

# **STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH STRESS AND BURNING OUT OF COMMANDERS OF THE CROATIAN MILITARY AT DIFERENT LEVELS OF COMMANDS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this research we were interested in finding out if there were differences among commanders at different command levels in the level of stress measured with burn-outs and in their stress coping strategies.

The study was conducted on 421 commanders who performed their duties at different levels: non-commissioned officers (N=195), officers at platoon or company levels (N=87), officers at battalion levels (N=94), staff officers (N=45). These commanders, with minimal pre-war military experience, had developed their specific stress coping strategies during the War.

Applied questioners: Questioner of symptoms of burn-out (USPI), Questioner of stress coping strategies (SU-PSD), Self-estimate for efficiency of dealing with life difficulties, and External locus control's scale.

In the manifestation of symptoms for burning out NCO's show the most symptoms. Staff CO's more than others use strategy oriented to the problems. CO's at battalion levels less than others use avoidance of problems strategy. There were no statistically significant differences in using seeking social support and life optimism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Command duties entail appraisal and decision-making processes that necessitate complex, quick and sound responding. The responding and the decisions made by leaders eventually affect the security of individuals and the unit in general, all the more so in wartime or dangerous situations. Thus, there is much stress inherent in the role of commanding as a job and the perception of leaders' own responsibility. The stress-coping and problem-solving techniques are directly correlated with the stress results. Namely, along with health and psychological disturbances, inadequate coping with stress also affects working performance (by reducing it).

The stress involved in the working (in this case: commanding) can be observed (and measured) through the degree of burnout and of individual symptoms. There are quite a number of factors determining the outcome of stress on a person, among which the level of responsibility involved in the duty assigned, and the stress-coping style hold a prominent place. It is arguable therefore that prediction of a leader's performance is dependent on knowing his stress- and life problems-coping strategy.

Personality traits also play a role in stressful situations, through the perception and appraisal of the stressfulness of the situation on the one hand, and the behaviours manifested in such situations on the other. Finally, the perception of the outcome and the effect of the behaviour employed also is affected by personality characteristics. One of the relatively stable personality traits (as explicated by Rotter, 1966.) of interest here is the locus of control. Namely, the stress-coping mechanisms of a person characterized by an internal locus of control arguably differs from those of the individuals possessing an external one, and the resulting stress effects also manifest differently in the two types of individuals.

## **STUDY GOAL AND PROBLEMS**

The goal of the study was to establish the existence and the relationship of the stress-coping strategies, the burnout symptoms, the personal perception of the successfulness of coping with the problems in one's life and the locus of control in leaders at different command duties.

In accordance with the goal set, the following problems were defined:

- 1) do stress-coping strategies vary with regard to the level of the leaders displaying them/is there a command level – stress coping strategy correlation?
- 2) is there a command level – burnout degree correlation?
- 3) how do leaders at different levels appraise their stress-coping efficiency, is there a correlation between the appraisal and the burnout degree and the stress-coping strategy respectively?
- 4) is there a correlation between the external locus of control and
  - a. the dominant adoption of a stress-coping strategy and
  - b. the burnout symptom?

## **SUBJECTS**

The subjects of the study were leaders from different command levels, who at the time attended different military education programmes (according to their respective duties).

Table 1. Number of subjects with regard to the command level or military education level

| COMMAND LEVELS                       | N   |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| NCOs<br>(group1)                     | 195 |
| Platoon/company officers<br>(group2) | 87  |
| Battalion officers<br>(group3)       | 94  |
| Staff officers<br>(group4)           | 45  |
| TOTAL                                | 421 |

All the subjects examined took part in the Croatian Homeland War (and all at leader posts).

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in October 1998 at the Croatian Military School during the regular military psychology curriculum, in 25-subject groups. The purpose of the study, as explained in the instruction, was to determine the extent of stressfulness of leader duty. The subjects were told that the study was anonymous and even allowed to refuse to take part (however no one did so). They were given detailed explanation of the filling of the questionnaire, and the sequence of the statements was identical for all the groups.

