assesment measures are administered. In instances of deteriorated satisfaction with working conditions, it can be dealt with through target supervision by the respective command, which will, based on their own findings, draft specific troubleshooting measures. Should the problem consist in impaired interpersonal relationships or trust in command, a follow-up survey is conducted by military psychologist, who will tailor the instruments and the approach to the issue. The follow-up survey usually consists in sociometry, Professional Stress Questionnaire, as well as a poll containing items on stress-coping strategies, working motivation, communication style (implying horizontal and vertical communication) and satisfaction with stimulation and disciplinary measures implemented.

Sociometric Questionnaire involves the attraction and antagonism test in the respective group by the criteria of authority, mutual trust in war and other high-risk situations, bonding defined as non-formal socializing at work, professional competence, effectiveness and exchange of information critical for task execution or personal professional status.

Professional Stress Questionnaire (composed by the Croatian military psychologist Lt. Boris Hudina) contains 3 subscales derived through factor analysis of the results from the first administration (May/June 1998) as follows; **burnout syndrome**, **personal organizedness** (personal planning and working time organization, task distribution), **working atmosphere and conditions** (physical conditions, equipment condition, interpersonal relationships and communication style, availability of information needed for task execution and their quality and of feedback from the superiors, role and task clarity and the like). The intensity of professional

stress is assessed on 4-point scales as follows: "no stress", "moderate stress", "severe stress" and "stress calling for professional help".

In some instances standardized measures of war psychotrauma are administered too, mostly USTBI-M and LASC-01, as most of the troops are Homeland Defence War veterans, and a certain degree of chronic psychological disturbances has to be reckoned with, which not necessarily threaten professional functioning (and in view of time elapse may not be associated with the original war trauma), but may interfere with interpersonal relationships (e.g irritability, paranoid occurrences, withdrawal etc).

As the additional measures are not conducted anonymously (especially sociometric measures), the openness problem is addressed to by informing the respondents of confidentiality of individual data and their accessibility (through encryption/coding) to psychologist only, whereas commanders are presented group data and reports on the overall state of interpersonal relationships in the unit.

Surveys cover entire small units and commands of larger units. The command and control system being the factor most directly affecting psychosocial climate and motivation of the entire unit, and can also compensate for stressors and risk factors at all subordinate levels.

3. Improvement measures: it is generally accepted that however well-concieved, measures will have no effect if implemented by one sole branch of the Armed Forces, but should rather make a teamwork effort. For instance, measures implemented by military psychologists, along with being furnished material and technical support, should be included into operational planning, orders and instructions; also essential is co-work and information exchange with the medical service, security, human resources and departments in charge of creating, planning, and execution of training, and the presence of target units and command staff is mandatory.

In this stage psychologist only act as measure proposers (measures such as enhanced supervision by superior command or relevant services, specific disciplinary or stimulative measures, proposals for task teams) or evaluators of measures effects. Psychologists' active participation includes training and counselling of commanders, groups or individuals e.g. on effective communication styles, management, decision-making, dealing with people, effective stress-coping strategies, self-help techniques and psychological condition regulation (through isometric exercises, breathing exercises, creative visualisation etc.), and possibly individual psychodiagnostic and counselling approach.

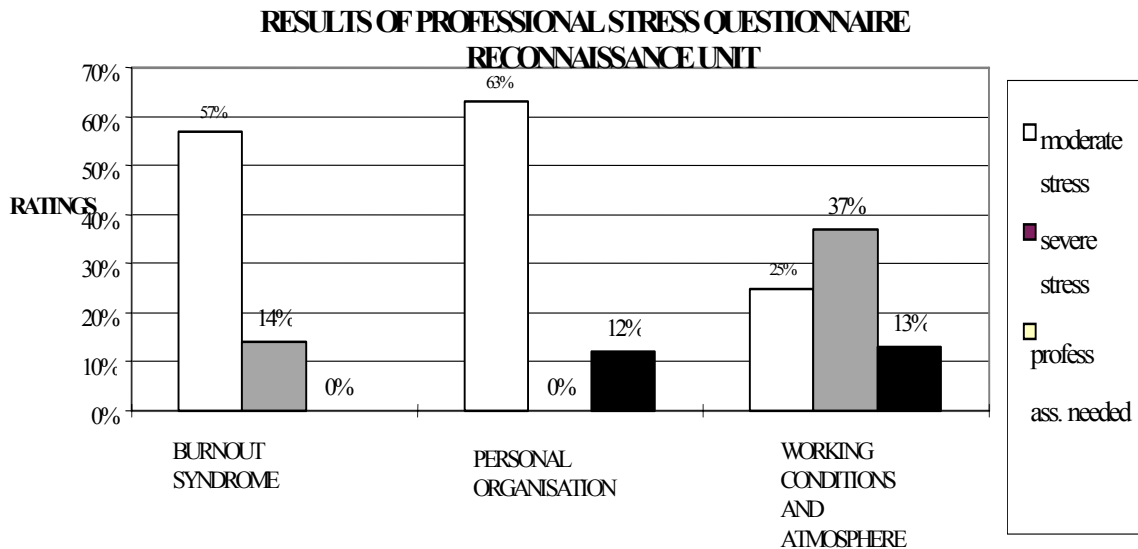
4. Evaluation of measures implemented is conducted based on results of surveys of psychological combat readiness, but can also include sociometric follow-ups and opinion polls following a training cycle or another event. Measure effectiveness is also evinced through the findings by other services of the Armed Forces, which also implies the need for inter-service and inter-level co-work and information exchange (e.g. statistical findings on frequency and type of incidents, disciplinary measures, training and exercises outcome etc.).