## INSTRUMENTS

### 1. Burnout Symptom Questionnaire (USPI)

Burnout assessment was administered by using the Burnout Symptom Questionnaire, adjusted for administration with the command/leader duties. The Questionnaire comprises 32 statements answered by the subjects on a 1-4 scale, reflecting their incidence of a burnout symptom.

*Statement (example):*

|   | NEVER | AT TIMES | OFTEN | ALL THE TIME |
|---|-------|----------|-------|--------------|
| <i>I no longer see the sense in my job.</i> | 1     | 2        | 3     | 4            |

The preliminary administration of the Questionnaire (as part of the regular psychological surveys) has shown it to have a good psychometric characteristics. The items are grouped into 6 factors (emotional depletion, insensitiveness, rudeness and isolation from the colleagues, psychosomatic distress, loss and lack of self-confidence, losing the match with the deadlines and the working regime, and intolerance of others' inefficiency).

### 2. Stress-coping Strategy Questionnaire (SU-PSD)

The Stress-coping Strategy Questionnaire (Štefan, 1997) was composed for use in psychological assessment of the de-mining squads. It was of very practical nature, to help the de-

miners train themselves into more efficient stress-coping strategies, and was administered as part of the psychological support programme for deminers (Štefan & Koren, 1997). It is founded on the theory (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, Latack, 1986, acc. to Vizek-Vidovic, 1990) of three principal individual life problems-coping styles, involving direct action focused on the problem, solving of stress-induced emotional tensions, and elimination of distressing symptoms. We added the life optimism items, as in the study with the veterans of the (Homeland) war it was identified as a separate yet significant variable associated with coping with the traumas of the war (Bunjevac, 1996).

SU-PSD comprises 15 statements describing the behaviours employable in different hardship situations assessed on a 1-5 scale depending on the frequency of the behaviour.

*Statement (example):*

| <i>Faced with a mishap or a major life problem, I:</i> | NEVER | RARELY | AT TIMES | OFTEN | NEARLY ALWAYS |
|--|-------|--------|----------|-------|---------------|
| Seek understanding from the persons I close with       | 1     | 2      | 3        | 4     | 5             |

According to the theoretical foundation, the indicators of the employed stress-coping strategies can be interpreted as:

- seeking of social support
- focusing on problem solving
- avoidance of the problem
- life optimism
- overall result (employing of all available stress-coping strategies)

Earlier factorisations of the Questionnaire yielded the expected 4-factor structure (Štefan, 1997, 1998).

### 3. Personal assessment of the success in dealing with life problems

The subjects assessed their own perception on next statement:

*How successful you see yourself in coping with stress and stressful situations:*

| 1                     | 2      | 3            | 4           |
|-----------------------|--------|--------------|-------------|
| not successful at all | poorly | successfully | excellently |

### 4. Bezinovic's scale of externality (locus of control)

The locus of control dimension was measured by means of Bezinovic's scale of externality of locus of control, consisting of 10 statements related to external perception of the cause of the problems in one's life (Bezinovic, 1990). The subjects responded to the statements and chose the response category matching their condition the best.

*Statement (example):*

|  | ABSOLUTELY UNTRUE | UNTRUE | PARTLY TRUE | TRUE | ABSOLUTELY TRUE |
|--|-------------------|--------|-------------|------|-----------------|
| Most events in my life have been pre-determined. | 1                 | 2      | 3           | 4    | 5               |

## RESULTS

### 1. STRESS-COPING STRATEGIES

Table 2. Mean values (indicators) of employments of stress-coping strategies with respect to the level of command

| COMMAND LEVEL                | Optimism                    | Support                    | Focusedness on the problem   | Avoidance                   | Coping Strategies TOTAL     |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| NCOs                         | M=9,79<br><u>SD</u> =2,105  | M=7,49<br><u>SD</u> =1,391 | M=19,61<br><u>SD</u> =3,233  | M=12,52<br><u>SD</u> =2,100 | M=48,94<br><u>SD</u> =7,281 |
| Officers-platoon/<br>company | M=9,68<br><u>SD</u> =2,026  | M=7,44<br><u>SD</u> =1,538 | M=20,25<br><u>SD</u> =2,775  | M=12,33<br><u>SD</u> =2,061 | M=49,70<br><u>SD</u> =5,331 |
| Officers–<br>battalion       | M=9,56<br><u>SD</u> =2,072  | M=7,20<br><u>SD</u> =1,471 | M=20,02<br><u>SD</u> =3,149  | M=11,72<br><u>SD</u> =2,102 | M=48,51<br><u>SD</u> =4,885 |
| Staff officers               | M=10,07<br><u>SD</u> =2,147 | M=7,71<br><u>SD</u> =1,308 | M=21,27<br><u>SD</u> =2,544  | M=11,96<br><u>SD</u> =2,421 | M=51,00<br><u>SD</u> =5,018 |
| TOTAL                        | M=9,75<br><u>SD</u> =2,083  | M=7,44<br><u>SD</u> =1,435 | M=20,017<br><u>SD</u> =3,086 | M=12,24<br><u>SD</u> =2,146 | M=49,22<br><u>SD</u> =6,218 |

Differences among the leaders from different levels of command as to the strategies employed were tested by means of a one-way analysis of variance with the *post hoc* LSD test and the significance level  $p < 0.05$ . Tables 2a, 2b and 2c display the statistical differences among the means.

#### 1.1. Overall employments of stress-coping strategies

Table 2a: Differences between the respective means related to employments of all strategies by the leaders from different command levels

**F=2,144(p=0,094)**

|        | Group1        | Group2 | Group3        | Group4 |
|--------|---------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Group1 |               |        |               |        |
| Group2 |               |        |               |        |
| Group3 |               |        |               |        |
| Group4 | <b>2,057*</b> |        | <b>2,489*</b> |        |

\* $p < 0.05$

Although the differences yielded were only statistically significant at  $p < 0.10$  for the F ratio, one notices wider employment of all the stress-coping strategies by the staff officers (group4) compared to the battalion-level (group3) and NCOs (group1).

#### 1.2. Focusedness on the problem

Table 2.b: Differences between the respective means related to employment of the focusedness as a strategy by leaders from different levels

**F=3,854(p=0,009)**

|        | Group1        | Group2 | Group3        | Group4 |
|--------|---------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Group1 |               |        |               |        |
| Group2 |               |        |               |        |
| Group3 |               |        |               |        |
| Group4 | <b>1,656*</b> |        | <b>1,245*</b> |        |

\*p<0.05

The obtained indicators on employment of the focusedness strategy point to same direction as the use of all stress-coping strategies (table 2a), with  $p < 0.01$ . The employment of this particular strategy by the staff officers was statistically more significant compared to the leaders from the battalion level and NCO leaders, while no differences were found between the remaining command levels.

### 1.3. Avoidance of problems

Table 2.c. Differences among the means related to the avoidance strategy by leaders from different command levels

**F=3,673(p=0,012)**

|        | Group1         | Group2         | Group3 | Group4 |
|--------|----------------|----------------|--------|--------|
| Group1 |                |                |        |        |
| Group2 |                |                |        |        |
| Group3 | <b>-0,792*</b> | <b>-0,630*</b> |        |        |
| Group4 |                |                |        |        |

\*p<0.05

The avoidance strategy was statistically more significantly used by the NCOs and junior level officers (platoon/company) compared to the battalion level. The data suggest that the most senior level tested (staff officers) employed this strategy to the same extent as the three subordinate command levels.

The finding that the battalion-level leaders resorted to the avoidance strategy less compared to the two junior levels, and the staff officers displaying no such (statistically significant) difference can be accounted by the fact that it is an self-standing command level whose leaders enjoy certain autonomy in the exercise of their duties but also the direct (and hardly divisible) responsibility. Their role barely allows avoidance and delay of problems, which makes this stress-coping strategy inefficient.

### 1.4. Optimism in problem-solving

F=0.686(p=0.560)

### 1.5. Seeking social support in hardships

F=1.477(p=0.220)

No statistically significant differences were found among leaders from different command levels regarding their resorting to optimism and seeking social support to endure hardships. They all proved using the two strategies equally, which points to the behaviours equally found in stressful situations at all command levels.