SURVEY OF PSYCHOSOCIAL CLIMATE IN A RECONNAISSANCE UNIT

Intervention in the reconnaissance unit covered 100 % of unit personnel, in all 4 stages of evaluation and intervention in psychosocial climate factors and thereby makes a typical, integral approach in survey of psychosocial climate in the Armed Forces units.

Psychological combat readiness findings in the given unit in June 1999 revealed impaired interpersonal relationships, especially vertical (evinced in declined togetherness and trust in unit commander), accompanied by poor satisfaction and information, which were seen as a natural result.

In July 1999 a follow-up ensued, detecting specific problems and their sources, but also the existing positive effects of psychosocial climate in the unit, based on which corrective measures were devised. Professional Stress Questionnaire and sociometric test findings were found the most useful.



Symptoms of professional stress related to burnout (14% had stress), working conditions and atmosphere (35% had stress, 13% showed stress symptoms calling for professional help), and some respondents reported personal organization problems (12% with symptoms calling for professional help).

Sociometric test revealed tensed interpersonal relationships, frustrated individuals, unsatisfactory mutual trust and antagonized commander, but also threw light on two potential leader and star personalities (by the criteria of authority and competence). The assessment was that improved communication and cooperation between the two and incitements towards greater initiative could help restore the unit situation.

The report to the unit commander recommended supervision, with an emphasis on the command and control system, and a three-day psychological workshop for the entire unit, which was feasible in view of the size of the unit.

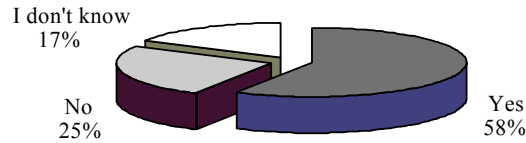
Command supervision led to organizational and personnel changes, and the workshop was conducted in February 2000 in camp setting, by 3 military psychologists as moderators.

The topics addressed in the workshop were "Social perception", "Problem solving and decision making process" and "Effective stress-coping strategies". The workshop aimed to draw attention to the actual interpersonal situation, facilitate non-formal contacts; to bring out positive aspects and possibilities in one's personal life and unit life; to warn about existing ignorance of context, different expectations, stereotypes and biases blocking the communication and affecting the decision-making process, and, finally, to end the process, incite future positive relationships and togetherness. As the workshop was conceived with as little formal and theoretical portion as possible, which was only included in the discussion following the exercises, which included role playing, self-perception and self-regulation of psychological condition (breathing exercises, calibration exercises and creative visualisation exercises).

The workshop was concluded with an anonymous evaluation poll, with respondents evaluating the benefit of the seminar for their personal development, the content, the atmosphere and organisation of the seminar on a 5-point scale. Furthermore, the respondents were also asked to state what aspect of the seminar they liked or disliked the most, whether they intended to bring changes into their behaviour and what changes would that be. All elements of the workshop were averagely rated above 4, with the atmosphere rated the best (=4,67).

**PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKSHOP FOR THE REC. UNIT PERSONNEL
AND COMMANDERS**

Response to question: "Will this seminar bring changes into your behaviour?"



58% of respondents reported considering changing their behaviour, mostly in terms of introducing breathing exercises into their everyday practice, as well as devoting more attention to their co-workers, and working towards better unit atmosphere (as reflected in statements: "I'll think more about my acts and try to avoid biases", "I'll be more open towards my co-workers" etc.), and a more positive approach to problem solving. 17% of respondents reported uncertainty about modifying their behaviour, and the remaining 25 % declined any modifications whatsoever, convinced as most of them were that recommended strategies had been part of their behaviour.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKSHOP FOR COMMANDERS AND RECONNAISSANCE
UNIT PERSONNEL**