## 2. JOB BURNOUT

Table 3. Differences in the burnout degrees among the leaders from different command levels

**F=7,031(p=0,000)**

| Job burnout |           | COMMAND LEVEL                   | Group1 | Group2 | Group3 | Group4 |
|-------------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> |                                 |        |        |        |        |
| 59,91       | 13,446    | NCOs(1)*                        |        | 3,292* | 4,317* | 7,380* |
| 56,62       | 11,049    | Officers-platoon/<br>company(2) |        |        |        |        |
| 55,60       | 10,543    | Officers-<br>battalion(3)       |        |        |        |        |
| 52,53       | 9,873     | Staff officers(4)               |        |        |        |        |
| 57,48       | 12,233    | TOTAL                           |        |        |        |        |

\*p<0.05

Results showed the burnout degree in NCOs statistically higher compared to all officer leaders and no differences among officers.

## 3. SELF-ASSESSMENT OF SUCCESSFUL STRESS- AND STRESSFUL SITUATIONS - COPING

Table 4. Differences in self-assessments of successful hardship-coping in leaders

**F=3,706(p=0,011)**

| Self-assessment Of successful Stress-Coping |           | COMMAND LEVEL                   | Group1 | Group2 | Group3 | Group4 |
|---|-----------|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <i>M</i>                                    | <i>SD</i> |                                 |        |        |        |        |
| 2,94  | 0,50      | NCOs(1)                         |        |        |        |        |
| 2,99  | 0,49      | Officers-platoon/<br>company(2) |        |        |        |        |
| 2,99  | 0,54      | Officers-<br>battalion(3)       |        |        |        |        |
| 3,24  | 0,49      | Staff officers(4)*              | 0,30*  | 0,26*  | 0,26*  |        |
| 3,00  | 0,51      | TOTAL                           |        |        |        |        |

\*p<0,01

The best successful in stress-coping, judging by their self-assessments, were the staff officers, and the difference in their assessments were statistically significant compared to all the three junior levels, which were not different between themselves. The strategy of focusedness on the problem being more used at this level (Table 2b) and differences in the overall employment of all strategies (table 2a) suggest such behaviours enable better stress-coping. This is reinforced by the significant negative correlations between the burnout symptoms and the self-assessment of successful coping ( $r=-0.307$ ), and the focusedness strategy ( $r=-0.329$ ) shown in Table 6. On the other hand, the correlation between burnout and avoidance of problems was positive and statistically significant ( $r=0.195$ ).

#### 4. EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

The differences regarding the (external) locus of control found among the leaders from different command levels are shown in Table 5, and the correlations with the rest of the variables examined (stress-coping strategies, burnout and self-assessed successful coping with life problems) in Table 6.

Table 5. Differences in externality of locus of control among the leaders from different command levels

**F=5,162(p=0,002)**

| Locus of control |           | Command level                   | Group1 | Group2 | Group3 | Group4 |
|------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <i>M</i>         | <i>SD</i> |                                 |        |        |        |        |
| 27,48            | 6,258     | NCOs(1)                         |        |        | 2,766* | 2,189* |
| 26,16            | 5,530     | Officers–platoon/<br>company(2) |        |        |        |        |
| 24,71            | 6,233     | Officers–<br>battalion(3)       |        |        |        |        |
| 25,29            | 4,104     | Staff officers(4)               |        |        |        |        |
| 26,32            | 5,993     | TOTAL                           |        |        |        |        |

\*p<0,05

The most external locus of control (fatalism and believing in luck) was characteristic of the NCO leaders. It was differed statistically significantly from the battalion and the staff officers, and from the leaders of the platoon/company level not significantly. Officer leaders did not differ significantly among themselves.