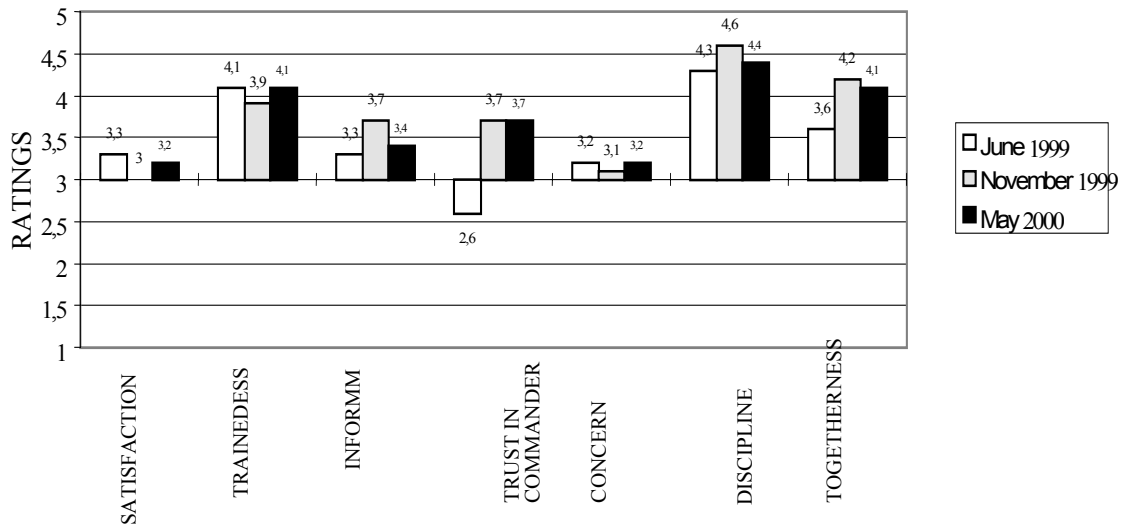
Answer to the item: "Are you going to modify your behaviour following the seminar?"

Not sure	17%
I don't think so	25%
Yes	25%

What the attendees appreciated in the workshop the most were the open discussion in a relaxed non-formal surrounding, exchange of points of view and learning of how the others viewed them, participation in different activities and demonstration of relaxation techniques. Remarks were addressed to some organisational details (e.g. poor heating in the workshop premises), but the general opinion was that the workshop should have even lasted longer, and that future programs of the kind would be welcome.

RESULTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL COMBAT READINESS OVER A 1-YEAR PERIOD

PSYCHOL. COMBAT READINESS SURVEY RESULTS OVER A 1-YEAR PERIOD



Psychological combat readiness survey administered in November 1999 and May 2000 revealed sharp rise in togetherness and particularly in trust in commanders. However, as improved results had been found even prior to the workshop, the improvement was probably a result of inspection and personnel changes, whereas the military psychological service has been credited with maintaining the satisfactory situation (following the command intervention and prior to working closely with the unit conflicts re-occurred, as evidenced in follow-up rounds and reports from the unit. The efforts resulted in improved formal and non-formal communication and trust in military psychologists, evidenced through openness and seeking psychologists for help and cooperation, which ensures better conditions for the job in the unit in future.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED AND GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE WORK

The most frequently encountered methodological problem was respondent anonymity in follow-up (targeted) surveys of psychosocial climate and the value of results obtained. Namely, only an anonymous survey (that is the identity of the respondents known to the psychologist only) guaranteed frank answers, as otherwise respondents would fear their answer would affect their position. On the other hand, what is the use of results if they are not reported to commanders to intervene themselves. As noted previously, the best results were those of corrective measures implemented coordinately by psychologists and the command.

In addition, even with respondents' identity coded, most commanders will try to figure their answers out, especially about the star and anti-star status. In other words, sociometric survey results often are used to test and/or prove commander's assumptions concerning interpersonal relationships in the unit.

In recent surveys (April 2000) this problem was tackled by recomposing the questionnaire to contain only positive selection, by highlighting that only the psychologist and commander will have the insight into the results, and by re-phrasing the items and asking the respondents to state their preferences rather than assessments. Thus, with the "professional competence" criterion: "Rather than assess the competence level of your co-workers, please cite

the name of the colleague you would readily turn to for advice", which along with professional competence, also reflects other characteristics of the person (readiness to help, teaching skill etc.), for the respective item in the questionnaire: "While carrying out your duty you encountered a difficulty calling for additional knowledge and information, who are you going to turn to for help?"

However, in this way we lost some critical data, primarily on the anti-star personalities, the nature of relationship among the "star" personalities (cooperation or rivalry?) and of relationships among the subgroups; next, we were unable to discern the isolated from the rejected individuals. However, this compromise approach turned out as least harmful. It has also opened the way to psychologist intervention through working on psychosocial climate elements and made it possible to test hypotheses on possible negative points through workshops.

Next steps will be to improve evaluation of measures undertaken. Namely, although the "general attack" on problems proved the best, post-evaluation of the most and the least effective intervention is difficult. Besides reaching the desired effect, which is critical in practical terms, the contribution of individual measures administered should be determined to define optimal and cost-effective approach to survey, prevention and intervention into psychosocial climate.