Such findings reveal the officers (especially at the senior levels –i.e. battalion and staff) have less external locus of control compared to the non-commissioned officers. This partly explains the earlier findings on greater burnout in NCOs leaders. A possible conclusion is that the individuals manifesting more external locus of control are more prone to burnout ( $r=0.322$ ) and their self-assessed coping with stress was poorer ( $r=-0.116$ ) (as shown in Table 6). Also, NCO leaders significantly less employed focusedness on the problem but rather preferred to avoid it (compared to battalion leaders). It follows that such combination of stress-coping strategies is more characteristic of the individuals with exteriorised locus of control, also evident from the correlation figures in Table 6.

#### 5. CORRELATION OF STRESS-COPING STRATEGIES, SELF-ASSESSED SUCCESS IN DEALING WITH LIFE PROBLEMS, BURNOUT AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

| Pearson's correlation      | Overall coping with stress        | Optimism                         | Seeking the support               | Focusedness on the problem        | Avoidance of problems            | Self-assessed success in coping   | External locus of control        |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Burnout (overall)          | <b>-0,138**</b><br><b>P=0,005</b> | -0,038<br>P=0,436                | <b>-0,222**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>-0,329**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>0,195**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>-0,307**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>0,322**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> |
| Overall coping with stress | --                                | <b>0,572**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>0,556**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b>  | <b>0,736**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b>  | <b>0,542**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b> | <b>0,291**</b><br><b>P=0,000</b>  | -0,022<br>P=0,658                |



|  |  |    |                           |                           |                           |                           |                            |
|--|--|----|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Optimism                               |  | -- | <b>0,250**</b><br>P=0,000 | <b>0,141**</b><br>P=0,004 | <b>0,162**</b><br>P=0,001 | <i>0,120*</i><br>P=0,029  | <i>0,084*</i><br>P=0,044   |
| Seeking the support                    |  |    | --                        | <b>0,303**</b><br>P=0,000 | <i>0,085*</i><br>P=0,044  | <b>0,193**</b><br>P=0,000 | -0,028<br>P=0,579          |
| Focusedness on the problem             |  |    |                           | --                        | <i>0,115*</i><br>P=0,020  | <b>0,315**</b><br>P=0,000 | <b>-0,175**</b><br>P=0,000 |
| Avoidance of problems                  |  |    |                           |                           | --                        | -0,007<br>P=0,904         | <b>0,131**</b><br>P=0,008  |
| Self-assessed successfulness of coping |  |    |                           |                           |                           |                           | <b>-0,116**</b><br>P=0,018 |

\*\*p<0.01

\*p<0.05

The major part of the correlations studied was statistically significant (at  $p < 0.01^{**}$  or  $p < 0.05^{*}$ ). We emphasise once again that there was statistically significant **positive** correlation between burnout and the external locus of control and statistically significant **negative** correlation between burnout and the strategy of focusedness on the problem and self-assessed success in coping with life problems. The self-assessed success in coping with life problems was in its turn positively correlated with the employment of most of the strategies available **except** for problem avoidance.

No correlation found between burnout and optimism might be an interesting finding as it implies, contrary to the general belief, that optimistic view need not be a defence mechanism against burnout. Likewise, avoidance of problems could be perceived as a successful stress-coping strategy (particularly with no other solutions at hand). However, the correlation found between burnout and problem avoidance (unlike the negative correlation with other strategies) suggests problem avoidance affect health adversely.

Another interesting finding is that non-correlatedness of the external locus of control and the seeking of support, reinforcing the earlier explanation on the human need for support in hardships, regardless of social position and of personality traits.

## CONCLUSION

The study found statistically significant differences with respect to the command level of subjects in their symptoms of burnout, externality of locus of control, employment of different stress coping strategies and self-assessment of successful coping with life problems.

The comparison NCOs - officers found significantly major external locus of control in NCOs while the officers displayed less avoidance of problems and more focusedness on them and eventually less burnout symptoms.

It seems reasonable that when planning and conducting the prevention of negative effects of stress as a way of upgrading of commanding efficiency particular attention should be dedicated to cognitive components of stress and practicing of efficient stress-coping strategies. Also considered should be possibilities of stimulating the internal locus of control in commanders, as the study showed it significantly correlated with successful solving of problems, coping with stress and the extent of burnout. A reasonable suggestion is to use the locus of control as a criterion in selection of commander candidates.

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